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Restoring relationships: Exploring an alternative approach to traditional discipline practices

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

In

Educational Leadership

by

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University of California San Diego  
California State University San Marcos

2019

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to those who are looking for a different way. When tradition runs its course it is time to begin a new path, to hear what one another needs and to have the courage to act on it.

## EPIGRAPH

I've learned that people will forget what you said,  
people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget how you made them feel.

-Maya Angelou

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Although in many ways this dissertation is the finale in a hardfought contest including sweat, tears, laughter and cognitive demands, it is only the beginning of a shift in the way I view the educational system and my participation within it. As a classroom teacher for sixteen years I watched students find success and face obstacles, I saw teachers exhilarated and completely wiped out and administrators who fostered growth and change when everything seemed to be stacked against their community. Over the last five years I have grown in my capacity as a school leader and administrator due to the people who have pushed me to think in different ways.

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## VITA

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Restoring relationships: Exploring an alternative approach to traditional discipline practices

by

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University of California San Diego, 2019  
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Large studies of the 13 southern United States and California reveal an issue of equity and project far-reaching social consequences. Disciplinary disproportionality has affected the way students of color interact with the public-school system by historically providing harsher disciplinary procedures.

One promising program, known as restorative justice, includes the voice and involvement of students in their discipline as they repair the relationships that have been affected by their misdeeds through the use of restorative practices. Discussion groups, circles, and mediations are facilitated by trained adults to improve decision making, and empathy while enhancing the school climate. The implementation of restorative justice practices may assist schools in closing the chasm that exists for students of color within the school

disciplinary structure as well as improving school climate by offering an empathetic alternative in confronting bullying.

This qualitative case study examined teacher and student perceptions of student behavior and school climate as a result of administrative implementation of restorative practices. Anonymous on-line teacher questionnaires, individual teacher interviews and student focus group data were used to reach conclusions. Both teachers and students saw changes in communication, relationships and discipline as being influenced by the introduction of restorative practices.

*Keywords:* discipline gap, students of color, restorative justice, bullying, school climate

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

In the United States, education is provided free of charge to children aged five through eighteen and mandated through the age of sixteen. American society has shown a consistent desire to educate the population, even in Colonial times, before the United States of America gained independence from Britain (Middleton, 1958). The value of education, therefore, is inherent in our foundation and treasured by almost all people living within the United States. One of the issues that impedes the education system from achieving its mission is problematic student behaviors because they lead to decreased student involvement in school, increased rates of defiance, and tense relationships between students and adults (Kinsler, 2015; Maag, 2012; Monroe, 2005; Unnever, Cullen, & Barnes, 2016).

One of the primary goals for school administrators is to maintain a safe environment for student learning which is closely tied to the challenge described above. There is a variety of ways that school officials can find student behavior intolerable, including but not limited to, it being a safety concern for the student, the student's peers, the student's teachers, the school personnel, and even the larger community. The way that school administrators have typically responded to repeated problematic and/or egregious behaviors is to have a student excluded from the classroom, the school, and/or school activities by way of suspension or expulsion (Evans & Lester, 2012; Shabazian, 2016). The problem with practices of exclusionary disciplinary policies like suspension and expulsion is that they have been found to have bias in who is being suspended and/or expelled and why the administration is seeking to do so.

Male students and students of color tend to be more harshly disciplined than female students and white or Asian students (Gregory, Hafen, Ruzek, Mikami, Allen & Pianta, 2016; Monroe, 2005; Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Shabazian, 2016; Theriot, Craun & Dupper, 2010). These fundamental biases, known collectively in the research and education communities as the discipline gap, warrant further investigation into alternative means of correcting behavior and improving school climate through shared responsibility (DeMatthews, 2016; Monroe, 2009; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015).

In 2015 the California legislature passed Assembly Bill 420, which was intended to correct the discipline gap in public schools by mandating a more limited use of exclusionary disciplinary practices as well as suggesting the use of restorative practices as a means of mending the fractured relationship between a student who has harmed and those whom s/he harmed. Restorative practices focus on building the community through dialogue and engagement, as opposed to separation and isolation (Mullet, 2014; Pavelka, 2013). Although restorative practices were suggested and not specifically mandated in CA-AB 420, these procedures can show benefit for increased student self-awareness, improved positive school culture and climate, and the development of more confident citizens (Drewery, 2004; Morrison, 2006; Varnham, 2005). Restorative practices have shown benefit in improving school climate, building community and supporting interpersonal relationships among students as well as between staff and students (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2010; Smith, Fisher & Frey; 2015).

### **A Discipline Shift**

One of the cornerstones of school administrative work is appropriating actions and defining consequences for student misdeeds, whether it be when working with staff, teachers, or students. School administrators are often held to an extraordinary undertaking, however,

because their actions in dealing with student discipline are not only judged by students, their actions can also be appraised by teachers, staff, parents, and the community at large (Maag, 2012; Mccluskey, Kane, Lloyd, Stead, Riddell & Weedon, 2011; Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Theriot et.al., 2012). In a desire to keep a school safe, school administrators have often looked to exclusionary discipline policies to force some students out of the classroom, and sometimes out of the education system.

When student behavior has interfered with learning, many administrators have prioritized safety and compliance by withholding students from class, therefore denying them the opportunity to learn with their peers. As a result of CA-AB 420 administrators in California have been tasked with fostering a different way of interacting with students, teachers, parents, and community to enhance the learning experience and build a climate where every student is afforded the opportunity to engage in meaningful learning. Restorative practices may be the key to developing a climate and community of respect, understanding, and increased safety (Haft, 2000; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015; Teasley, 2014).

### **Overview of the Study**

Although many schools have been instituting restorative practices there has not been a significant amount of research conducted that looks to gain insight into how teachers and students feel about the implementation of these practices. The purpose of this study was to examine teacher and student perceptions of school discipline practices and school climate after restorative techniques were implemented by the site administration. This study took a qualitative approach to understanding whether and how the implementation of restorative practices affects students' perceived sense of safety and school climate, while also gaining insight to teacher perceived sense of safety and school climate after implementation. The study took place within a public middle school that serves a relatively diverse student

population in North San Diego, California. A total of eighteen teachers and 23 middle-school students grades six through eight participated in the study. Data were collected in the form of anonymous on-line questionnaires, individual teacher interviews, and student focus group discussions.

The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

1. After implementation of restorative practices in the middle school, what do teachers perceive are the effects of that shift on school discipline and climate?
2. After implementation of restorative practices in the middle school, what do students perceive are the effects of that shift on school discipline and climate?

### **Significance of the Study**

The study explored how teachers perceived the implementation of restorative practices as they relate to student discipline and climate as well as how students perceived discipline and school climate after the implementation of restorative practices. Although restorative practices have been implemented in schools around the world, there have not been many studies that focus on the perceptions of teachers and students on changes in disciplinary practices and/or school climate. Investigations into teacher and student perceptions are important because administrators have been mandated by CA-AB 420 to reduce suspensions and exclusionary disciplinary practices without insight into how these efforts might impact teacher and student perceptions of support and community. By interviewing teachers and students to understand their perceptions of the changes, this study provided a unique perspective on whether the implementation of restorative practices at the administrative level caused a shift in school discipline practices and the overall climate.

When exclusionary discipline practices are used, there is a disproportional negative impact on students of color known as the discipline gap (Evans & Lester, 2012; Smith &

Harper, 2015). Exclusionary disciplinary practices and their use on students of color can have enormous consequences including increased rate of school dropout, decreased rate of school satisfaction, and increased rate of continued misbehavior (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Losen, 2011; Monroe, 2005). Because CA-AB 420 identified restorative work as a means to reduce the discipline gap while also creating greater equity within schools, the implementation and subsequent effects of implementation were worthy of further study. An element of the implementation of restorative practices that has not been investigated closely is how teachers and students perceive discipline and school climate after restorative practices have been used by the site administration.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*Middle school.* Comprehensive three-year education program for students aged 11 to 14 experience a lot of social and emotional upheaval in addition to academic learning (Burwell & Stone, 2012).

*Restorative justice.* An approach to replace our existing highly professionalized systems of punitive justice and control with community-based reparative justice and moralizing social control (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007).

*Restorative practices.* A set of structures put into place in a school designed to increase restorative justice, sense of community, and belonging through positive relationships between adults and children (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015).

*School climate.* The quality and character of a school, it emanates from the relationships that exist between and among staff, students, family, and community (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015).

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This review of literature first investigates the discipline gap by looking at data from statewide reports of suspensions that demonstrates a need for a more concerted effort to correct it, a discussion of bullying, followed by focused research of the African-American experience as related to discipline. Then there is a discussion of the research as it relates to how school leaders discipline misbehavior and what can be done to correct the discipline gap. This chapter also describes what existing research says about the value, or lack thereof, of restorative justice practices, the implementation of a restorative program, and why it may be an effective method to address bullying, disciplinary misbehaviors and the discipline gap. In conclusion, there is a discussion of the existing research as it relates to the racial discontinuity inherent in the discipline gap and how restorative practices may effectively address the social justice inequities that students of color face in American schools due to exclusionary disciplinary practices.

### **An Overview of Discipline**

Disciplinary practices have been a widespread concern in schools since the inception of the modern education system (Monroe, 2009). Different disciplinary actions may be taken when an infraction, like bullying, defiance, fighting, or harassment, is committed. If the student misbehavior is severe, the most stringent forms of school discipline can take place, such as out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Kinsler, 2011). However, out-of-school suspension does not allow for a student to enter school grounds during the course of his or her suspension period, while an expulsion would not allow a student to attend school within the same district as where the misbehavior occurred. When students are denied access to school and the curriculum because of disciplinary infractions, it can have devastating effects on their academic achievement, academic growth, and personal well-being (Gregory, Skiba, &

Noguera, 2010). This cycle of student behavior leading to out-of-school suspension, lower student academic achievement, less academic growth, and lower sense of self-worth, but can be broken with the implementation of critical practices including restorative justice procedures (DeMatthews, 2016). Consequently, there is a strong correlation between students who struggle academically to also exhibit problem behaviors (McIntosh, Sadler, & Brown, 2012). Although the research has shown a link between exclusionary disciplinary actions, there is a need for further research on what non-exclusionary actions may alter student behavior (DeMatthews, 2016).

One of the programs that shows particular promise is restorative justice, which originated within the criminal justice system and was subsequently used in some schools in Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Restorative justice practices require a shift in how adults view, and react to, “inappropriate” behavior (Mullet, 2014). Disciplinary practices are developed that allow the child who committed the misdeed to make amends with those who were damaged by his/her actions. Therefore, punishment is no longer simply a punitive measure, but rather, an opportunity to learn and repair the child’s place within the community. The use of restorative justice in the discipline practices used by administrators (DeVore & Gentilcore, 1999) as well as by classroom teachers (Monroe, 2005; Morrison & Veneering, 2011) is fundamental in altering the current state of the discipline gap. These studies focused on areas with a large African-American student population within the United States or in schools in non-U.S. nations (Australia, United Kingdom New Zealand) emphasizing the implementation of restorative practices but did not delve into how the practices may alter a different student population. Therefore, there is a missing element in the

research to investigate the perceptions of implementing a restorative justice program in American schools with diverse populations.

There is also a critical component, the inclusion of a community/family and school connection, that has only recently been investigated by Cavanagh, Vigil, and Garcia (2014). Because this is a newer area of study, focusing on the immediate school community, including the perception of teachers, could provide valuable insight into whether restorative practices make for a more solid school connection for teachers and students that this study intends to uncover.

### **Discipline Gap**

In 2002, with the onset of federal legislative acts involving No Child Left Behind (NCLB), schools across the country began investigating data on school progress, success, and gaps (Figlio, 2005). For the first time since the civil rights legislative events of 1965, the federal government was involved in wide-reaching educational reform at the K-12 level. One of the primary features of the NCLB legislation involved developing standardized tests that would provide more objective information about student and school success than what was viewed as subjective teacher reporting (Hursh, 2007).

The goal of NCLB was to provide a high-quality education to every student, to ensure that all students have access to curriculum and can be successful, and ultimately, to close the achievement gap (Vannest, Mahavedan, Mason & Temple-Harvey, 2009). This wide-sweeping reform forced schools to look at how they were meeting the needs of all student populations. While the NCLB legislation had the potential of closing gaps for historically disenfranchised student populations, tests alone could not address the spectrum of underachievement seen for African Americans and Latinos in both Texas and California (Causey-Bush, 2005). As schools began collecting and delving deeper into data

disaggregation for student based on race and socio-economic status, it became clear that there was an achievement gap.

As a result of increased attention on student achievement, many states also began instituting data collection systems for school disciplinary dispositions and actions used by school administrators. The two most stringent disciplinary measures used by schools are suspension and expulsion. A school administrator can determine a term of in-school or out-of-school (at home) suspension which requires a child is removed from the classroom setting as a result of violating state education code. Furthermore, an extreme violation of state education code can result in a mandatory recommendation for an expulsion hearing where a child could be removed from the district where the offense occurred. Evans and Lester (2012) described the cycle of discipline created by zero tolerance policies for weapons, drugs, and other offenses where administrators are mandated to suspend or move for expulsion with students who have violated education code. Only recently have there been data collected concerning the exclusionary practices of suspension and expulsion as well as the effects of zero tolerance policies. Upon disaggregation of these state data sets, many states have discovered a discipline gap based on race and gender.

**National and state studies show disciplinary disproportionality.** According to the U.S. Department of Education, during the 2011-2012 academic year, Black children comprised 18% of preschoolers in the U.S. but were 42% of students suspended once and 48% of students suspended multiple times from preschool. When students are subject to exclusionary disciplinary practices in early childhood settings, they are likely to experience grade retention, academic failure, hold negative attitudes about school, and are ten times more likely to drop out of high school (Department of Education, 2015),

The Penn Graduate School of Education: Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education compiled a report (2015) titled *Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in the Southern States*. Although the public schools in thirteen southern states were required to report to the Office of Civil Rights, there were 269 southern school districts that had missing or incomplete data that could not be included in the study. Regardless, the sample size included 17,259,605 students and 1,494,519 suspensions across the South from which the disproportionate nature of the disciplinary actions is clear. This important work found that in 132 Southern school districts Blacks were disproportionately suspended at rates five times or higher than their representation in the student population (Smith & Harper, 2015). Additionally, they found that in 743 districts Blacks were 50% or more of the students that were suspended from public schools. Blacks were 35% of the boys suspended and 34% of the boys expelled from K-12 public schools in the United States. Across the Southern states, it was found that Black boys comprised 47% of suspensions and 44% of expulsions (Smith & Harper, 2015). Furthermore, Smith and Harper (2015) discovered that overall, although 24% of all students in public Southern schools were Black, Blacks accounted for 48% of all suspensions and 49% of all expulsions. These data illustrate a significant discipline gap between Black students and other students in the public education system in the southern states.

