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A Seat at the Table: Illuminating Student Voice in Restorative Justice Processes

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A Seat at the Table:

Illuminating Student Voice in Restorative Justice Processes

By

Nicole J. Reda

A dissertation presented to the faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2024

A Seat at the Table:

Illuminating Student Voice in Restorative Justice Processes

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This dissertation written by Nicole Jacqueline Reda, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Omid, Cat, Justin, and Javier. You are incredible and I am glad to have had the opportunity for us to get to know each other, laugh, and cry together. To every student I have worked with over the past thirteen years: you have all left an imprint on my practice and educational philosophy. I truly love you all.

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ABSTRACT

A Seat at the Table: Illuminating Student Voice in Restorative Justice Processes

By

Nicole J. Reda

This study explored the perspectives and lived experiences of urban youth in relation to Restorative Practices at a free public charter school in Los Angeles, California. This qualitative study used a series of semi-structured interviews with four high school students. This adaptable design allowed for the nature of questions to evolve and shift in accordance with emergent themes and patterns. After a detailed inductive analysis of the data, major themes emerged related to students' aversion to punitive discipline, their preference for conversation-based Restorative Practices, and their desire to have more agency as school community members. Moreover, participants reported that they only felt trusting of a small handful of staff members, preventing consistent conflict-resolution practices and positive relationship building. This study's findings indicate a need for changes to be made at the school, district, state, and federal level to halt the use of traditionally racist and punitive discipline practices and replace them with Restorative Practices and social-emotional education and support. Additionally, student voice needs to be included and acknowledged as an integral piece of meaningful decision-making in school settings.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Schools all over the United States have the power to develop and educate students who will lead and positively impact their communities in the future. All students should have equal opportunities to achieve this goal. However, in the United States, the troubling legacy of systemically racist disciplinary practices and policies casts a long shadow over the nation's educational system, and students of color continue to bear the brunt of these inequalities. Current data reveals that racially biased policies remain significant contributors to the school discipline disparities that persistently target Black/African American, Native American, and Latine students.

Many think of schools as places that foster creativity, intellectual curiosity, and positive learning habits for all. However, schools often treat students of color punitively, deterring them from academic success. For decades, detention, suspension, and expulsion have been standard practices for schools to address student misbehavior. Research shows that punitive disciplinary practices disproportionately affect non-White students (Schiff, 2013, p. 4). In the past decade, excessive use of school suspension and expulsion as disciplinary practices has been recognized as a national concern for education and juvenile justice systems. Black/African American, Native American, and Latine students are disproportionately referred to school disciplinary officers and to the juvenile disciplinary system (Skiba, 2011). For over 25 years, in national, state, district, and building-level data, students of color are suspended at rates two to three times that of other students and similarly overrepresented in office referrals, corporal punishment, and school expulsion (Skiba, 2011, p. 8).

Many suspended children are transferred straight from schools to juvenile justice organizations. Some wind up on diversion caseloads, probation, or even in secure detention facilities for very small, typically nonviolent offenses. The worst effects of what has regrettably come to be known as the "School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP)" are disproportionately felt by underrepresented pupils in the poorest areas with the fewest resources (Advancement Project, 2010).

Angela Davis (2003) contended that schools possess the potential to serve as powerful alternatives to jails and prisons. However, to realize this potential, the existing structures of violence in underprivileged communities of color—including the presence of armed security guards and police—must be dismantled. Only by transforming schools into institutions that foster a love for learning can we prevent them from becoming pipelines to the prison system. One possible solution involves adopting robust Restorative Justice (RJ) Practices, which can help pave the way towards decarceration (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998). As outlined by Sumner et al. (n.d., p. 2), "Restorative Justice is an alternative to retributive Zero-Tolerance policies that mandate suspension or expulsion of students from school for a wide variety of misbehaviors."

Schools are intended to educate and prepare students for college and successful careers. However, as research indicates that disciplinary practices have hindered the progress of many non-White students, it is crucial to examine and understand the consequences of punitive disciplinary measures and to explore alternatives such as Restorative Justice Practices (Davison et al., 2022). Restorative Justice in schools includes an alternative disciplinary approach that focuses on repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and fostering empathy among students.

Instead of relying on punitive measures, Restorative Justice encourages open dialogue, personal accountability, and collaborative problem-solving (Sumner et al., n.d.).

Historical School Discipline Practices

Traditional methods of discipline, such as detention, suspension, and expulsion, have been used in schools for decades. Historically, punitive disciplinary measures have disproportionately affected Black/African American and Latine students. This disparity leads to a direct feed into the STPP. This trajectory takes students from their learning environments and refers them directly to the justice system. The STPP disproportionately affects Black students, racial minorities, and students with disabilities (Keyes, 2022, p. 7), and often manifests itself in the form of disciplinary exclusion (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) for those and other populations such as males, students in poverty, LGBTQIA+ students (Keyes, 2022, p. 19). The disproportionality of disciplining Black students and other culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education has been observed for over 40 years (National Education Association, 2007, p. 6).

History of Zero-Tolerance Policies

School policies have been influenced by stringent Zero-Tolerance policies initially implemented by the United States government in response to gun violence. Zero-Tolerance policies forbid school administrators from exercising discretion or altering punishments based on individual circumstances excluding the possibility of any subjectivity or flexibility. Starting in 1989, school districts in California, New York, and Kentucky adopted the concept of "Zero-Tolerance" and instituted policies requiring expulsion for drug use, fighting, or gang affiliation.

Zero-Tolerance laws had been implemented nationwide by 1993 and were frequently expanded (Skiba, 2004, p. 18).

Zero-Tolerance policies have become the standard practice to punish students for less serious behaviors that are frequently common amongst adolescent/teenage students (Oakland Unified School District, 2014). A Zero-Tolerance policy is "a policy that results in mandatory expulsion (M.E.) of any student who commits one or more specified offenses (for example, offenses involving guns, or other weapons, or violence, or similar factors, or combinations of these factors)" (Curran, 2019, p. 87). As outlined, Zero-Tolerance policies were written in response to transgressions of extreme seriousness, those that could potentially put students and staff at risk in a school environment. Unfortunately, these policies are often utilized for much less severe wrongdoing and tend to be used disproportionately against non-White students. Black students are the most negatively affected by this trend:

> African American students, in particular, have faced the brunt of unfair disciplinary policies and staff practices that have led to the criminalization of African American youth across the education and justice systems, a trend referred to as disproportionate minority contact (DMC). (Oakland Unified School District, 2014)

Plainly stated, Zero-Tolerance policies are rooted in racist beliefs.

Anoa Changa, a former attorney and current journalist, drew significant parallels between modern-day school discipline policies and slavery-era punishments. "Well-run schools, like well-run plantations, are places where the 'consequences' for violating requirements are swift and certain" (Changa, 2022). In the school setting, this translates to an emphasis on domination and control, which disproportionately is focused on the actions of non-White children and teenagers.

Punitive policies are based on the idea that students will remember the negative consequences the next time they are tempted to break a rule and that they will avoid it. Punitive discipline is ineffective because it maintains a cycle of negativity in that it punishes the harm-doer rather than supporting them in changing their behaviors.

In general, race is the most crucial factor in the issuance of disciplinary action and increases when other variables such as class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability overlap. Berkowics and Myers (2017) cited several studies reporting disproportionate punishment focused on race, sexual orientation, and ability. Keyes (2022) also discussed and pointed out the various effects of these targeted and discriminatory exclusion practices: "The disparities are magnified at the intersections of these variables [students of color, poor students, students with disabilities] and in conjunction with geography, as the most punitive districts are those that are majority students of color and majority poor" (Keyes, 2022, p. 12). Students who attend school from backgrounds that are already challenging for them also face the reality of disproportionate disciplinary practices being used against them.