**The disciplinary disproportionality issue in California.** In California, student data is collected through the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS) and reported to the California Department of Education. The CALPADS system began collecting disciplinary data in 2012, so data from 2012 to the present are available for comparison from year to year to look for disparities. Once data began to be collected in 2012

there has been a significant decline in the number of suspensions for California public school students. For the 2013-2014 school year, the suspension rate declined from 11.4 per 100 students enrolled to 8.1 per 100 students over three years (Blad, 2015). The Center for Civil Rights Remedies and University of California, Los Angeles conducted a study of California suspension rates and found that in 2013-2014 Black students experienced 7.2 more total suspensions per 100 students than White students for the disruption/defiance category, but just 2.9 more for the most serious offense categories (Losen, Keith II, Hodson, Martinez, & Belway, 2015). Much of the decline in suspension rates in California can be attributed to the implementation of AB-420 which restricts the use of suspension for students for disrupting school activities or otherwise willfully defying the valid authority of those school personnel engaged in the performance of their duties (CA AB-420, 2014). School officials, prior to the implementation of this bill, would frequently use defiance or disruption as a rationale for removal from the classroom (ACLU, 2014).

**Bullying.** The rising concern for student-on-student bullying has also led to the implementation of restorative justice practices to empower the community and the student to build healthy relationships where all individuals are respected and held accountable for their behavior and choices (Grossi & Santos, 2012; Morrison, 2006, 2012). Many school administrators and school staffs turn to restorative justice practices because they have discovered that traditional, punitive disciplinary techniques are not only not working but are also doing harm to their students and the climate of their schools (Varnham, 2005). This shift requires adults and students to view a child's poor behavior choices as damaging relationships with the student and adult members of the school not simply as being defiant or disruptive.

The implementation of restorative justice practices requires a great deal of work for the school site in changing the structure of discipline and the approach of the organization (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006; Varnham, 2005). An analysis of the use of restorative justice practices was conducted in a United Kingdom all-boys school where the former disciplinary system was failing and contributing to problems at the school. The staff had discovered that long-held exclusionary practices like detentions and suspensions were being challenged by the new clientele. The researchers discovered that the use of restorative circles was extremely successful in changing the way that students interacted with one another, their teachers, and the administration (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006). The implementation of restorative justice policies focused on people and relationships rather than punishment and retribution. (Varnham, 2005). Overall, bullying behavior results from a child's ideology of marginalizing others and a deficit in understanding and appreciating others (Polanin & Vera, 2013). Unfortunately, the implementation of practices and changing culture and climate takes a long time and a continued effort to be effective.

Bullying can also occur with the actions of administrators and teachers when they use their power at the expense of the students. Rules and regulations are often enforced in a traditional manner with little awareness of how the needs of students have changed over time. This makes the involvement of all staff members critical in the development of a caring ethos and community engaged in supporting a bully-free school (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Additionally, word choice and attitude of teachers as they address problematic student behavior can have an impact on the school climate as well as future student behavior (Blintiff, 2016; Lustick, 2016). Morris (2005) found a close connection between student behavior and

how the teachers addressed the behavior. Oftentimes, student behavior was addressed differently based upon the race and/or past behavior of the student.

**The African-American discipline experience.** There has been significant research that investigated African-American students and the discipline gap (Gregory, 2008; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Kinsler, 2011). By studying overall suspension and expulsion rates, researchers found a disproportionate level of discipline exerted onto African-Americans in the southern states when compared to their White counterparts in a comprehensive disciplinary study focused on the 13 southern states of the United States (Smith & Harper, 2015). Similarly, in a large study of California discipline, it was discovered that there are a higher number of suspensions for Latino and African-American students in California and a lower number of suspensions for White and Asian-American students when considering enrollment figures (Dataquest, 2016). These two large studies illustrated the disparity in the implementation of exclusionary discipline policies; however, other single-school case studies have shown the same issues (Morris, 2005).

African-American students are over-represented in disciplinary referrals (Gregory, 2008). The behavior of African-American students is more carefully scrutinized, monitored, and criminalized by teachers and staff members (Monroe, 2005; Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Gregory and Weinstein (2008) posit that the reason African-American students are over-represented in disciplinary referrals is the direct result of adolescent decisions to defy or cooperate along with trust or lack thereof for authority figures.

African-American students make crucial decisions within the school environment to be vulnerable in a system that may be unjust to students of color or to resist cooperation with an unjust system (Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). This decision is further

complicated by the influence of trust. Studies have shown that African-American students, especially, respond best to systems where student perceived instructors had high expectations paired with a supportive and responsive environment (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Shirley and Cornell, 2011). When teachers are perceived as caring and holding high expectations and the school climate is positive, trust is initiated and there was less risk of disciplinary actions for African-American students.

In analyzing the discipline gap at an urban middle school with a predominantly African-American population, Monroe (2009) identified four themes that reduced discipline in the classroom and subsequently closed the discipline gap. They included changing teacher perspectives of student behavior, the role of preservice teacher preparation, remembering teachers and mentors, and reaching out to students' parents and families (Monroe, 2009). Furthermore, the discipline gap could be corrected by teacher training in a teacher-coaching program focused on emotional support, classroom support, and instructional support (Gregory, Hafen, Ruzek, Mikami, Allen, & Pianta, 2016).

African-American students are overrepresented in special education programs throughout the country (Ferri & Conner, 2005). There has been a case made that the overrepresentation of students of color in special education is due to social inequality in housing and income, lower expectations by teachers which leads to low student performance, extensive referrals for special education, and de facto racial segregation (Artiles, Harry, Reschley & Chinn, 2002; Ferri & Conner, 2005). Students with disabilities are especially prone to exclusionary discipline practices. When special education students changed schools often, attended a school in an urban neighborhood, were socio-economically disadvantaged,

Black, and male, they held the greatest risk of exclusionary disciplinary practices (Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014).

**Disciplined behavior and its affects.** There appear to be specific behaviors that are more likely to be disciplined than other behaviors. Student aggression, impulsivity, and disruptive behavior are the most likely activities resulting in student discipline in schools (Horner, Fireman & Wang, 2010). The disciplinary measures employed by teachers and administrators as a result of these activities often reflect teacher expectations and beliefs based on the race and gender of the child. Race often influences the type of discipline provided by teachers and administrators alike, as opposed to the nature of the child's behavior (Horner, Fireman & Wang, 2010). Behaviors of African-American students are often criminalized and referred to the administration, while a White student displaying the same behaviors will be ignored (Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2005; Murphy, Acosta, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2015). Morris (2005) noted that this discriminatory treatment regarding behavior occurred with teachers regardless of their race. Kinsler (2011) analyzed discipline referrals and suspension rates for students in North Carolina schools where discipline referrals given within a specific school appeared unaffected by race. He did find that the level of disciplinary punishments were provided in schools with high minority populations. Therefore, a school administration that has a high minority student population may be more likely to provide harsher punishment than a school with more white students. Furthermore, it was found that schools with higher proportions of minority students were also highly correlated with low economic status.

Students who are suspended from school run the risk of being less bonded to school, less invested in school rules and course work, and subsequently less motivated to achieve

academic success (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). They are more likely to commit lawbreaking acts and engage in antisocial behavior. Furthermore, the discipline gap can be closely correlated with the achievement gap among students particularly boys, based on race and socio-economic levels. When exclusionary discipline practices are employed, students feel alienated from their teachers, administrators and the education institution (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016).

Punitive discipline processes such as suspension can have devastating long-term impacts on student education and should be corrected earlier in the educational process. Middle school provides an arena where the exclusionary process of suspension is imposed more regularly than at the elementary school and the consequences of that exclusionary practice can influence the course of a child's life (Losen, 2011; Monroe, 2005). Additionally, middle school academic and behavior support systems could have a critical impact on secondary school success as well as college and career achievement.

### **Changing Discipline Practices**

Historically, administrators have used exclusionary discipline practices to segregate and isolate students who did not conform to the norms or rules set forth by the classroom teacher and/or school officials (Maag, 2012). In California, Education Code 48900 (k): Disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority of supervisors, teachers, administrators, school officials, or other school personnel engaged in the performance of their duties, was often used to suspend students from classrooms or school in general. Therefore, any student whose behavior was deemed to be in conflict with that of a valid authority's direction could be subjected to exclusionary disciplinary practices. In 2014, the Assembly and Governor of California signed CA-AB 420, which restricted the use of EdCode 48900 (k) for excluding students from class and/or school. As of the execution of

this law, administrators may not suspend a student simply for a “first-strike” violation of 48900(k), and a district cannot expel a student if the only violation is 48900(k). The law led to a need for alternative forms of discipline including the implementation of restorative practices (Gonzalez, 2012; Haft, 2000; Teasley, 2014).

### **How Restorative Practices Can Address Gaps**

There are important strategies that could be employed to reduce the discipline gap (Kinsler 2011; Monroe, 2009; Noguera, 2007; Skiba, et al 2011). Those strategies included reducing bias in issuing referrals by increasing awareness of teachers and administrators to sources of bias, using a variety of disciplinary techniques, using exclusionary disciplinary practices as a last resort, focusing on finding the core of behavior practices, and reconnecting students to the school’s mission and vision during disciplinary events.

Culturally-relevant curriculum and engaging instructional practices should also be employed to build and prepare students for academic success (Monroe, 2005; Monroe, 2006; Monroe, 2009). The practices involved in restorative justice may also provide a foundation for closing the discipline gap by offering a counter-measure to traditional disciplinary measures. Restorative justice experts have explained that these practices were successful in improving experiences in the criminal justice system and the community and could therefore have a positive impact on the methods used for student discipline in American schools (Guckenburg, Hurley, Persson, Fronius, & Petrosino, 2015).

By educating administrators, teachers, and staff on a system of relationship restoration and community building, disciplinary actions would entail a learning experience that could shape school culture and climate in a positive way.

## **Restorative Justice**

With increased criminal activity involving youth and society's desire for swift punishment, discipline in schools became very harsh as the United States embarked on a new century (Karp & Breslin, 2001). In 2000, President Bush fought for gun and drug free schools in the United States and adopted the Gun Free Schools Zone Act (GFSA) of 1990, which was followed by the enactment of the GFSA of 1994 by President Clinton (Robbins, 2005). These pieces of legislation began zero tolerance policies for students across the country. Many school districts and states began to implement procedures to help alleviate a growing epidemic of school violence and behavioral misconduct (Karp & Breslin, 2001; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead & Weedon, 2008; Varnham, 2005). Unfortunately, the implementation of those strict zero tolerance measures led to a large discipline disproportionality within American schools (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

When a child commits to a behavior that is deemed against the established school rules or which jeopardizes the learning environment, discipline and punishment result. As was discussed earlier, the exclusionary disciplinary policies of suspension and expulsion more often result in harsher punishment for students of color. Restorative practices focus on repairing the relationships that were harmed when an infraction has occurred thereby building a stronger sense of community (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006).

The most salient element of restorative justice practices in schools is the importance of student voice, both the child who did the harm and the child who was harmed. The involvement of student voice allows for children to take an active part in the discipline process rather than having it be something that occurs to them as a result of an adult's decision (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Bintliff, 2011; Guckenburg, et al, 2015). Additionally, the use of restorative practices creates a renewed focus on positive school climate as all members

of the school community: teachers, students, and staff share openly with one another their concerns and agree on how to rectify the situation to restore school community and self-respect (Macready, 2009).

**Early history of restorative justice practices.** The use of restorative justice practices, like victim-offender conferencing, were first used and found successful during the 1970s in the criminal justice system in New Zealand and Australia (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Since the movement began within the criminal justice system the focus on true restitution, rather than punishment, allowed for the processes to be relatively easy to implement in a school system in New Zealand and Australia (McCluskey, Lloyd, Stead, Riddell & Weedon, 2008). By the late 1980s, restorative justice practices had been implemented and researched in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia (Cameron & Thorsborne, 1990; McKuskey, Lloyd, Stead, Kane, Riddell, & Weedon, 2008). In 2004 eight Scottish schools funded by the government piloted a broad measure to implement and study the results of implementing restorative practices in schools (McCluskey, et al, 2008). After analyzing data on the results of the implementation, the researchers found that there was a positive influence on school climate, student self-awareness, the use of restorative language and means of communication, as well as advancement in social skills.

In evaluating how restorative justice practices cross from the criminal system to the educational system, McCluskey, et al (2008) discovered that there were eight clear elements that would have to be included. Those elements include having a fair process where individual rights are recognized and all parties are involved in conflict resolution, the importance of reparation or restoration as a result rather than retribution and punishment, the development of empathy for all those involved the conflict, the value of all expressions and

views in resolving issues, the utilization of circles to exchange views, and the crucial use of scripted language to resolve disputes (McCluskey, et al, 2008). There are times when shame is misplaced, and restorative practices have the potential of doing harm. In the case of bullying after a restorative justice meeting a child who had been bullied may feel responsible or shameful about their part in the other student's behavior even when they have done nothing wrong.

Restorative practices can be used both as a response to misbehavior and as a way to facilitate healthy school climates (Evans, et al, 2013). Often times restorative justice measures are put into place in response to undesirable behavior or unmet needs (Evans & Lester, 2012; Karp & Breslin, 2001). Restorative justice practices were put into place as a result of drug and alcohol abuse at an all-boys school, and it was found that the implementation of these policies offered a more effective counter-action to zero tolerance policies (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Restorative justice policies can allow for a greater emphasis on communicating needs and therefore fills the void that non-communication employs which subsequently leads to perceived misbehavior (Evans & Lester, 2012). The practices employed by restorative justice techniques takes into consideration that there are unmet student needs that are often illustrated in violence and combative behavior (Evans, et al, 2013).

Schools readily operate as a cornerstone for youth socialization and a social control of delinquent or unwanted behavior. In this way restorative programs can reduce delinquency simply by prioritizing activities that support students and communities (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Restorative justice practices mandate a move from authoritarian disciplinary measures that deny offenders and victims a way to restore a relationship, to the implementation of

procedures that encourage building community capacity and relational rehabilitation. The school begins to look at how the behavior of a student not only breaks a rule but also harms the relational realm of that student as well (Karp & Breslin, 2001; McKluskey, et al, 2008).

Payne and Welch (2014) found, through a national random sample in regression analyses, that schools with higher numbers of Black students were less likely to use restorative justice practices as a way to respond to student misbehavior. With the disparity in the use of exclusionary disciplinary practices it is unfortunate that researchers have found schools with higher numbers of Black students do not embrace restorative practices to build school culture and improve student behavior. Students must be given the chance to accept responsibility for their actions, a chance to make things right, and an opportunity to grow from their choices (Evans, Lester, & Anfara, 2013).

**Implementation of restorative justice.** The Scottish Executive, in 2004, funded a pilot program where restorative practices could be implemented in a number of schools (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Woodon, 2005). These researchers found that the implementation of restorative practices occurred much more slowly at the secondary schools than it did in the elementary schools involved. One of their primary findings was that for restorative practices to be successful the schools had to be ready to change, and it required a balance of clarity and flexibility about identification of aims (McCluskey, 2005). McCluskey (2005) uncovered the importance of teachers and administrators being on board with change in disciplinary practices and open to reflection as well as having a solid understanding of restorative justice principles.

Evans, Lester, Anfara and Anfara Jr. (2013) provided a number of important suggestions for implementing social justice practices have been offered to school change-

leaders including the use of strong leadership at the top and grassroots at the bottom. Additionally, they found it is crucial that the school evaluates exactly where they are, what they do that is already in place, and what changes need to be made. For successful implementation the administration invited voluntary participation and moved to shape the discipline paradigm from punishment and control to a more restorative approach to change behavior.

“Restorative practices provided a framework within which individuals move their understanding from having an ‘I-it’ relationship to having an ‘I’Thou’ relationship (Macready, 2009, p. 215). Therefore, implementation of these practices required students who commit wrong-doing to view their behavior as having a profound effect on their relationship with others because it makes it more personal. When restorative practices were established, children had a new opportunity to learn about the views and priorities of other people and could therefore develop more empathy. The development of empathy can have a profound impact on school climate especially when viewed as deficient in the case of bullying.

**Practices of restorative justice.** Although restorative practices were originally put into place in Australia to combat serious disciplinary infractions, they have the potential for changing the culture and climate of any school. Morrison (2007) found that when a school embraced restorative justice practices, it empowered students and faculty to take ownership and responsibility of their behavior choices and developed social capital. When trained and qualified staff used restorative circles as a means of consequence for student misbehavior, students found empathy and understanding for one another, and bullying behavior decreased (Grossi & Santos, 2012). Upon implementation of restorative practices, students enjoyed

feeling safer on campus and more accepted along with decreased disciplinary incidents (Mirsky, 2007).

A critical component of restorative justice practices involved having students conference with those who have been harmed by their behavior choices. The conferences were meant to be open conversations by both parties so that a new relationship can be established (Drewery, 2014). The implementation of a “family group conference” allowed for the re-establishment of relationships rather than a punitive punishment-based disciplinary action, which could lead to more compassion and empathy on the part of the school community (Halstead, 1999).

Grossi and Santos (2012) discovered that the use of reparative dialogue, as a practice, helped improve the school climate and decrease bullying behavior. This technique involved using a circle of discussion with the bully and the victims to discuss the impact of the behavior and develop an understanding of the negative outcomes associated with the intimidating actions. Mirsky (2007) focused on the implementation of “check-in/check-out” circles at the beginning of each period of work together so that students had a chance to set goals for their session as a group. Additionally, they taught students to use affective statements so they spoke from a place of emotion. The use of these practices altered the way students interacted with each other and created for a more positive school climate.

There are a number of restorative justice practices that can be implemented in a school system to draw out the value of relationships and community. The first practice, Victim-Offender Mediation/Reconciliation, involved having students speak to one another with a mediator, often a peer within the school. Second, Community/Restorative Conferencing encouraged all victims (students and staff) to speak to one another about the incident that

caused them harm. There was also a trained mediator involved to assist with this conversation. Finally, peacemaking circles were used to come to an understanding as a group. The use of circles has been an effective way to gain a greater understanding of other people's feelings and how a student's behavior impacts more than just them, but rather the entire community (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Circles promoted empathy between students and one another as well as with their teacher or the facilitator of the circle by bringing everyone together to talk about their experience. The use of a circle has been especially effective with disengaged or disconnected youth because it gives people the opportunity to share perceptions and hear from others that their experience is shared, therefore developing a sense of community (Bintliff, 2011). The use of restorative circles can also increase empathy when used with teachers and staff. When listening to the stories of others, people gained a deeper appreciation of our shared community and experienced a source of empathy and compassion.

Restorative justice methods employed a viewpoint that is far different than was seen in the days of zero tolerance. Traditional discipline focuses on the cycle of harm found in school discipline where adults punish, often excessively, and those punishments are chosen for the student rather than with the student can cause conflict and lead to poor social outcomes for students (Mullet, 2014). Confrontive discipline involved regulating a child's behavior through the use of reason and negotiation where the child has a voice in the process. Because children develop a sense of well-being by confrontive rather than coercive discipline, those who were harmed and those who did the harm must come together to right the relationship (Baumrind, 2012). Research has shown that for a learning community to improve, students and community members must be given the power to restore their rightful place within the community by accepting responsibility, repairing relationships, and being accountable for

their position in the school climate (Stutzman, Armstutz, & Mullet, 2005). When using a restorative justice approach, it was important for schools to evaluate their own school site's needs, and to create a system that works well for them (Mullet, 2014).

Pavelka (2013) focused on the core principles of restorative justice, which she defined as “repair harm, reduce risk, and empower community” (p. 15). Similarly, to what Mullet (2014) argued, Pavelka (2013) found that the proper implementation of restorative practices is dependent upon the culture and willingness of the school to adopt new measures. Schools can take any number of collaborative approaches to deal with disciplinary violations including “peer mediation, peer/accountability boards, conferencing, and circles” (Pavelka, 2013).

There is an important shift in language and attitude when using restorative practices. In using affirmative statements, students are reminded that it is okay to have feelings regarding behavior and to be affected by both their own behavior and the behavior of others (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2009). Furthermore, by allowing students to understand the impact of their behavior on others, a student's perspective on the world shifts to that of an active participant.

**Value of restorative practices.** The proper implementation of restorative practices and techniques can lead to a reduction in bullying or intimidating behavior, a reduction in disciplinary events, and an improved climate and sense of safety (Hannigan & Hannigan, 2017). Ultimately, using these practices allowed for students to relate to one another in a more empathetic manner. When a district trained the school administrators on the techniques of restorative justice, the results appeared promising in that it reduced disciplinary actions as a whole for all students (Anyon, Jenson, Altschul, Farrar, McQueen, Greer, Downing &

Simmons, 2014). Because the discipline gap affects non-White students the most, restorative practices may create a closure to the discipline gap.

Although the implementation of restorative justice processes is time-limited and the interactions with disciplined students is also time-bound there is some intermediate promise that the processes help the offending student and the victim to restore the relationship of a school community as well as have closure to the incident (Bottani, Bradshaw & Mendelson, 2017; Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Administrators must use their time with students wisely to support a restorative process. Furthermore, it was discovered that the implementation of restorative practices can have a positive effect on school climate (Gonzalez, 2012; Reyneke, 2012)

## **Conclusion**

A system of inequality and injustice has been established by the institutionalization of disciplinary measures in school systems worldwide. Policies of zero tolerance implemented in the 1990s expose students of color to the exclusionary disciplinary measures of suspension and expulsion more often than their white counterparts (Shirley & Cornell, 2012; Smith & Harper, 2015). Quite often, students were suspended or excluded from instruction on a subjective basis of “disorder or disruption.” Due to the subjective nature of the terms, different teachers had different expectations regarding what was “disorderly or disruptive in their classroom environment.” Some teachers disciplined students for any behavior that was not completely compliant with their direction. Exclusionary disciplinary practices can have a significant impact on a child’s life trajectory and can lead to a strong dislike of school, opposition to adult authorities, anti-social behavior, criminal activity, and dropping out (Hemphill, Herrenkohl, Plenty, Toumbourou, Catalano & McMorris, 2012; Peguero & Bracey, 2015). To close the discipline gap, school administrators must investigate procedures

and policies that can effectively reduce the numbers of suspensions and expulsions at school sites. Restorative practices allow students to work with one another while also working with adults to find justice and reparation with reduced punishment-inflicting discipline. The inclusion of restorative practices can help shape perspective on school climate and student discipline in a positive direction (Drewery, 2004; Mullet, 2014). Although there is a small body of research describing the impact of restorative justice in schools, explorations into teachers' and students' perceptions have not been pursued.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher and student perceptions of school discipline practices, school safety, and school climate after restorative techniques have been established by the site administration. This case study used a qualitative method involving interviews and focus groups. Anonymous on-line questionnaires and one-on-one focused interviews of teachers provided the most complete collection of information about their perception of shifts or changes in school discipline practices and school climate as a result of administrative implementation of restorative practices. Student focus groups facilitated discussion and insight into their perceptions by allowing students to think deeply about their experiences and observations while also collaborating with others. Next, is a description of the participants and procedures for data collection that was used for both the teacher and student components. The chapter concludes with a description of how the data were collected and analyzed to better understand the perceived impact of implementing restorative practices at a suburban middle school in Southern California.

Although restorative practices have been in use in schools across the county, there have been few studies looking at how the implementation of those practices affected student and/or teacher perspectives of discipline and school climate (McClusky, et.al, 2011; Mullet, 2014; Standing, Feron & Dee, 2012). The administration and teachers in a restorative system seek to repair the harm that has been done when a student's behavior has come into conflict with the values of the school community. It seeks to repair this harm by restoring the offender's status through disciplinary measures that allow for understanding and reconciliation of the community rather than exclusionary disciplinary practices (Drewery, 2004; Evans, Lester & Anfara, 2013). Because there is relatively little known about how

teachers and students perceive this shift, this case study examined whether teachers and students perceived any effect on school discipline and school climate after the implementation of restorative practices by the school's administration.

A case study model allows for profound insight into a specific community for a specific timespan (Yin, 2009). This study focused on a single middle school located in Southern California that was implementing restorative practices, at the administrative level by the Principal and Assistant Principal primarily, to explore how students and teachers perceived its effects on discipline and school climate. The findings enhance the understanding of the impact of these practices for other school leaders who are looking into moving their school in a similar direction and contribute to the existing research described in chapter two.

Qualitative research allowed for greater development of meaning both for the participants as well as for the larger educational context (Maxwell, 2005). A case study provided valuable information about the experiences of a population during a specific time period that may otherwise go unattended (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Yin, 2003).

### **Context of the Study**

This study took place in a neighborhood, public middle school, serving students grade six through eight, in a Southern California suburb. The middle school is one of three in the district, and there are approximately 1,030 students enrolled in the school each year. Approximately 29% of the student population received free or reduced lunch, however, the household income of the remaining students varied widely from poor to lower middle class to affluent. Therefore, there was a significant economic diversity on this particular campus. This middle school was the oldest in the community at 52-years old, and there was a great deal of tradition and heritage that followed the school as parents and grandparents were quick

to note that they attended the school when they were in junior high. Ethnically, the population had remained relatively stable with approximately 35% of the student population identifying as Latino and 55% identifying as White while 1% of the student population identifies as African-American and 7% identifies as Multi-Ethnic. The student population consisted of 8% English learners while 13% of the student population received Special Education services. There were a variety of course levels taught, including advanced tracks in English and mathematics along with a wide array of elective opportunities. While 45% of the students on this campus identified as non-White, in the 2016-2017 school year 63% of suspensions and 65% of referrals were given to students not identified as White. The suspension rate for students suspended at least once from school was 3.7% in 2016, 3.1% in 2017 and 3.9% in 2018. This number does not account for students who were suspended multiple times. Historically, in the 2015- 2016 school year, students who identified as Multi-Ethnic, Latino or African-American were suspended from school multiple times but are only accounted for once in the descriptor above. When looking at disproportionality in suspensions, one must also consider how many times each individual student was suspended although that data is not collected/reported by the State of California. Students who identified as Multi-Ethnic, Latino or African-American were suspended multiple times at a rate higher than their White counterparts. Strides were made in the 2016-2017 school year to correct suspensions, which accounts for the drop in overall suspensions, however there was an increase in the suspension rate during the 2017-2018 school year. Studies have shown that when students are suspended from school they lose faith in the education system and are increasingly prone to school failure or drop-out from school (Hemphill, Herrenkohl, Plenty, Toumbourou, Catalano & McMorris, 2012; Peguero & Bracey, 2015). Male students at the

case study site had been overwhelmingly disciplined using suspension. During the 2014-2015 school year 55 of 79 suspensions were provided to male students, in the 2015-2016 school year 25 of 43 suspensions were provided to male students in the 2016-2017 school year 28 of 35 suspensions were provided to male students and in the 2017-2018 school year 83 of 85 suspensions were provided to male students.

The site selected for this case study was important because it is the only school in the district where restorative practices are being implemented after an administrator attended a restorative practices training. This school site had been in state-government level, program improvement for lack of sub-group student performance on state-wide testing prior to the newly developed State testing system. The school site was relatively diverse, both ethnically and socio-economically. Although there was not a large African-American population, there had been a disproportionate number of suspensions and disciplinary actions taken against students of color and male students more specifically. In exploring my research questions as to how teachers and students perceive student discipline and school climate as a result of implementing restorative practices, this site served my needs and provided valuable feedback to the administration as well as the broader research community.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were teachers and students at a suburban middle school, servicing grades six through eight, in Southern California. Sixteen of 34 teachers participated in the on-line questionnaire, two teachers provided a one-on-one interview and 23 students participated in focus-group discussions. The only requirements for teacher participation was that the teacher was employed by the school district and had his or her primary workplace at this specific suburban, middle school during the 2017-2018 school year and that they consented to being a participant in the study. Race, gender, and teaching experience was not

considered in the recruitment process. 34 teachers responded to the questionnaire, each having at least 7 years of experience in teaching. Although there were novice teachers on staff, they did not choose to participate. The only requirements for student participation were that the student had been at the school site from the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year and that both parent consent and student assent forms were completed prior to the discussion date. Race, gender, socio-economic level, and discipline experience were not taken into consideration during the initial recruiting process.

When it became apparent that it would be more difficult to find students who had both parent and student permission to participate, the site leadership provided greater outreach to students whom had been involved in disciplinary action or had a closer relationship with the site administration. This type of recruitment allowed for the site administration to reach out to specific students who had intimate knowledge of restorative practices because they had participated with the administrator in a discipline or social conflict experience. Participants included eight sixth graders (three females and five males), six seventh graders (three females and three males), and nine eighth graders (four females and five males). Fourteen of the 23 student participants had been a part of a restorative practice either for discipline or to relieve social conflict. One student also received intervention due to chronic absences (truancy) from school. Of the 23 student participants, sixteen identified as White, two identified as African-American, three identified as Latino or American Indian and two identified as Multi-Ethnic.

### **Procedures**

First I received approval from the site principal to have teachers and students participate in the research. I then received a signature on a letter of support from the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Dr. Robert Nye, to gain district approval for the research site and topic. This signature was more a formality since the researcher has

already received verbal approval from the Superintendent of the district. Upon formal district approval, IRB paperwork was submitted with Cal State San Marcos from which consent and assent forms were obtained.