The UCLA Civil Rights Project kept track of lost instruction resulting from suspension in California schools from 2011 to 2019 (Losen et al., 2015). The research revealed that Black students lost at least 26 hours more than their White counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2020a). Not only does suspension rob students of instructional hours, but according to Pearman et al. (2019), suspension/expulsion creates significant inequities in student learning outcomes and graduation rates.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Proportional discipline is not only necessary when students are of school age, since these patterns of inequity could ultimately feed into racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In their 2019 research, Gopalan and Nelson (2019) explained that the racial composition of schools and school districts—particularly the percentage of Black students—predicted suspension/expulsion rates. Research shows these trends will continue if disciplinary practices continue to be punitive rather than restorative. In California prisons as of 2017, 28.5% of the state's male prisoners were Black—compared to just 5.6% of the state's adult male residents. In 2019, the imprisonment rate for African American men was 4,236 per 100,000 people—10 times than for White men, 422 per 100,000. (Hayes et al., 2022). There is a clear correlation between punitive school discipline and imprisonment rates in California.

Additionally, research showed that being suspended "increases the likelihood of dropping out, from 16% for those not suspended to 32% for those suspended just once" (Balfanz, 2013, p. 3). In 2015, Okonofua and Eberhardt of Stanford found that Black students' misbehavior was significantly more likely to be viewed as problematic than the misbehavior of White students. Punitive school discipline practices informed by law enforcement policies are rooted in a deep history of racism in America. These policies, when turned into practice, perpetuate adverse outcomes for Black/African American and Latine students.

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Restorative Practices to Combat Racist Disciplinary Practices

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History of Restorative Justice

Indigenous cultures began addressing wrongs through deep listening with an intent not to punish but to understand. Through discussion, the group works to determine where the

disconnect began and to find a way to repair the broken connection. The goal of these communities was to have mutually beneficial interconnectedness. One of the important principles was that when anyone in the community was harmed, all members were harmed. Today, schools utilize this principle when they use Restorative Justice (Zehr, n.d.).

Restorative Justice acts by questioning the assumptions of the judicial system (or school discipline policies) without denying them, emphasizing harm reparation as a means of restoring justice and relational balance rather than punishing incorrect behavior (Lodi et al., 2021). Restorative Practices involve those who have suffered the harm, those who are responsible for it, and members of the community. The commitment is to make right what is wrong and to restore justice in a way that is respectful of everyone and honors both coexistence and school safety.

As such, schools have begun implementing Restorative Justice programs that employ tactics such as community circles, healing circles, and restorative projects to repair the harm done to individuals and the community (Zehr, n.d.). This approach, too, focuses on the people harmed, the people who inflicted the harm, and the overall wellbeing of the community. Additionally, Restorative Justice relies much less on punitive discipline and focuses more on meaningful community-building practices.

Principles of Restorative Justice

Different conceptions of Restorative Justice can coexist, but they all share the same basic assumptions: encounter, reparation, and transformation. These three elements agree with the values of restorative processes and the needs they are addressing (Lodi et al., 2021). Restorative Practices can include but are not limited to individual conferences with school administrators/counselors, group conferences, restorative conferences, circles of peace,

victim/offender mediation, community-building circles, community service projects, and informational presentations.

Restorative Practices are focused not only on repairing harm in the event of conflicts and harmful/violent behaviors (e.g., bullying) but also on building and cultivating relationships, promoting both relational/emotional and peaceful conflict management skills, encouraging nonviolent communication, and imparting a sense of security, respect, and wellbeing (Lodi et al., 2021). Additionally, Restorative Practices focus on teaching individuals to have the ability to prevent and deal with conflict as the best solution for a safe and peaceful school learning environment.

Indeed, many programs developed in schools "can provide an opportunity for the community to provide an appropriate educational response to minor offenses and other conflicts without formally criminalizing the behavior or the individual" (Lodi et al., 2021, p. 26). This approach is not aimed at only repairing harm in case of conflicts or incorrect behavior. It allows for building and strengthening relationships and promoting and developing relational and personal skills such as empathy, assertiveness, and self-efficacy. In addition to preventing harm, Restorative Practices can assist people in learning and practicing skills they can use throughout their lives by promoting social and emotional learning in children and adults. Repair and accountability can also help combat the cycle of punishment and violence, especially in schools.

Impact on Reducing School Discipline Disparities

Restorative Practices allow schools to lower detention, suspension, and expulsion rates. These practices also create a more robust and communicative school environment with fewer behavioral indiscretions and referrals. A 2018 analysis of Los Angeles Unified School District's

discipline records following the implementation of RJ in the 2014/15 school year demonstrated that suspension rates for misconduct dropped for all measured categories of students (Black, Latine, Asian, and White students; students with disabilities; English learner students; and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). The analysis also indicated that although discipline gaps related to race and disability status persisted, those gaps had narrowed considerably (Hashim, et al., 2018). A report focusing on RJ in one high school indicates that Black-White racial disproportionality in suspension rates abated after RJ's implementation (Fronius et al., 2019).

Schools throughout the United States have implemented Restorative Practices with promising success, keeping students safe and in school. Armour (2013) reported an 84% drop in out-of-school suspensions among sixth graders in one Texas school during the first year RJ was introduced, and a 19% drop in all suspensions. These findings coincided with findings from other studies in urban schools nationwide. Denver schools that implemented restorative circles and conferencing experienced a 44% reduction in out-of-school suspensions and an overall decrease in expulsions across the three-year post-implementation period (Fultonberg, 2019). In Oakland, Cole Middle School experienced an 87% in suspensions across the first two years of implementation compared to the prior three years, and expulsions were eliminated after RJ was put in place (Gregory et al., 2017). More recent figures from Oakland outline continued success, with a 74% drop in suspensions and a 77% decrease in referrals for violence during a two-year follow-up (Fronius et al., 2019). Studies consistently illustrate the effectiveness of RJ practices in keeping students in school, not barred from their studies.

Although Restorative Practices work in more traditional school settings, McCold (2008) reported that RJ reduced offending by 58 percent for youth participants in an alternative education program in Pennsylvania during a three-month period. Upon a follow-up investigation in 2008, effects were sustained through two years of implementation, with reductions in offending of around 50%. In both studies, McCold (2008) reported that recidivism rates were significantly related to youths' length of participation in RJ. Youth who completed the program showed more of a reduction in recidivism than those who were discharged early. Student/individual recidivism rates were decreased due to the program, with participants citing higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of community (Fronius et al., 2019).

Using Restorative Practices, one elementary school experienced a 57 % drop in discipline referrals, a 35% drop in the average time of in-school suspensions, a 77% drop in out-of-school suspensions, and only one student was expelled during the one-year follow-up (Fronius et al., 2019).

Notably, Educator Policy Education Center (n.d.) reported similarly positive results from their study of the "Family Group Conferencing" model adopted in Minnesota. In this model, the offender and victim do not meet face to face in the conference (distinguishing it from most restorative conferencing). Instead, family members, school staff, and the offending student work together to develop a plan to ensure that the youth take responsibility for the youth's actions, improves any harmed relationships, and takes steps to ensure that the youth does not make the same mistakes in the future. Participants who were referred to the program experienced a drop in suspension rates and gains in attendance, credit accrual, and progression toward graduation in the year following the implementation of the conferencing program (Fronius et al., 2019).

Impact on School Climate/Student Mental Health Outcomes

Restorative Practices not only offer promising outcomes concerning lowering discipline rates, but they also help support students with social-emotional learning. By implementing a diverse and multitiered set of classroom and school-based strategies emphasizing the importance of relational needs, the community strengthens. Fostering student accountability for behavior also improves students' social and emotional wellbeing and school connectedness (Wolf-Prusan et al., 2019).

According to research, around one in six school-aged children suffer from a diagnosable mental health issue that limits their ability to function in daily life. Trauma has been reported to have affected 70% of children (Wolf-Prusan et al., 2019). The cognitive and emotional pressures placed on students dealing with anxiety, sadness, trauma, or other mental illnesses can seriously impede their ability to receive an education. These difficulties not only put students at risk of missing class, but they may also impair their ability to performing functions that are necessary for learning in the classroom, such as maintaining focus, short-term memory, and persevering through difficult tasks (Wolf-Prusan et al. 2019).