The research study was introduced to the teachers before I left for another school site at the semester break. The consent forms and on-line questionnaires were to be introduced at a staff meeting. Unfortunately, due to the cancellation of the staff meeting, the questionnaire and further introduction to participate in the research was given by the Principal of the school via email. The teacher consent form was the first question in the teacher questionnaire, and each participant had to affirm in order to continue with the survey. Students' parents were provided with the parental consent and student assent form for participation through an email sent directly from me. Additionally, I sent a separate email to teachers to secure participants for the one-on-one interviews. Two teachers agreed to participate in a 30-minute individual interview which was conducted at the school site in June. Students who participated were assigned to one of four small groups (four-six students) for a semi-structured focus group discussion during their lunch period. Students were placed into groups based on grade, sixth and seventh or seventh and eighth. Attempts were made to group students with a friend or two so that they would feel comfortable. Creswell (2013) noted that focus groups are best when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other and when interaction with one another may produce the most complete information. Small focus groups were beneficial to the study because they allowed me to gain deeper insight from all participants without the discussion being taken over by a few vocal students at the expense of students who were more reflective before they spoke (Morgan, 1997).

## **Data Collection**

This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview for two participating teachers, an on-line questionnaire for sixteen teachers, as well as four semi-structured focus group discussions with four-six students each, for a total of 23 student participants. Each interview and all focus group discussions were audio recorded for ease of transcription as well as accuracy of the interview. Both interviews and all focus group discussions used specific prompts first to develop a sense of comfort and then to provide information about school climate and student behavior.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

A qualitative design involving on-line questionnaires, individual one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions was utilized because it allowed for greater awareness into what the perceived implications of implementing restorative measures were in the words of those who experienced the shift in disciplinary practices (Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2009). The research question ‘What do teachers perceive are the effects of implementing restorative practices on student discipline and school climate?’ was best answered through an anonymous on-line questionnaire, or semi-structured interview where teachers were given the opportunity to provide examples of the practices in use and whether changes were noted in discipline and climate. Some teachers may have provided responses to both the questionnaire and the interview. The question ‘What do students perceive are the effects of implementing restorative practices on student discipline and school climate?’ was best answered through a series of semi-structured focus group discussions with students. Based on my experience with middle-school aged children, focus group discussions fostered and encouraged more communication and insight than individual interviews would have. Morgan (1997) noted that group discussions on topics students have not given considerable thought to can be more

effective than one-on-one interviews because other people sharing their ideas can spark thought and communication.

### **Teacher Online Questionnaires**

There are many reasons that anonymous online questionnaires are a good choice when gathering information from teachers. First of which is anonymity. Teachers often feel that their opinion and voice will be scrutinized by administrators and/or teachers if shared aloud. Therefore, offering a safe, anonymous, way to share their thoughts allowed for a greater number of participants, as can be seen in the fact that only two teachers agreed to the one-on-one interview. The questionnaires were provided through the online program Qualtrics, which collected the data for further analysis.

### **Teacher Interviews**

Interviews are a practical and established technique for collecting qualitative data and are incredibly useful in identifying themes in a personal experience that can later be used to recognize larger implications (Mischler, 1986; Shrivastava & Valenzuela, 2009). Teachers participated in one semi-structured interview (Appendix B) for approximately 30 minutes to collect qualitative data to explore the research question ‘After the implementation of restorative practices, what are the perceived effects on student discipline and school climate?’ Maxwell (2005) argued that interviewing enables researchers to gain insight into someone’s perspective that you would not be able to gather through observation. The interviews used in this study elicited important data and provided patterns in understanding of the impact of administrative use of restorative practices. Seidman (2013) noted that interviews are meant for topics where the researcher is attempting to gain an understanding of an individual’s experience as opposed to testing a theory or hypothesis. This study examined the perceptions of teachers, and interviews served to provide complex data for a more complete

understanding. Each one-on-one interview was audio recorded for ease of transcription and accuracy.

### **Student Focus Group Discussions**

Semi-structured focus group discussions have proven to be effective in gathering data for qualitative analysis and for uncovering patterns in thinking (Yin, 2009). Focus groups allowed students to interact with one another, to influence and be influenced by one another as they are in their daily lives (Kruger & Casey, 2015). Additionally, given the nature of the topic, students may not have thought about the discipline experience in depth but when given questions in a group they would have a range of thoughts on the issue that they would not have been able to share if asked individually (Morgan, 1997). In my experience, middle-school students are more apt to speak about discipline and school climate when they are with their peers than when they are with an adult. Having a discussion with students as a group stimulated conversation with young people, and allowed them to build upon the ideas of others especially when they have not thought deeply about the topic before. Using focus group discussions allowed for greater student participation and more complete information for me to work with in response to the research question. Each of the four focus groups consisted of four-six students since larger groups can become more challenging for the researcher to control and may also silence some student voices who would not speak up if the discussion is dominated by a few students (Morgan, 1997). The student focus group discussions took place in late May and early June, 2018. Each focus-group discussion was audio recorded to aid in transcription and accuracy. The data collected from the focus group discussions were analyzed for patterns that provide insight into answering the research question ‘What do students perceive as the effects of implementing restorative practices on student discipline and/or school climate’?

## **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted, the recordings were professionally transcribed by Rev.com and analyzed for patterns and repeating subject matter. Qualitative researchers use both inductive and deductive analysis in synthesizing the information found in the sources (Creswell, 2014). I re-read each transcription while listening to the audio to ensure accuracy. Once accuracy was determined, I read through each on-line questionnaire response, interview and focus group transcript looking for repeating ideas and thoughts related to the research question. The process of open coding, where the researcher finds the patterns rather than having pre-determined codes, was utilized in this process (Creswell, 2013). At first, the teacher on-line questionnaire and interview was considered one component while the student focus groups were considered a separate component. Upon further analysis I found that the data overlapped and were best organized under three main points: Communication, Relationships, and Discipline. The additional synthesis involved the development of substantive categories, which sought to be more descriptive and precise (Maxwell, 2005). When the three main categories were developed, further sub-categories emerged for each of the categories. This analysis and synthesis was completed first for the teacher questionnaire and individual teacher interview data and later for the student focus group discussion data.

Finally, the findings were conveyed in what Creswell (2014) refers to as a detailed descriptive portrait. Because my research questions intended to closely examine teacher and student perceptions of student discipline and climate, a detailed account of the data portrays the richness of the data collected. The detailed descriptive portrait consisted of a written narrative of the interview data and the focus group discussion data findings in the following chapter. The narrative includes the themes, patterns, and insights gained from teachers and students aimed at understanding their perceptions of student discipline, school safety, and

school climate. Because the questionnaire responses were anonymous and both the student focus group discussion participants and teacher interview participants were confidential pseudonyms have been provided for all respondents. Teacher last names were assigned beginning letters A-R and Student participants were provided with a first name for ease of reference.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The middle school chosen for this study was not the most ethnically diverse middle school in the area, however, it was the middle school that was consistently incorporating restorative practices within the discipline arena because I had attended restorative practices training. In addition to the use of restorative practices this site had also been carefully selected because of the way disciplinary practices had impacted the student population. The school site had shown disparate rates of discipline for students of color and male students. As noted earlier in this chapter, male students were much more likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary practices than their female counterparts. In the 2015-2016 school year 25 of 43 suspensions were provided to male students and in the 2016-2017 school year 28 of 35 suspensions were provided to male students. Due to this disproportionality, it was best to gather qualitative data aimed at assessing perceived changes in discipline and/or climate at the conclusion of the first year of administrative implementation of restorative practices because people's memories fade with time and they may not be able to report insight as accurately (Yin, 2003).

My position as the Assistant Principal at the time of restorative practices implementation may also have posed a limitation in the form of responder bias. Although I was no longer the assistant principal at the site when the teachers were interviewed, their knowledge of my interests may have altered their responses. Teachers had already been

informed that I was very interested in addressing the discipline gap and the implementation of restorative practices as I had done professional development on the topic with them before. I emphasized in person and by email that the research is part of my independent practice and that their insight was valuable to the study to see if there were any changes they perceived as a result of the implementation of restorative practices. Furthermore, it was made very clear that this study is in no way tied to teacher evaluation or teacher disciplinary action which allowed teachers to speak freely about their perceptions without fear of retribution.

Finally, there was a power differential between the researcher and those being interviewed. Although participants were reminded before the interview that they were free to leave at any time, or to stop the interview, they may have felt pressured to remain throughout the entire interview, or to give the type of answers they thought I wanted for the study. When the interview took place I was no longer in an administrative position at this site, however, I was supposed to return to the site. I provided each interviewee the opportunity to set up an appointment with me or an alternate interviewer, however, they both chose to be interviewed by me. The interviews were conducted at the interviewee's convenience at the school site in June.

### **Summary**

This case study attempted to understand the perceived effects of implementing restorative justice practices at a suburban middle school in Southern California. The study provided insight from both the teachers' and students' perspective. While there may be many approaches to gain a deeper appreciation to the possible changes, the technique that appeared to be the best aligned to answering the research questions of interest was qualitative. After the administration had implemented a variety of restorative practices in the fall and winter of 2017, teachers participated in anonymous on-line questionnaires, in one-on-one interviews

and students participated in focus group discussions in May and June, 2018. These efforts were made to gain a more thorough understanding of the perceived effects of that implementation on student discipline and school climate.

## Chapter Four: Results

Although exclusionary discipline practices have long been used by school administrators to corral and control student behavior, there are adverse outcomes to suspending or expelling students (DeMatthews, 2016; Kinsler, 2011). Excluding children from the learning environment of a classroom leads to a break-down in the relationship between the teacher and student as well as the school community (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Cavanagh, Garcia & Vigil, 2014; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Students of color and male students are disproportionately disciplined using harsher methods and more exclusionary practices, and therefore they experience alienation from the education environment (Smith & Harper, 2015; Kinsler, 2011).

In 2014 the California Legislature attempted to eradicate the use of exclusionary discipline practices by passing Assembly Bill 420, which reduced the opportunity for administrators to suspend or expel students based on first time, non-threatening, non-violent offenses. This bill also encouraged the use of a more restorative model for student discipline whereby students could repair their relationship with the student community when they have behaved in a way that has harmed the community (Teasley, 2014). This legislation created a need for school districts and school administrators to investigate restorative practices to craft a discipline system that met the needs of school communities (Gonzalez, 2012; Haft, 2000).

This chapter explains how teachers and students at a public, suburban, middle school in Southern California perceived the use of restorative practices by school administration at their school site. There were two research questions used in this qualitative case study:

1. After implementation of restorative practices in the middle school, what do teachers perceive are the effects of that shift on school discipline and climate?

2. After implementation of restorative practices in the middle school, what do students perceive are the effects of that shift on school discipline and climate?

After an analysis of sixteen teacher questionnaires, two individual teacher interviews, and 23 student focus group responses, it became clear that teacher and student feedback produced similar themes, despite being asked different questions in a variety of spaces. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the three themes that emerged from the data collected and provides insight into how teachers and students perceived the implementation of restorative practices at this particular middle school. The themes that embody the quality and character of the complete data set are communication, relationships, and discipline. Figure 1 illustrates the patterns and themes that were found in data from teacher questionnaires and interviews as well as student focus group discussions involving student behavior and school climate.

	Teacher Perception	Student Perception
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positive Communication</li> <li>● Negative or Lack of Communication</li> <li>● Increased Parent Contact</li> <li>● Feelings About Restorative Justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Classrooms and Teacher Responses to Student Behavior</li> <li>● Staff Responses to Student Behavior</li> <li>● Jokes</li> </ul>
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Time</li> <li>● Trust</li> <li>● Respect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Respect or the absence thereof</li> <li>● Labels and Targeting</li> </ul>
Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Safety</li> <li>● Consequences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Safety</li> <li>● Consequences</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Themes discovered in teacher and student perceptions

### **Communication**

Restorative practices involve providing students with a voice and allowing them to be a participant in the discipline process rather than simply administering a punishment as a result of misbehavior (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Bintliff, 2011; Guckenbunrg, et al, 2015). A key element that arose from the data was the importance of communication among all stakeholders. This subsection reveals how teachers perceived communication with students, staff, and parents as well as how students perceived communication from teachers and staff.

#### **Teacher Perception of Communication**

Teachers expressed an interest in setting the stage for student behavior as well as providing reminders for students as to what proper behavior looks like. When asked about what restorative practices are, most teachers provided information involving communicating with students about their behavior. In both the questionnaire responses and the interviews some of the teachers used words like ‘conference’ or ‘conversation’ intimating a meeting where both the teacher and the student spoke. Other teachers used words like ‘tell’ or ‘direct’

which would characterize a lack of student voice. While many teachers spoke of a positive communication experience involving students, they also spoke of negative communication (being put down or unsupported) or a lack of communication from the administrative level when approached or upon speaking about student discipline issues.

**Positive communication.** Teachers communicate their behavior expectations explicitly to students, especially early in the year. Applegate stated, “I convey my perspective to the students” while Graham shared that “when someone responds in a disrespectful manner, they are notified that such behavior will not be tolerated.” Maple stated that s/he “uses verbal reminders as well as one-on-one conversations to address disciplinary issues.” Nickel shared that “if a student is struggling, I pull him or her aside to find out what is going on to make them disobey.” Findley stated that s/he has seen a change in the student population. “I find students over the past few years need much more time to ‘be heard’ and I need to make the time to ‘listen,’ to understand ‘why’ they may have reacted in a manner that needed correction.” Radcliff said that “it’s really important to let someone who’s done something wrong know that they’ve got a fresh start, that you believe in them.”

Many teachers also communicate their behavior expectations to students through implicit, non-verbal means. Everly shared that s/he uses proximity to correct unwanted behavior in their classroom, while Graham and Keaton place sticky notes on student desks as a warning that their behavior needs to change, or further discipline will occur. Graham reported that s/he “quietly place(s) a sticky note on their desk that reads ‘If your behavior continues, you will be written up and receive an email or phone call home.’” Keaton said “I warned with a ‘post-it’ on their desk when a behavior arises.” Some of these communication tools were newly in place since they were introduced to staff recently during professional

development: sticky notes and I statements. Other tools, like proximity or seat changing, have been means of behavior correction prior to the introduction to restorative practices.

**Negative or lack of communication.** Multiple teachers said that they felt unsure about the message that was being communicated by the administration regarding restorative practices. In an individual interview Tucker stated:

Honestly, sometimes it felt like nothing was really happening. It might have been a communication issue I think, maybe there was a lot more going on than we really knew about, but there were just so many times, I don't know, just even with the dress code, that changed, the way that it was worded and everything and we felt so fuzzy about, are we supposed to send this person up, is this what he or she is wearing not okay now or is it okay? And we didn't always feel backed up I think, or we didn't know whether or not there was any follow through.