Enhancing young people's access to social, emotional, and mental health assistance is crucial—especially for students who cannot access these resources otherwise. Since schools can provide supports for young people in the community, it is of critical importance that they provide preventative social, emotional, and mental health supports. Long-standing punitive disciplinary practices fail to reduce negative behaviors and perpetuate systemic biases. More significantly, sending students off to isolation does not support them in learning self-regulation or emotional intelligence skills.

As explained by Wolf-Prusan et al. et al. (2019), fewer than half of the young people who have mental illness receive treatment and, consequently, they experience more significant impairments in life functioning over time as they struggle to meet social, emotional, and behavioral demands in their family, school, and neighborhood environments. More importantly: young people with mental illnesses are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system; 60% of young people in juvenile detention have a diagnosable mental illness (Teplin, et al., 2002). Students often lack the awareness and tools to understand how these extrinsic and intrinsic factors affect their ability to learn and regulate their thoughts and behaviors. Social-emotional support should be foundational to the overall planning for student wellness and academic success.

Although the benefits of reducing school disciplinary actions are clear, the benefits for students' mental health and wellbeing have also become apparent.

> Restorative Practices uphold the concept that humans are social and communal and need to learn and grow through relationships and community. The philosophy behind Restorative Practices acknowledges that children and young people who are involved in bullying, violence, and school disruptions are themselves feeling unsafe and in need of an opportunity to reattach and re-engage. (Wolf-Prusan et al. et al., 2019)

Often, students do not know how to get themselves to feel safe again on their own. Restorative Practices "improve the social and emotional wellbeing of young people by addressing the root causes of student misbehavior, such as distressed social relationships and lack of school connectedness, thereby reducing the need for the behavior rather than simply punishing it" (Wolf-Prusan et al., 2019, p. 3).

Concerning school climate, adults can also benefit from employing Restorative Practices. When adults gain a deeper understanding of students' lives and experiences, this can help them build empathy and better understand the reasons behind certain student behaviors and responses. This allows more room for discussion and conversation around behaviors versus exclusionary practices that remove students from the environment in an abrupt way. When all community members "hold one another accountable, so should a community member break a norm or rule, there is a shared understanding of the need for and effect of the community's response" (Wolf-Prusan, 2019). Rather than reverting to punitive and reactionary discipline practices, RJ practices offer a fair process for all parties to be heard and a chance to repair relationships. Additionally, conversations open the possibility for individuals to share their personal experiences and cultivate empathy for others.

Social-Emotional Learning

Aside from addressing the harm caused by an incident, Restorative Practices help students learn how to discuss their feelings, thoughts, and reactions to the said incident. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) summarized these alternative strategies that address school climate and school discipline: relationship building (i.e., through approaches such as RJ), SEL approaches (e.g., improving understanding of social interactions and regulating emotions), and structural interventions (i.e., Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports [PBIS]). Incorporating SEL will help students and staff with necessary skill-building strategies during conflict or when negative behaviors arise. According to Hulvershorn and Mullholland (2018),

> When students are provided an opportunity to participate in RJ, they get to participate in
> role-playing on the conflicts experienced and can receive support for skill development

from a trusted adult and a small group of students. It has long been known that a healthy

school climate requires "instruction in important social skills. (p. 8)

Role-playing will allow individuals to think through scenarios, decide how they would handle

situations, and work on productively managing them moving forward.

SEL "helps students recognize emotions first in themselves and then in others to develop

empathy. SEL curricula directly teach children appropriate actions and provide a safe

environment to practice what they learn" (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Programs that

promote caring, empathy, and kindness to improve relationships between students and other

school community members will strengthen school culture in the long run. Thus, understanding

the connection(s) between RJ practices and the goals of SEL programming makes sense.

Students who have solid relationships with adults in school have been found to buy in more and

participate more actively in the school environment. Gregory et al. (2015) also suggested that

understanding the teacher-student relationship is critically important, given that positive teacher-

student relationships among all racial groups are essential to creating an equitable and supportive

school climate that does not rely on punitive approaches to behavior.

Research on SEL may help to make additional connections between RJ and neuroscience.

Increasingly, more attention is paid to how emotions influence learning, relationships, and

behaviors. SEL is the "process whereby children can acknowledge and manage their emotions,

recognize the emotions of others, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish positive

friendships, and handle challenges and situations effectively" (Gunter et al., 2012, p. 151).

Researchers have identified and examined specific learning outcomes for SEL programming and

curriculum. These "Core SEL Competencies" are self-awareness, self-management, social

awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2024). When these SEL concepts are implemented along with RJ, the advantage is that the concepts are not presented in a vacuum; instead, these competencies are learned through the filter of the community. In conjunction with each other, SEL and Restorative Practices could prove to be a promising step in the right direction regarding reducing punitive discipline disparities in schools.

Problem Statement

Black/African American and Latine students are consistently overrepresented in disciplinary actions in schools across the nation, including LAUSD. Punitive discipline practices have been linked to negative academic outcomes, mental health issues, and reduced overall well-being among students. Consequently, there is a growing demand for alternative approaches, such as RJ practices. These practices, grounded in historical community values of repair and care, seek to dismantle racist school practices and develop positive educational spaces for students of color.

Research to understand RJ from the perspectives and lived experiences of youth of color remains limited. Although these practices are typically anti-racist and non-punitive, they still tend to be adult-centric. As a result, RJ practices might not be sufficiently effective in transforming our schools into equitable, nurturing environments that dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline and enable all students to achieve their full potential. Incorporating student voice and understanding their lived experiences is critical for the continuous improvement of RJ programs, ensuring that they remain effective and relevant in addressing the evolving needs of students.

Purpose

This study aimed to amplify the voices of students of color as they shared their experiences with Restorative Justice approaches to discipline. By analyzing the narratives from a select group of Black and Latine students with multiple behavior referrals, the researcher aimed to examine a Restorative Justice program at a public charter high school through the first-hand experiences and insights of the students themselves. This study analyzed the data using Restorative Justice (RJ) (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998), and CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) frameworks (CASEL, 2024). frameworks. This approach will provide valuable context for understanding these students' challenges and ultimately help identify areas for improvement within the current system.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- How do Black and Latine youth describe and experience Restorative Justice practices in an urban school?
- What aspects of a Restorative Justice program are associated with Black and Latine youth perceptions regarding the betterment of social-emotional awareness and application in the restorative process?
- In what ways can student feedback shape and enhance Restorative Practices?

Significance of the Study

Given the research questions, the significance of this study lay in its potential to deepen our understanding of the experiences and perspectives of youth of color in relation to Restorative Justice programs within an urban school setting. By exploring the aspects of Restorative Justice

programs that students perceive as beneficial in enhancing their skills, behaviors, and attitudes during the restorative process, the study can help identify key elements that contribute to the program's success.

Furthermore, by examining similarities and differences between the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of youth and educational stakeholders at the school site, the study provided valuable insights into potential areas of alignment or disconnect between these two groups. This information can serve as a foundation for fostering better collaboration and communication between students and educational stakeholders, ultimately leading to a more effective and inclusive implementation of Restorative Justice practices.

In summary, the significance of this study was its ability to inform and improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of Restorative Justice programs, particularly within urban schools, ensuring that these initiatives effectively address the needs and perspectives of youth of color and promote a more equitable and nurturing educational environment.

Conceptual Frameworks

The study utilized two frameworks: a Restorative Justice Framework (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998) and the CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework (CASEL, 2024). While the Restorative Justice Framework (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998) primarily focuses on repairing relationships and addressing harm through dialogue and empathy, the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2024). emphasizes the development of students' social, emotional, and cognitive skills. While differing in their approaches, both frameworks are used to in schools improve school climate by cultivating a caring, participatory, and equitable school environment. Utilizing both frameworks enabled the researcher to capture a wider range

of students' lived experiences and better understand the challenges they face within the educational context.