Liston echoed that sentiment when s/he stated "I do not know what kind of support I will get when I send a student to the office." Maple and Paisley stated that too often teachers are not privy to the serious discipline issues and that the school administration leaves them out of the loop. During the second semester, I took an interim administrative position at a different site and a novice interim administrator who was not as versed in restorative practices took the position. Maple stated that "responsive communication between admin and teachers has been very beneficial [second semester]. It conveys a message to the student community that teachers and admin are a cohesive, dedicated team." I would argue that, Maple is referring to a return to more traditional disciplinary practices occurred during the second semester that created greater comfort to teachers. Teachers reiterated that restorative practices led to a lack of communication from administration to teachers regarding student behavior and consequences. This is reinforced through the aforementioned example where a more traditional administrator joined the team discipline and teachers cited that they were more comfortable with the return to more familiar communication.

**Increased parent contact.** Many teachers use a phone call home to alter student behavior. Nine of the sixteen teachers shared that when there is misbehavior in their classrooms, they would contact a student's parent through email or phone. There appears to be an increase in parent contact initiated by the teacher after the introduction of restorative practices. Paisley said that 50% of the time s/he would have the student make the contact and explain to the parent what s/he was doing in class. Applegate shared "I am using student-led conferences as disciplinary intervention more than ever. I have set up a lot of parent conferences this year. Two-three times more than previous years. Along with the shift in frequency of parent conferences, there has been a shift in the way the conference proceeds." The use of student-led conferences, as opposed to teacher-directed conferences is an important change introduced by the school administration. These conferences allowed parents a different view of their child as the child shares academic progress, behavior, goals, and sets forth an action plan. Bleck and Everly have been pulling parents into the conversation about their students earlier in the process this school year as a means of correcting student behavior in response to the introduction of restorative practices. Bleck shared that parent contact would be the second step in disciplinary action, which was well before a referral or conference with the administration. Everly said that since the implementation of restorative practices, "I spend more time communicating with the parents." This has provided for changes in student behavior and intervention earlier in the process without involving administration, thus supporting the teacher-student relationship with the assistance of parents.

**Feelings about restorative justice.** Some teachers reflected upon the progression of their beliefs on restorative justice. Bleck, Keaton, and Paisley shared that they now sit down

and communicate directly with students during detentions. Applegate shared that s/he led an activity this year where students shared their bullying/name calling experiences aloud and made their stories public. Bleck sometimes had students role-play to better understand how their behavior affects others. S/he said Findley worked through a situation with a student where the student decided s/he should apologize for their behavior and make it public by also including their parent on a formal, written apology. Findley said “After a conference, one student decided he should apologize to his teacher. He wrote an email to the teacher and cc’d his mom too since we were all trying to support the student.” Hooper, Jenkins, Liston, and Ort stated that they make time to talk to students individually, privately, about their behavior and what changes to make. Hooper stated “I almost always find time to speak to the student in private so I can share my concern and to give them the opportunity to explain their behavior.” Jenkins shared “Restorative practices allow the opportunity for students to reflect and truly understand the impact of their behavior on others so they are less likely to repeat the behavior.” Liston shared “Restorative practices allow for students and teachers to meet and discuss classroom behavior.” Ort said, “I talk with the students more about how their actions are selfish and help them to see how their actions affect those around them. Sometimes the parents and I compromise, sometimes the students decide their own consequences, sometimes the students get credit for getting caught being good.” Applegate shared that s/he had “100 conversations with students regarding their behavior in class this year...I had about 60 last year.”

Many teachers expressed frustration, however, with an apparent lack of communication surrounding the use of restorative practices and what that means for student behavior and discipline. The issue that seemed to illustrate this frustration most clearly was

the issue of student dress code. The dress code was altered this year from a measurement system where straps on blouses had to be two inches wide to simply not allowing strapless tops. Additionally, shorts and skirt length requirements were also modified from the shorts having to touch the fingertips when the arms are relaxed to needing to cover the buttocks. These alterations were communicated from administration to the leadership team which consisted of the administration, the two school counselors, and 13 teacher leaders. Liston stated “I am confused about why our school has practically no dress code.” Radcliff shared, “There was also a negative vibe, teachers were very frustrated about dress code. I told my aides ‘How am I gonna teach them [the students in the classroom] if you guys are not dressed the way you should be?’” Everly stated “The office seems to be filled with drama. I do not think teachers, nor students, have buy-in to the process. I do not know if either believe in the school or feel connected to the school. I also think the practices that I have seen seem to drag out the students staying focused on themselves and liking the attention of the drama.” Graham expressed that students “sit through a meeting while being offered coffee and treats. The students talk about whether or not this is what truly happened up in the office, it is the perception.” Maple said “Too often, teachers are left out of the loop when it comes to serious discipline issues. Then we lose touch with that’s happening with the students.”

### **Student Perceptions of Communication**

#### **Classroom and teacher responses to student behavior: Student perspective.**

Students expressed that their attitude and behavior was often dependent upon the teacher’s communication and what they would tolerate. Ensuring clear two-way communication about expectations and consequences is an important component of restorative practice. Madelyn shared that “teachers try to be more enthusiastic when they are giving a complicated or stressful assignment so that kids will get more excited.” The students shared that teachers

also communicate with students about misbehavior in a variety of ways. Tim, Olga, and Robert spoke about teachers talking individually with students when they were misbehaving. Tim said “If it’s something minor, he’ll just come up and talk to you and give you a warning and sometimes, he’ll send you to the middle room [to be excluded from the class.]”. Robert said “The teachers will command or tell the students that it is not right to talk back or to disrespect other kids.” He also said “Sometimes teachers would say or write down something and then they’ll tell the kid who did something wrong to come meet them after lunch, before lunch or before snack or whenever the class ends so that they can discuss what they did.” Josh shared that when a student misbehaves, the teacher “pulls you to the front of the class, and they like send you to the office and you get embarrassed.” The students clearly expressed that teacher communication in front of their peers was embarrassing and not desirable.

Gennadiy and Olga shared that teachers will often talk directly to students who need to change their behavior. Gennadiy also said that teachers “send you out and they come out and talk to you.” While Olga said “They’ll [teachers] talk about the decisions they [the students] make and try to like figure out...try to help them and tell them that it’s not good to do it. Ritchie said “My friends were like talking pretty loud outside classrooms and sometimes like they [teachers] will come out and tell us to shut up.” Therefore, some students viewed teachers communicating with students in a private and direct way, while others communicated in a more public, and therefore embarrassing way for middle school students.

**Staff and administrative responses to student behavior.** At this middle school there are four campus supervisors that are employed to provide a safe environment during non-structured times (brunch and lunch). Throughout the focus group discussions, students referred to these individuals as “Noon Duties” or “Yard Duties” (elementary nomenclature)

rather than as campus supervisors or by their actual names. Sariah shared that the “yard duties would be like ‘don’t touch each other’ but they are good when it comes to strict rules. They give you a chance at least.” Chip stated that it appeared there was a lack of communication between the campus supervisors and the administration. “Some of the campus supervisors and some of the administrative office kind of have different rules almost. Some will say, ‘yeah, you can do that,’ and then someone else will see you doing it and they’ll be like, no you can’t do that.” When speaking about campus supervisors and other staff, students were warned and directed to change behavior. There was not discussion of a conversation or any student voice. From the students’ experiences with campus supervisors, there was not enough communication about expectations for student interaction between the administration and the campus supervisors about how to work with students.

When asked about what happens when students are seen by the principal, there were many ideas shared. Sariah said “Sometimes they’re just like no we want to talk or like something you’re a witness to something or something like that. And even if you did something like actually bad they would call your parents or something like that and they would get you suspended or something.” Liz stated that “The principal might give them like a talk and like might give them detention or if you did like very bad...you might get suspended.” Although the students did not use the terms restorative practices or restorative justice, Sariah, Liz and Jenny refer to talking with the Principal as being an interactive experience rather than simply being chastised.”

**Jokes.** Claire, Angelita, Chip, and Betsy all spoke to teacher communication that was classified as a “joke” but had a more complex impact. Claire said “some teachers say rude jokes to students and it’s not funny.” Angelita shared this story:

I have this teacher and there's this kid in my class that always says 'What?' and she thinks it's funny, so then whenever a student will say something not in the correct grammar, she'll always just like she'll go 'What?' That student will like get embarrassed and you can just tell that it just doesn't make them want to be there. Sometimes, in my classes, they'll, like the teacher, will say don't talk to some-body and then the person who was talking earlier before, they'll say like wink, wink and they'll say their name out loud to publicly embarrass them. Students get really hurt to the point where they're like, 'Oh well, like I hate them because they said that.'

Claire said that she tried to ask one of her teachers to stop making jokes at her expense but that the teacher said it was a joke and "only had her point of view." She further illustrated her point with this story: "Sometimes [teachers] can take their jokes a little too far. Sometimes if you say, 'well, you know that joke that you made in class, I don't know if it was a joke or not, but it hurt my feelings.' Sometimes the teacher's response will be like 'Well, it's not my fault you weren't paying attention.' Or they'll be like 'Oh well, that was just a joke.'" Chip shared a similar experience: "Some teachers will think something is funny even when really it's not. It's hurtful. Even if you ask them to stop singling you out and they'll keep doing it. I have a teacher that will hush me a lot and I've asked her to stop and she hasn't stopped." An especially poignant response was offered by Claire when she said: "They [teachers] should just not make offensive jokes to students because that really makes the students feel like they're less instead of making them feel like they're more. In pushing them they're taking away their strength." Clearly, although many teachers use jokes and sarcasm to lighten their class mood, that communication does not always convey the intended message. Although the administration had spoken about the use of sarcasm in the classroom, that was clearly lost on some teachers who continued to use it as a weapon in their classroom. Although students felt that discipline became more harsh each year, they also shared that they felt like there were teachers having fun at the expense of student well-being.

## **Relationships**

One of the key values within the use of restorative practices is the importance of relationships. There are relationships formed throughout the school community that can strengthen or hinder the bond that a student has with a teacher, a teacher with a student, a student with staff, the staff with a student, students with other students, parents and the school, and the school with parents. Since relationship building is a critical component of restorative practices, this dimension provided a great deal of insight into how students and teachers perceived themselves and one another as part of the process at this middle school.

### **Teacher Perceptions About Relationships**

**Time.** Applegate, Bleck, Findley, Nickle and Radcliff shared thoughts about the importance of giving time to develop relationships because it will help in the long run. Nickle said “I think it is important to show students you care. If they know you are in their corner...they will try to do better.”

Applegate stated that “It’s a priority that all students believe I like them, value them, and respect them.” Findley elaborated on this sentiment:

I take time to establish a friendly connection and learn a little something about each one of my students. I save this information to help me in growing a connection to build upon, learn about their strengths and weaknesses and about their concerns. I give a child the opportunity to ‘save face’ and rectify the situation, then take time to sit in that ‘truth’ for a few minutes and think about the incident from the other student’s/teacher viewpoint.

Radcliff said “I work to build a relationship with that student and really try to understand why this student is acting out.” S/he further explained “I try to get the student connected with me, so this student will not fight with me.” Radcliff also spoke about working with other teachers to support students. “We talk about different students and what’s going on and how we can help them.” Taking the time to get to know students, to discuss students within small teacher

groups, and discovering ways to support the student community are all important facets in the development of a strong restorative program.

**Trust.** Throughout the teacher questionnaire and interview responses, there was a thread focused on trust or lack of trust within the school community. Radcliff shared:

I think they [students] really like a lot of teachers, but I think that when you have teachers that they think they're above, really being kind to the students, I think that's tragic. I think some students would tell you that they had been picked on by teachers.

Radcliff felt that the implementation of restorative justice allowed him/her to build a more trusting relationship with students that sometimes translated into improved behavior, "I feel like that was a self-affirming prophecy where he [a student] did better and better and better." S/he also stated that when a student was trusted to make better choices, s/he usually did.

Tucker illustrated trust within a relationship with this story:

A student was having a really hard time with one of the other teachers. He was just super convinced that she hated him. I would talk to him about his behavior in the other class, just kind of trying to talk to him about stuff like that and getting to know him a little better that way. Asking him questions about himself.

While most teachers understood that the goal of implementing restorative practices was to focus on building relationships and improving student behavior through the use of these means, some teachers expressed a feeling of distrust between the teachers and the administration, which hindered their willingness to adopt these practices. Radcliff said,

When people say restorative discipline, you think, of there's no consequences. No, no, no, you always bring the person back and say, okay, now you've got your consequence. You're forgiven. We know you can do better. You've had a hard time. You always have to restore.

Radcliff expressed two key elements of restorative practices, consequences, but a way to work back and regain composure. Tucker shared that "there has always been a lot of trust between

the parents and the teachers and the students and the administration.” However, [this year] “we didn’t always feel backed up.” In explaining that lack of trust, Tucker said:

I think a feeling developed that we couldn’t count on administration. There’s this feeling...and we would talk about it, the teachers would talk about it like, ‘Well, I don’t know, if they don’t back us up and then the kid comes back and nothing happened, it’s kind of like, nah-nah-nah-nah-nah,’ just like you lose respect or authority. It didn’t feel so much like we were a team.

From this teacher’s perspective, the implementation of restorative practices alienated teachers from the administration.

**Respect.** Thirteen of the sixteen teachers who responded to the questionnaire stated that they feel like a respected member of the campus after the introduction of restorative practices. Most of the teachers focused on the student and teacher relationship when thinking about respect. Hooper shared that s/he “feel respected because students seem to trust me and feel comfortable speaking to me.” Graham views respect as a two-way street: “I feel that by treating my students with respect- no insults, no sarcasm, no putting them on the spot, no labels, that they are being shown how to treat one another. I try to praise good thinking, ideas, and behaviors, etc.” This is especially poignant in relation to how strongly the students expressed their disturbance by the use of sarcasm and “jokes.” The use of restorative practices do not allow for sarcasm or fun at another’s expense as it breaks down a relationship and eludes the building of a trusting relationship. Tucker shared this story about respect and understanding: “There was another student that a couple of times was very hurtful toward me and other kids in class. I thought it was really important for him to understand that he was really hurting people’s feelings, even his teacher.”

When looking at the larger school community, Findley shared that the staff listens to one another and that the administration encourages collaboration and understanding. Tucker

said that they “feel like the parents trust us, for the most part.” As discussed previously, parent communication has increased as a result of the introduction of restorative practices.

A few teachers have experienced disrespect whether by students, their colleagues, or administration. Radcliff shared that they feel disrespected when students do not close their Chromebooks when asked. Maple said “Sometimes I feel disrespected. Students use foul language and have inappropriate conversations outside my classroom, when it required my intervention it would likely lead to disrespectful behavior being directed toward me.” Jenkins said that “a fellow teacher made an incorrect inference and spread untruths.” Graham shared that they have heard of “frustration from peers that they feel unsupported and that no real consequences are applied” by the administration in response to student misbehavior, therefore fostering a sentiment of disrespect. Furthermore, Tucker thought that the administration viewed teachers as weak when additional support was requested for special education and English Learner students. The implementation of restorative practices at the administrative level happened concurrently with a shift in monetary resources and how support staff would be used to support students and teachers. This change impacted a number of teachers who were expected to work directly with students that had aides in the past. Although these two items are not entirely tied, in the minds of some teachers and staff the decision to educate teachers with additional professional development rather than employ hourly aides to assist in the classroom was seen as showing a lack of respect for what teachers have to do in their classroom on a daily basis in meeting the needs of students.

### **Student Perceptions About Relationships**

**Respect.** While thinking about relationships on campus after the implementation of restorative practices, students usually focused on the relationships with one another first. Grace said that “students are respected because they’re popular...they’re disrespected because

like how they look.” Josh thought “people are respected a lot for achievements.” Madelyn stated “some students are very much respected by other students, while others are very much disrespected by others. I really see no reason why.” Mitchell thought “the staff won’t respect them if they are like troublemakers and they just don’t follow the rules.” Robert put it this way:

Sometimes students can be respected and disrespected. The reason how they can be respected is how come teachers would agree with them and like students would like encourage them and all that. But somehow they’re not respected is because some kids could pick on other people and they could make the situation more bigger than it really is.

Students were able to explain the importance of respect and articulate how it influenced a student’s position on campus.

When focusing on respect in the context of student-teacher relationships, students had some different responses. Liz said:

You can get respect is like you do like all your homework and like all your projects and like be good. How to get like not respected is like if you do something very wrong or bully someone or even like make fun of a teacher.

Other students also equated respect within the student and teacher relationship with how you behave. Sariah said that “teachers usually respect me because I’m nice and kind to people.” While Claire reported that “if you are polite, a teacher will respect you more, just be polite,” Liz shared that you can get respected by doing all your homework. Betsy felt a shift in respect over the course of her middle school experience. “Sixth and seventh grade...we were treated with more respect and the teachers were so much nicer and we didn’t get disciplined as much.” It appears by the student responses, that with teachers, respect is earned through compliance rather than through the development of a relationship. This is a difficult shift to

make in an ingrained institution where compliance is highly valued because it makes the work of school easier on staff.

Many of the students expressed a feeling of respect from and for the site administration. Jenny stated “Our Principal has always kept a fine line between what’s fair and what’s not fair.” Jenny, Betsy, Claire, and Sariah shared that The Principal was fair when making decisions and listened to the students to make sure she understood their side of the story. This is an important aspect of restorative practices, allowing students to provide their perspective and be part of the discipline process in determining next steps in repairing a relationship. While some students have experienced a shift in their relationship with the Principal (and administration) after the implementation of restorative practices, there does not appear to have been a change in how they view respect with teachers.

**Labels and targeting.** While many students reported that the school is safe, throughout the focus group discussions, a common thread was the topic of how students get labels and are sometimes targeted. This process involved peer relationships as well as teacher-student relationships. Even with the implementation of restorative practices the students revealed that labels are extremely difficult to overcome.

Chip shared that “middle school is all about labels. People judge you by who you hang out with and how you act in school and stuff.” Mitchell said, “The people that are popular are judged in bad ways because being popular can be a bad title, but it could also be a good title.” Grace has noticed that “some kids are mean to certain students because of how they look or what they say or stuff like that.” Steward said: “I think that also it’s sort of like a totem pole, like people like know where they’re at in those groups and so they know not to mess with certain people and they know how much they can get away with within a group.”

Gennadiy put it this way: “I feel like there’s much more nicer people than bad people being mean to other people and since you know them and you’re in the eighth grade and they know the other kids because they just came from the school, they just know how to push their weaknesses and sometimes they choose to do bad stuff. [...] You go to know who you are and find the people that’s the same as you.”

Some students discussed labels that were provided by teachers even after they were introduced to restorative practices. Ritchie stated “I feel like some of the teachers here can like be a little crude and unfair to some kids in particular.” Steve said “I feel like sometimes teachers like have like people that often mess around in class and then they’ll like target them even when they’re not.” Claire shared this thought: “If you’re talking teacher to students, I think that sometimes teachers choose favorites and they’re super nice to their favorites and super mean to students that they don’t like. And sometimes they may not even have a reason to not like that student.” Sariah expressed this quandary:

I just feel that if you get in trouble once, you’re disrespected for the rest of the year by your teachers and I honestly don’t know how to bring that respect back when you’re doing everything you’re supposed to do. If you’re doing everything you’re supposed to do and you’re not getting in trouble I think they should be pretty respectful to you. I agree about the target on your back and how the teachers call you names. They might think it’s funny and like everyone laughs at it, but really it honestly hurts.

This student’s experience brought up a few similar ideas. Betsy said, “I feel like they [teachers] tend not to help us fix our mistakes.” A critical tenant of restorative practices is allowing for the student to repair the relationship and make up for their mistakes, which would appear to be missing according to these student accounts. Sariah shared a story where vandalism occurred, and she and a friend were blamed by the custodian even after the perpetrators were caught. Angelita spoke to the brutal nature of feeling judged by a teacher,

“I feel like they’re [students] already judged by their other classmates and the thing that some teachers are doing makes it ten times harder because teachers are supposed to be the people you could go to if you needed anything and to feel like your teacher judges you too hurts.”

There were some ideas for improvement suggested by Claire, “Sometimes they’re [teachers] not open minded to changing their decisions. Sometimes they [students] want to change.

They want to become a better student...they should start us on a clean slate and try to give us a chance if they see we’re improving.”

While students had some great things to say about the school as a whole, the experiences shared during the student focus group discussions about relationships were insightful in recognizing a greater need for increased training in restorative practices. In shifting to a more restorative system, teachers and staff need more tools to build relationships with foundations of respect where the hierarchy of positionality is minimalized and where the ultimate goal is reflection and growth for all stakeholders.

## **Discipline**

### **Teacher Perception of Discipline**

**Safety.** Most teachers reported a classroom discipline policy that focused on respect, positive reinforcement, or kindness. While teachers did not explicitly report a feeling of being unsafe on campus, they would like for improved communication from the administration when dealing with school-wide safety issues, discipline and the introduction of restorative practices. Several teachers reported that they use a progressive discipline policy, but that issues of safety would supersede this policy. Radcliff said that there is a different level of discipline in the classroom when it involves a safety issue, for example putting a string around another student’s neck. Findley stated, “I discipline with dignity and ‘teach’

them where they may need redirection and understanding of the school rules and/or societal, unwritten rules.”

**Consequences.** In the questionnaire and interview responses, discipline consequences, or lack thereof due to the implementation of restorative practices, were expressed by a number of teachers. Seven of the sixteen teachers who responded to the questionnaire explained a set of steps that they follow for student discipline with a referral to administration being the final step. Detentions were offered as a means of discipline by many of the teachers while three teachers spoke to having individual conversations with students during the discipline process. For some, the conversations were viewed as a shift in practice since the introduction to restorative practices while for others it had always taken place without the title or label. Keaton offered this explanation, “A detention in my room has always been restorative. I was unaware that I was disciplining in that manner. I sit down with the student during detention and have a conference.” Ort refers to a newly adopted restorative approach, “I talk with the student more about how their actions are selfish and help them see how their actions affect those around them. I explain the discipline system to them in more detail, so they know where they stand as their behavior escalates.” In an interview, Radcliff explained, “If they’ve [a student] done something really poorly, you’ve got to have a harsh consequence, but you still have to restore them. If we just do the discipline, it breeds rage in kids. They don’t need that. They really need to know that someone’s on their team.”

For some teachers, the introduction to restorative practices meant a lack of or reduction of disciplinary measures from the administration. Teachers believed that the administration was no longer willing to discipline students as a result of implementation of restorative practices at the administrative level. Liston perceived “a lack of discipline

structure at this school. When I finally refer a student to the office, I do not know what kind of support I will get.” While Paisley argued that “Restorative practices mean teachers handle the situation vs. sending students to admin. to handle problems on campus.” Ort said “Timing is critical for discipline to be effective. If consequences are not as immediate as possible, then student ownership tends to disappear.”

While many teachers reported seeing little to no changes in student behavior this school year, even after the school administration had instituted restorative practices, there were some who did. Three teachers reported some positive changes this year. Isley felt that “the students are well behaved” and “noticed fewer suspensions this year.” Jenkins shared that he/she thought “restorative practices has definitely had a positive effect on most students.” Unfortunately, nine of the participating teachers perceived negative shifts in student behavior this year.

Two teachers, Deckly and Nickle, wondered if the political climate or cycle has had some effect on how students respond to discipline. Graham spoke to how much time a restorative process can take:

I have been a part of a couple...restorative sessions. My impression of them is that they take way too long. In both cases behavior was not changed even though many opportunities were offered to the student. In each case about eight-ten hours (total # of hours by all professionals/adults involved) were spent to no avail.[...]

Without real consequences for poor behavior some students will not change. The restorative process in theory should be good but in my reality has not been shown to work or to be worth the time.

Graham, Liston, and Nickle reported that there have been more discipline problems this year. Nickle wondered “if it is a cultural shift with the internet so available for students to view content that is not appropriate, or it is the lack of dress code this year. Maybe it is both.” Two teachers said that lack of administrative visibility is, in part, to blame for poor student behavior. Ort said, of using restorative practices “kids understand that disruptive behavior is counter productive, there is no need to waste time with discipline issues.” Ort expressed that using restorative practices was not a necessary step, or was a waste of time when dealing with problematic behavior. If discipline occurred it should be swift. Applegate shared.

Overall I have not noticed any big changes in student behavior. In general on the campus it does seem that students are a bit older and bolder during outside class time, but it also seems like there is less adult monitoring which could explain the observation. If it were true (ie. previous administration was more present during brunch/lunch and asked teachers to stand outside their doors during passing period.

Although administration is very much involved in maintaining high expectations for students while also implementing restorative practices, the perception remains that the implementation of restorative practices means less involvement by the administration.

### **Student Perceptions of Student Discipline**

**Safety.** All the students who participated in the student focus group discussions stated that school was a safe place. However, some students revealed feelings of emotional discomfort when being disciplined. Grace said that if you do something wrong “a noon duty [campus supervisor] notices and tells you to stop and you get embarrassed.” Mitchell shared that if you do something wrong “a golf cart person [campus supervisor] who’ll come up to us.” Students did not share any change in their feelings of safety as a result of the

administration's implementation or restorative practices although they did see a shift in the area of consequences.

**Consequences.** Students provided a wide range of currently used consequences when there is student misbehavior observed by teachers or staff. Consequences varied from changing seats to detention or being sent to the Principal's office. Seven of the students noted that the type of consequence that was received as a result of misbehavior changed based on the type of misbehavior. Ritchie explained that "bigger mistakes...require more discipline." Madelyn said, "depending on what they do and how severely bad what they do is, and of course, whether or not it's noticed, punishments will usually range from just a teacher calling them out or maybe being sent to the office."

Two students shared that if they get in trouble in a particular class that the disciplinary action is to have to sit outside or in the pod away from the rest of the class. Ritchie shared that "you get suspended, you can even get expelled from the school" for poor behavior. Many students provided examples of times where a teacher would talk to them individually when they did something wrong. Tim said the teacher will "just come up and talk to you and give you a warning and sometimes, he'll send you to the middle room." Ritchie said, "A lot of times when I do something wrong, they are always like, they always offer like a one-on-one like time at lunch or something that I never really go to but like, it's still the thought that counts, I guess." Ritchie's statement is interesting since individual conferences could be part of the restorative process, but he did not want to participate and was therefore not forced. Sariah found some teacher's discipline structure to be unnerving, "Teachers get mad at us for doing...like talking. I think that basically we should get disciplined about stuff we need disciplined for and teachers don't take it real when a kid is mean." Claire shared, "I think

most of my teachers do a pretty good job with handling situations like if some kid does something wrong, but some other teachers just...I think they get us in trouble for a little bit too much. Things like simply just like talking about other things. I feel like we get disciplined a little bit too fast. I think that we should have some more time to fix our mistakes.” Angelita, an eighth-grade student, shared that “if you talk it’s an automatic detention.” While restorative processes are being introduced to teachers at this middle school, there is a regimented classroom disciplinary system that remains in place in many classrooms.

Some students expressed that there was a difference in discipline this year. However, the shift may not be a result of the implementation of restorative practices. Stewart, an eighth grader, shared, “I think that this year kids are a little bit more rowdy and punkish than they were last year, but I think that might just be eighth grade. I think that’s just everyone trying to find where they are in life and I think everyone’s trying to just see how much they can get away with each other before something happens.” Some students shared that particular teacher’s classes became more strictly controlled as the year continued. Claire said that they “feel as we go on it’s getting harder and harder discipline wise, but I also feel like it is preparing us for when we are older.” Furthermore, she stated “the older you go, the worse punishment gets, but they’ve changed. They’ve changed the punishments.” Ethan explained the changes this way, “ [Discipline] it’s definitely not been the same plan because there’s been different occasions, like different levels of bad things that have happened so there has been changes to discipline things.” Enrique and Sariah attributed the changes to the “end of the year and people are kinda getting out of hand, so discipline is kind of like on the rise.” Several students shared that they believed the school was safer when discipline is stricter. Sariah said, “[The teachers] are getting stricter...but the discipline has been actually growing

which is making it safer.” It appears that the implantation of restorative practices at the administrative level did not change classroom disciplinary practices in a way that the students perceived.

## **Summary**

After analyzing data from three sources: sixteen teacher questionnaires, two individual teacher interviews, and 23 student focus group discussion participants, I discovered three overarching categories of information. Those themes are Communication, Relationships, and Discipline. Although the teacher portions and the student portion were collected independent of one another and were designed to answer different research questions, I found that the responses were very similar, therefore incorporating the two research questions into one overarching question regarding the perception of student discipline and school climate as a result of administrative implementation of restorative practices.

For teacher responses, the category of Communication could be divided into the following subcategories for teacher perceptions: Postive communication, negative or lack of communication, parent contact, feelings about restorative practices. Communication broken down into the following subcategories for student perceptions: Classroom and teacher responses to student behavior, staff responses to student behavior, jokes. The category of relationships could be further defined by the following subcategories for teacher perceptions: time, trust, respect. Relationships could be divided into the following subcategories for student perceptions: respect, labels and targeting. Finally, the category of Discipline had three subcategories for teacher perceptions: safety, consequences. Discipline could be further broken down for student perception into the subcategories of safety and consequences.

A thorough analysis of this data provides us with unique insight into how teachers and students perceived discipline and school climate after the administration implemented restorative practices at a suburban, middle school in Southern California.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **Study Goals and Research Design**

This chapter summarizes the data analysis, the findings, and the implications for leaders who might implement restorative justice practices at their school sites. In addition, this chapter finishes with a discussion of the findings in relation to work that is currently being researched and provides potential opportunities for areas to research in the future. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate teacher and student perceptions of discipline and school climate after the site administrators began implementing restorative practices. Data were collected from three sources: a teacher questionnaire, individual teacher interviews, and student focus group discussions. The aim of the data analysis was to locate themes and patterns in the perceptions of teachers and students of the discipline process and school climate after the implementation of restorative practices by the school administration.. After reviewing data from all three sources, I identified three broad themes that described the perceptions of both teachers and students: communication, relationships, and discipline. While teachers and students were interviewed separately, many of their responses focused on something within the three identified themes.

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **Communication**

It was apparent in the teacher data that they felt ill-informed about the implementation of restorative practices and what it would mean for changes on campus. Teachers reported that the administrative staff needed to communicate more with teachers and provide them with information about how referrals and disciplinary issues were handled in the front office in conjunction with the use of restorative practices. This perceived lack of communication affected how teachers perceived school climate as many described it as “negative” and “low”.

Additionally, there was concern raised by a number of teachers regarding changes to the dress code. The dress code for female students was altered this year to allow for spaghetti straps as well as shorts long enough cover the buttocks as opposed to touching the bottom of the fingertips when the arms are relaxed. A few teachers argued that the modified dress code led to a less disciplined student body. Dress code violations dropped from a high in the 2014-2015 school year of 71 to a low in the 2017-2018 school year of nineteen. Dress code violation is the only disciplinary code that more frequently effects female students.

Students reported that they often felt teachers used their power to communicate with students in a less than positive manner. Some students referred to exclusionary practices, like being sent outside or to the pod for isolation from the class or being sent to the office. Many students expressed that speaking to them privately is a more positive way to communicate. A key finding from this study is the powerful negative impact of exclusionary discipline practices as well as the use of sarcasm and jokes being told at student expense. Students did not clearly express a difference in communication from the year prior when restorative practices were in place to the year of the study when the administration had been using restorative practices.

Due to the fact that teachers were being pulled in multiple directions, the administration focused more on supporting teachers through the academic professional growth this school year while working through restorative practices alone. I believe that this is strongly reflected in the outcomes of this study, especially where communication is concerned. In an effort not to overwhelm, I believe I did not provide enough information and feedback to teachers to fully embrace the use of restorative practices.

## **Relationships**

Although many teachers shared that it was important to develop relationships with their students so that learning and proper behavior could occur, there was also feedback regarding the lengthy process of restorative practices. In order for restorative practices to be effective, relationships must be developed that the students and teachers are invested in, so there is a desire to repair that relationship if it is harmed. Teachers also expressed that there was a lack of trust between the teachers and the administration as a result of the implementation of restorative practices, which negatively impacted adult to adult relationships.

Respect, an important element of building a strong relationship, was a concept that was explored by both teachers and students. Most of the teachers and students felt respected on campus but had significant examples of some people being singled out or disrespected. Both students and teachers commented on the use of labels within middle school. Some students reported being labeled at school as a particular kind of child both by their peers and their teachers. One student spoke to a feeling of middle school as being a 'totem pole' while another said 'it's all about labels.' Other students discussed the use of labels by teachers in how they treated students. A few students said that teachers did not provide opportunities to change or fix their mistakes. Some students said they have seen students who were targeted by other students or teachers. In a climate where restorative practices are embraced, nobody should feel targeted or unable to recover from making a mistake.

## **Discipline**

Many teachers were concerned with the disciplinary practices used by the administration this school year including a restorative process. Although one teacher mentioned that there seemed to be fewer suspensions, many others were startled by a lack of

student dress code. Three teachers noted that there were more discipline problems this year, while two others thought it may reflect the complex political climate our nation is enduring or the increased use and availability of technology. One teacher offered that they perceived a complete lack of a discipline structure at the school. Discipline has typically been viewed as a concrete consequence given to correct behavior like a detention or a suspension rather than a conversation or acceptance of responsibility.

No students or staff members reported a concern about safety on campus. I believe that when posed questions like ‘have you noticed any changes in student behavior and/or interactions on campus this school year?’ a first impulse is to think of physical well-being and safety. In reviewing the data and the findings, however, I would argue that the emotional well-being of students and teachers is an area of concern that requires further consideration because students do not learn from people they think do not care and teachers do not perform well when they feel threatened or unsupported.

### **Analysis**

Much can be gleaned from the information shared by both teachers and students as it relates to the study. When developing a complete picture of the teacher and student perceptions of a suburban, middle school after restorative practices have been implemented by the administration, I would offer the three areas of communication, relationships, and discipline as the starting points for further discussion.

### **Communication**

Communication proved critical to all parties involved in this process. Although teachers were familiar with the fact that restorative practices involve communication, they did not have a deeper understanding of how to implement a restorative model. McCuskey (2005) said that schools have to be ready to change and be clear but flexible about how that change

occurs. McCuskey (2005) focused on developing shared definitions for restorative practices and the need to be on the same page when it comes to implementing a school-wide policy. The administration provided numerical data to the staff showing the disparate nature of discipline on the middle-school campus, which was similar to what is shown in chapter 3 of this study. The data showed that dress code violations were overwhelmingly female students, that disorderly conduct violations were overwhelmingly affecting male students, and that non-white students were being suspended more frequently than other students. As the assistant principal at the site, I spoke about what we should do to combat these issues and what I, as a researcher, was studying however, in hindsight, I realize, that my communication did not allow teachers and staff to try on the vocabulary or be a part of the implementation team. The administration team provided a new referral system that asked if teachers wanted to be part of a restorative conference with students but having never observed that type of work, most teachers chose not to participate. Even teachers who were interested in making changes to reverse the pattern that had developed were not given the tools to do so, which led to frustration. Kinsley shared “It seems restorative practices would be beneficial if the entire staff (including aides and campus supervisors) were trained with specific techniques.” Providing training and practice on the use of restorative circles as a means of consequence for student misbehavior would prove useful in supporting teachers in shifting practice (Grossi & Santos, 2012) and would address teachers’ concerns such as Kinsley’s that they did not feel prepared to implement the shift in discipline practices. Additionally, Grossi and Santos (2012) discovered that using reparative dialogue also improves school climate, but there would be additional training and practice involved. Chambers shared “Teachers need to be further trained on the steps involved to see the impact.” When provided with opportunities to

participate in circles and to use reparative circles with one another in practice they will be encouraged to use it in their classrooms as well. Ort also said “I cannot be a good disciplinarian if other teachers aren’t.”

It is also important that the school administration frequently communicates with the teachers about the disciplinary process and restorative practices. Evans, Lester, Anfara and Anfara Jr. (2013) expressed the importance of moving from voluntary participation in the process to a school-wide process. There will be some teachers who are more willing to participate and they can become a natural starting point of adopting restorative practices and allow to grow organically. This approach may be more beneficial to the entire system rather than forcing change in a top-down direction as was the case in this study. Graham said “Without real consequences for poor behavior some students will not change. The restorative process in theory sounds good but in my reality has not been shown to work or to be worth the time.” With clear communication and support, teachers like Graham may not be the first to participate but may watch while others lead the way first. Graham also reported “I have heard of frustration from my pers that they feel unsupported and that no real consequences are applied.” By getting some teachers to participate in restorative practices and then spreading the word there would be more buy-in and support of the implementation.

Students also expressed the importance of communication in this process. They spoke to the value of positive communication and having a voice in the classroom or in a conversation. They also spoke to the damaging nature of demeaning or seemingly sarcastic communication and the importance of privacy with communication. By making an effort to communicate privately with a student there is a potential to not only improve individual interactions but also impact school culture in a positive way. By having greater

communication with students about how important it is to include them in the process of building community and being accountable for one's actions, the use of restorative practices would serve a critical purpose. Robert shared that "a teacher's aide took me outside the classroom and she just left me sitting on the bench and told me to wait until the bell rings to go to P.E. She was trying to embarrass me." Another student shared that when trying to speak to a teacher about hurting their feelings "She has only her side of view. She doesn't really pay attention to my side of view of things. And I feel like teachers need to see students side of things more because if we do then we can work stuff out better." Drewery (2014) found that restorative circles and conversations can provide a forum for both parties to communicate more effectively and provide voice for the concerns of all involved.

### **Relationships**

The eighteen teachers who participated in the study had been teaching between twelve and 35 years. The vast majority of the teachers had been at this particular school site for at least seven years. That is a very long time to form relationships with colleagues, families, students and students' siblings, and administrators. The teachers showed the tremendous value they placed in relationships and stated that restorative practices are about improving relationships. Jenkins said, "Restorative practices allow the opportunity for students to reflect and truly understand the impact of their behavior on others so they are less likely to repeat the behavior." Finley shared, "Restorative practices promote a school-wide culture of thinking and talking things through. Respect growth. It is listening to students so they can really comprehend what they feel/think or not think and how another student/class is affected due to their behavior." However, it was also expressed that restorative practices take too much time or do not produce the desired outcome, which is typically compliance. Liston said that despite a restorative meeting and a parent conference "the student's behavior continued to

become more and more disruptive in the classroom.” This is another area where more professional development could be invested so that teachers are able to make the connection between building the relationship upon which restorative practices are effective and a lack of disciplinary need within the classroom. Both teachers and students spoke to a student ‘acting out’ in class because they did not have a good relationship with the teacher. It is imperative that we do better as a society in being more tolerant, understanding, and flexible. Students valued relationships as well, but mainly thought they were respected or would have a good relationship with a teacher if they behaved in a particular manner. With friends, students talked about labels and being targeted or treated a certain way because of their label. Students also discussed being labeled by teachers and the difficulty in changing a teacher’s mind once that label was determined. This is at the crux of the argument for restorative practices. The use of restorative measures is to repair a relationship that has been harmed as a result of one’s actions or words. When a child has had a disciplinary outcome for an offense, they should not have that offense hanging over their heads for the rest of the year. McClusky, et al (2008) found that restorative circles and restorative conversations can have an critical impact in allowing students to take responsibility for actions but and also for repairing their position within the community. More than two students offered that rather than being given an opportunity to improve or change, they were labeled for the remainder of the year. When Betsy asked her teacher to stop making jokes at her expense, she reported that the teacher said ‘Well, it’s not my fault you weren’t paying attention’ or they’ll be like, ‘That was just a joke.’

Morrison and Vaandering (2012) found that participation in mediations, conferencing and peacemaking circles allowed for the development of relationships for all those involved,

adults as well as students. These are important ways to build and foster relationships between all stakeholders within the community thus providing for a more positive school climate.

### **Discipline**

Although both students and teachers said that talking to a student was in their disciplinary model, neither group acknowledged that it was a form of discipline. Having a restorative conference or restorative conversation is, in itself, a disciplinary consequence. That type of dialogue allows for a student or a teacher to repair the harm that has been caused in a mutually agreeable way (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). The frustration of not knowing what punishment was provided to a student for an action was clear in the questionnaire and interview responses. For example, L said “I feel that there is a lack of discipline structure at this school. When I finally refer a student to the office, I do not know what kind of support I will get.” In a restorative system those who need to know (because they were affected) are the ones who are told the disciplinary outcomes. This is a purposeful shift in disciplinary practices with the use of restorative practices because in a traditional system the documented outcomes are readily available and tangible, ie. a detention or a suspension. Stutzman, Armstutz, & Mullet (2014) said that for a learning community to improve, students and community members must be given the power to restore their rightful place within the community by accepting responsibility, repairing relationships, and being accountable for their position in the school climate. The power within these actions are a disciplinary measure within itself if the goal of discipline is for the behavior not to be repeated.

### **Contributions to Research**

The most salient element of restorative justice practices in schools is the provision of student voice, both the child who did the harm and the person who was harmed. While

Drewery (2004) and Bintliff (2016) focused on what restorative model looks or sounds like, only Cavanagh, Vigil and Garcia (2014) sought to legitimize student voice within the process. This study provides unique insight into what students perceive are the disciplinary practices and climate of a specific middle school. Students at this middle school shared they felt that discipline became more severe as the grades progressed and that some teachers would target students as a result of their behavior rather than allowing them a restorative process to repair their relationship with the community. Although McCluskey (2008) found there were positive influences on school climate as a result of introducing restorative language as a means of communication, that was not the case in this study. I would argue that this was a result of miscommunication and lack of a clearly established and embraced model. If teachers had been provided with ample time and practice, as described by Morrison (2007) or Mirsky (2007) there would have been a greater chance of classroom or greater use of restorative language and practice. Additionally, there were a variety of measures that were changing with teachers at the same time, so with competing interests, restorative practices went by the wayside.

Morrison (2007) found that when a school embraced restorative justice practice, it empowered students and faculty to take ownership and responsibility of their behavior choices and developed social capital. Unlike Morrison's study, a clear model was not determined nor embraced by the staff and students of this middle school and the benefits of restorative justice that other schools have seen were not realized. In fact, the way that restorative measures were introduced but not taught to teachers became the first in a series of frustrations. In addition, changing the dress code in a unilateral way right before the beginning of the year also fostered mistrust and dissention. Although the dress code was not

tangential to the move to implement restorative justice, it became conflated with the other issues and concerns posed by the teachers. Trust is viewed as mutual between two parties, shared between both students and teachers (Daly, 2006). In this way, trust is a two-way exchange. This is true also for the relationship between teachers and administration. Had the administration been more transparent about the use of restorative practices, and what that looks like in a classroom, there is a higher likelihood that this process would have been embraced. Many teachers were interested in closing the discipline gap, but because there was very little training provided for what can be done in an individual classroom, that left teachers to assume that they did not have a part. Additionally, teachers felt that there was a lack of follow through and direct communication from the administration and as a result thought that little was being done to sustain restorative practices. For example, Liston stated “I do not know what support I will get when I refer a student to the office.” Paisley also shared “Some students are making poor choices, and I am not privy to the situation and how it is being handled.”

Although prior research has been conducted at small private schools or schools in other countries, there have not been studies at a suburban, middle school to examine what happens after the administration begins using restorative practices.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Students**

Restorative practices have been offered as a way to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline practices. The more time a student remains in class, the more educational opportunities that student will be offered. This study revealed the importance of fair and kind communication among all parties. By being more intentional in fostering positive relationships between adults and students as well among students and students,

communication, relationships and the school climate can be improved. Students shared their need to be respected members of the learning community, and the critical role they play in the education process. Jenny said “I just feel that if you get in trouble once you’re disrespected for the rest of the year by your teachers and I honestly don’t know how to bring that respect back when you’re doing everything you’re supposed to do.” Claire shared “Sometimes [a student] wants to change. They want to become a better student, but the teacher doesn’t give them the opportunity to become a better student.” This aim can be achieved by implementing a restorative practices structure that deliberately integrates student voice. More specifically, through training teachers to run restorative circles in their classrooms as a way to build community, students would receive an additional opportunity to communicate in a safe environment, therefore building community as well as fostering student voice. Costello, Wachtel, and Wachtel (2010) describe using circles as a proactive, responsive and easily adaptable means of gathering a group of students together for discussion and attentive listening. This system can only be effective, however, if teachers are provided with ample opportunity to experience circles in low-pressure situations with success prior to expecting them to administer with fidelity in a classroom. Restorative circles require a feeling of safety and community to be effective. Students are also an important part of this process and should be included in low-stakes demonstrations of restorative circles to practice sharing ideas and feelings in a space where those expressions have been limited in the past.

The California State Board of Education has established a rating scale for important features of a school’s performance including testing results, chronic absenteeism and suspension rates. For the 2016-2017 school year, the middle school in this study was given an orange (poor) rating for Hispanic students, a green (good) for English Learners,

socioeconomically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities and White students, and a blue (good) rating for students Multi-Ethnic students. For the 2017-2018 school year, the middle school in this study was given an orange (poor) rating for suspensions involving Multi-Ethnic students and White students, a yellow (fair) rating for suspensions involving Hispanic students, and a green (good) rating for suspensions of English Learners, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. There were several disciplinary cases in the 2017-2018 school year that involved mandatory suspensions due to the behavior of the students involved. This may account, in part, for the movement of some populations of students within these parameters. While it is promising to see that Hispanic students are being suspended at a lesser rate than the year before, I would have liked to see movement toward yellow (fair) and green (good) for all students at this middle school. Use of restorative practices involving student voice and accountability could help assist in closing the discipline gap, thereby creating greater equity in our education system for students. There was definitely movement within the discipline code for dress where in the 2014-2015 school year 71 students had a dress code violation while in the 2017-2018 school year only 19 students had a dress code violation. This specific violation does not show on the State of California reporting system, but it makes a difference in school climate.

### **Implications for Administrator Professional Learning**

In providing for a solid learning environment for all stake-holders, it is imperative that administrators provide professional learning environments where members are valued. Teachers also need to feel a sense of respect within their classrooms as well as feel they are integral members of the school community. They must feel they have a voice in the decisions being made by the administration. In order for a school campus to shift its disciplinary practices, administrators should work to build trust among all constituencies.

One way to do this is by conducting a needs analysis and determining a course of action based upon that analysis and with input from all stakeholders. Once the new approach is decided upon, administrators should provide training in both process and techniques as well as time to become comfortable with the changes. I would argue that this is critical to a school with a veteran staff of successful teachers as was noted by some participants who said “In order for restorative practices to be effective, they must be embraced campus wide. Additionally, teachers need to be further trained on the steps involved to see impact (Chambers). Keaton also said “it seems restorative practices would be beneficial if the entire staff (including aides and campus supervisors) were trained in specific techniques.” Some companies, like The International Institute for Restorative Practices visit schools and run all staff restorative practices training. Teachers and staff would be able to focus on the need for restorative practices and what they look like on a campus and in their classroom. Restorative circles and restorative conferences are held so that participants experience what it would be like to run one in their classroom.

Some teachers explained that their use of restorative practices was due, in part to an issue with implementation. Liston shared “I have had a restorative meeting with one student that was facilitated by an administrator, my village has met with the student’s parent, and I have sent notes home. The student’s behavior continued to become more and more disruptive in the classroom.” Although I am unsure if the administration was aware that the behavior continued, the lack of communication between the administration and the teacher added to the frustration this teacher was experiencing with this particular student. Chambers offered that “In order for restorative practices to be effective they must be embraced campus wide. Additionally, teachers need to be further trained on the steps involved to see the impact.”

Keaton said “it seems restorative practices would be beneficial if the entire staff (including classroom aides and campus supervisors) were trained with specific techniques.”

The education system would benefit from involving teachers as a primary component in the building of equity in their classrooms through the use of restorative practices. Students who know they are cared about tend to do better academically and socially. In creating a school culture focused on support and understanding the discipline gap can be addressed and corrected. Although there was not a decrease in the percentage of students who had been suspended from school at least once at this particular school, there was a change in repeat suspensions provided to students identifying as non-White.

### **Implications for School Leaders Focused on Social Justice**

There has been significant research that investigated African-American students and the disproportionality of exclusionary discipline measures known as the discipline gap (Gregory, 2008; Gregory, Skiba & Nogurera, 2010; Kinsler, 2011). While states like California have legislated measures to reduce the number of exclusionary discipline practices, there has been no required training or professional development offered to administrators or teachers on how to effectively integrate practices that reduce discipline measures. This is where a quandary develops because although school administrators are reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions, teachers are unaware of the change in legislation, so they instead view it as a weakening of the disciplinary system. This conundrum is evident in this study’s finding involving communication and relationships. The administration introduced restorative practices to the school staff and explained the procedures for student discipline cases. The staff, however, wanted information about disciplinary practices in regard to student behavior that did not involve them or their classroom. Some teachers expressed their frustration in the survey or the interview process in feeling like they were “out of the loop” or

that the school had no disciplinary process in place. Paisley said “some students are making poor choices and I am not privy to the situation and how it is being handled.” Maple shared that “Too often, teachers are left out of the loop when it comes to serious discipline issues. Then we lose touch with what’s happening with students.” There also needs to be greater communication in how restorative practices address the needs of the learning community.

This can be corrected through the strategic and thoughtful building of relationships with all stakeholders where everyone takes part in developing a vision for all students’ educational experience. It is easy to agree, in a meeting, that students deserve a learning environment where there is mutual respect and communication. It is much more difficult to continually foster a culture where that is the case. By consistently using meeting time to reflect on practices, share practices, and build on practices, teachers will be provided with the time and space necessary to do the critical self-analysis necessary to improve in this area. When revisiting what the school community believes about students and then thinking about how our daily words and actions embrace and reflect our ideal, people will have the opportunity to support students. In an entrenched environment where most of the teachers have worked for at least a decade, change may come slowly but needs to be a continual shift in practice due to a school-wide focus on equity and the negative effects of disproportional exclusionary discipline practices. While some agencies, like the ACLU, investigate cases of disproportionality, there should be agencies in place that help provide training for school administrators and teachers in restorative practices to help combat the situation where it begins, in the classrooms.

### **Future Considerations**

The purpose of this case study was to investigate how teachers and students perceive the effects of the site administration using restorative practices. Further research is needed to

understand how a site should implement a school-wide restorative practices program, as well as whether a teacher's mindset influences how they respond to the use of restorative practices.

Although there are many features to a restorative program, there has been minimal research on the actual implementation process. The education community could greatly benefit from further studies involving timing, relationships, and professional development as key elements to explore. The adoption of restorative practices has to be based on a desire by all stakeholders to focus on the disproportional procedures and practices that are in place.

Based on the responses to this study which were all from veteran teachers, it would be interesting to study how a teacher views himself or herself as a learner and whether that has any impact on their desire or lack of desire to participate in the implementation of restorative practices. Furthermore, given a different environment with more teachers new to the profession, I wonder if teachers would be more willing or less willing to embrace restorative practices as part of their disciplinary structure. Disciplinary structure within a classroom is an element of control and the amount of control that needs to be exerted to maintain order and foster learning. Some new teachers feel more comfortable with a traditional disciplinary structure focused on compliance because it appears orderly. Other teachers are comfortable with a more fluid or flexible disciplinary structure where the needs of the individual learning community is most valued. Although no new teachers participated in this study it is worthy of further investigation.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include the site and respective sample sizes in addition to my positionality. The limitations were previously discussed in chapter three but are revisited in the following sub-sections to provide for more insight into this case study.

## **Study Site**

Although this school site is not the most ethnically diverse school site in the district, it does have a significantly diverse population both ethnically and socio-economically. The school site provides free or reduced lunch to approximately 29% of its students and has approximately 15% of the population being provided with special education services. Most other studies that have been conducted focus on a student population that consists of predominantly non-White students. The site administration (principal and assistant principal) have been working on putting restorative practices in place for the last two years while also revamping the professional development and academic structure for teachers

## **Positionality**

As the assistant principal at the school site for the three years previous to this study there were conditions of trust and a relationship built among the teachers, students, and me. During the second semester, I was placed at a different middle school and an interim assistant principal replaced me. This was difficult for the teachers, the students, and me as we navigated the remainder of the year. Without on-site connection to the staff, I was unable to ensure that communication around restorative practices was consistent or to answer questions to meet their needs. Students also had to negotiate a new relationship with an administrator who did not have the scope or training and understanding that I had developed in restorative practices.

## **Sample Size**

Although I had hoped for more data from the school site, the data pool was relatively small. Sixteen out of 34 teachers responded to the anonymous on-line questionnaire, while only two out of 34 teachers offered to participate in an individual interview. There are a few different factors at play that may have contributed to the small sample size. Because I was no

longer on campus, my requests for assistance in both areas were made by email rather than in person. When I was scheduled to offer the on-line questionnaire at a staff meeting, that meeting got canceled, so teachers were not in a position where they had time provided to take it. Additionally, given the responses I did receive, there were definitely some challenges with time and trust at the school site given the time of year (May-June), the academic professional development and reported lack of communication could have contributed to the lack of participants. For the student focus group discussions, it was also challenging to get student assent and parent consent forms signed and brought back to the office. Students were willing to participate in the focus group discussions, however, they did not always follow-through with getting the paperwork completed so they were unable to contribute to the conversation.

Qualitative research, however, seeks to create a thorough understanding of a specific case regardless of sample size (Yin, 2006). Cresswell (2013) argued that the goal of a qualitative study is to collect extensive data about a specific subject, time and place. Therefore, although I would have hoped for more participants in my study, the extensive detail the participants provided allowed for a thorough understanding of teacher and student perceptions of student behavior and school climate after administrative implementation of restorative practices.

### **Final Thoughts**

Discipline disproportionality is a critical issue in the United States and needs to be eradicated immediately. Although some measures are being put into place to address this issue, there has not been a concerted effort to replace existing discipline practices that administrators and teachers have utilized over the last century. This study showed the importance of communication, relationship-building, and the definition of discipline for a strong restorative practice program. All stakeholders deserve a voice in this process and

further research is needed to help guide the way to making important and lasting changes to our education system so that every child has the opportunity to succeed academically and social-emotionally.

Although I was hoping to see a large shift in the number and types of suspensions encountered at this school as a result of implementing restorative practices that was not the case yet. This case study did, however, provide a clear and representative voice for teachers and students undergoing a new set of policies and procedures. Their honesty and involvement should not go unnoticed or unheard. Change, especially when it involves something as entrenched as disciplinary practices, is challenging even when you know why it is necessary.

## Appendix A: Anonymous Teacher Questionnaire

Adult consent: I have read and understand the adult consent form. You may leave the questionnaire at any time and although your input is valuable to the study, it is not mandatory.

- I agree to begin the questionnaire
- I disagree and will not begin the questionnaire

How long have you been a teacher? How many years have you worked at this middle school?

Describe your current disciplinary practices.

Are your current disciplinary practices the same or different than they were last year. If there has been a shift in your practices, why?

What is your current understanding of restorative practices as they relate to student discipline?

Have you used restorative practices in your classroom? If so, describe what you have done, I not describe why you have not.

Do you feel respected as a teacher on this campus? Describe ways that you have felt respected or disrespected.

Have you noticed any changes in student behavior and/or interactions on campus this school year? If so, what do you attribute those changes to? If not, why do you think the campus has remained the same despite the implementation of restorative practices.

You have reached the end of the questionnaire. If there is anything further you would like to share, please do so in this space.

## **Appendix B: Student Focus Group Discussion Protocol**

*Thank you for agreeing to be part of the discussion today. I am doing a study that explores student perceptions of student discipline and school climate. I will be asking you questions about your experiences in this school, your thoughts about discipline, as well as your thoughts about what it feels like to be a student at this school. Before we start, I want to remind you about some important aspects of the study. During this discussion you may choose to answer or not answer any of the questions posed. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, so you do not have to worry about upsetting me or making me proud. Your responses have nothing to do with grades or teachers. This is a confidential discussion so please do not share your responses or the responses of others with anyone else. Unless you tell us about someone hurting you or you hurting someone else, I will not share your responses with anyone in the district or with your parents even if asked to do so. To make it easier to make sure I get everything right when I type up this conversation, please say the number on the card I gave you each time you speak.*

### **A. Introductory Questions**

Tell me about this school. What is it like being a student here?

### **School Discipline/ Restorative Practices**

How is discipline handled in your classrooms? What happens when a student is in trouble?

What happens when a student does something wrong during brunch or lunch?

What happens when a student is in trouble and goes to the office to see the Principal or Assistant Principal?

Has discipline been the same all year or have you noticed any changes?

How do teachers respond when a student has done something wrong?

### **B.**

*Now I'd like to ask you questions about what it feels like to be a student at this school.*

How do you feel about being a student at this school in your classes?

How do you feel about being at this school during brunch and lunch?

Are students respected at this school? Describe the ways students are respected and/or disrespected.

Have you noticed any changes to how it feels to be a student at this school this year as opposed to other years?

**C. Closing:**

*Thank you so much for your time. It has been helpful to hear your thoughts and experiences it will really help in the work I am doing for school.*

## **Appendix C: Teacher Individual Interview Protocol**

*Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. I am doing a study that explores teacher perceptions of restorative practices and school climate. I will be asking you questions about your experiences in this school, your thoughts about restorative practices and student discipline, as well as your thoughts about the school climate (environment). Before we start, let's take a minute to review the informed consent form.*

### **A. Introductory Questions**

Tell me about this school. What do you like about working here? What's challenging about working here?

How many years have you taught? How many years have you worked at this school?

### **B. School Discipline/ Restorative Practices**

*Now I'd like to ask you questions about student discipline and restorative practices.*

Describe your current understanding of restorative practices. Do you currently use restorative practices as a class management strategy?

Are you aware of any colleagues that are using restorative practices? If so, what does that look/sound like?

Have you ever participated in providing discipline that you view as restorative? If so, describe that experience.

The administration has been using restorative practices this year. Please describe any changes you have experienced in student discipline over the course of this year.

Have you changed the way you interact with students this year?

Why or why not?

### **C.**

*Now I'd like to ask you questions about school climate.*

What is it like to be a teacher on this campus?

What do you think it is like to be a student on this campus?

Has there been any change in your experience as a teacher on this campus this year when you compare it to past years?

Has there been any change in the general feeling on campus this year when you compare it to past years?

**D. Closing:**

That was the last question for the interview. Is there anything you were not asked about that you feel would be useful for the study?

*Thank you so much for your time. It has been helpful to hear your thoughts and experiences.*

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