Restorative Justice Framework

Restorative Justice is fundamentally focused on restoring and (re)establishing social relationships characterized by dignity, concern, and respect for all individuals involved (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998). To achieve restored relationships, Restorative Justice addresses the wrongdoing or transgression committed while acknowledging the relevant context and underlying causes. For students, this process is crucial as it enables them to reflect on their actions, express the motivations behind them, or seek assistance in understanding their behavior.

Restorative Justice retains vital morals and ethics that are often lost in punitive disciplinary approaches. It also embraces the ideas of transformation and future orientation (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998). By providing participants with an opportunity to discuss the incident, the harm caused, and the necessary steps for repair, Restorative Justice empowers students to take responsibility for their actions and hold others accountable for theirs. Furthermore, this framework actively works to dismantle and counteract the harm inflicted by historically racist school policies. Schools interact with most children and young people for a significant amount of time during a critical period in their cognitive, social, and emotional development. The inclusion of social-emotional education is imperative to making significant changes to school disciplinary measures.

The CASEL Framework

The CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) framework includes three key domains: the promotion of social and emotional learning (SEL) and resilience,

and the prevention of social, emotional and behavior difficulties. Each theme is further divided into specific topics. The first Tier of SEL, which will help students and staff develop foundational skills, consists of five pillars: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making (CASEL, 2024).

A wide range of behaviors that school children might develop to varying degrees can either be internalized or externalized as social, emotional, and behavioral issues. Interventions for behavioral, emotional, and social issues in schools typically do not address conditions like depression and anxiety related to rule-breaking, delinquency, violent behavior, social withdrawal, substance use, and self-harm (Cavioni et al., 2020). Although interventions may be used at both the general and the targeted levels, they often deal with pupils after a transgression rather than before. According to research, general preventative efforts must be accompanied by focused interventions for RJ and SEL to be more efficacious.

Methodology and Research Design

Research on the impact of RJ practices in schools, in particular, research focused on students' lived experiences and understandings, continues to be limited. Thus, RJ practices may fall short in reshaping our schools into equitable, nurturing environments that disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline and empower all students to reach their full potential.

Research Design

This study utilized narrative inquiry for data collection and thematic data analysis to answer the research questions (Seidman, 2006). This design was chosen to give voice to youth participants and to highlight areas of growth for RJ practices through the lens of students who have experienced it.

Participants

The youth participants in this study included four Black and Latine students who attended a free, public charter high school in Central Los Angeles. All participants had experienced both punitive discipline practice and RJ practices during their school careers.

Data Collection

Seidman's (2006) interview design was used to guide data collection for this project. Each youth participant completed three semi-structured interviews, designed to capture data about various aspects of their Restorative Justice experiences. Additionally, students had the opportunity to provide informal feedback through daily pop-ins, follow up conversations, or scheduled RJ check-ins.

Data Analysis

Interviews were be transcribed and coded by hand. A combination of inductive codes and a priori codes derived from the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2024) and Restorative Justice (Llewelyn & Howse, 1998) frameworks were used in the thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2020). Inductive analysis was conducted, and the primary researcher highlighted and kept track of emerging themes, patterns, and future recommendations. Chapter 3 expounds upon the findings, themes, patterns, and suggestions for moving forward with Restorative Practices at this school site.

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Limitations

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Limitations of this study included a relatively small sample size, self-reported data, the relationship of the researcher to the participants, and the school site community size, which is significantly small. This study may have reduced generalizability due to its small sample size,

which could affect how the findings translate to more extensive settings. Participants also self-reported their experiences, reactions, and thoughts concerning school discipline. Participants may have reported past experiences that could have been contextualized or put into new perspectives over time since they transpired.

All participants had what is traditionally viewed as a subordinate relationship with the primary researcher, which could have affected the interview responses. Additionally, students may have changed or altered their authentic answers to questions based on the researcher working as an administrator in the school setting. All participants were reminded that their identities would remain confidential and that their answers would be used solely to improve outcomes for RJ practices moving forward. Each participant was given ample time to ask the researcher questions, follow up on their previous answers, and elucidate any misconceptions about the study and how it would be or could be used in the future.

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was the fact that it only pulled from a pool of individuals at one school site in one specific area of Los Angeles, California. This choice allowed for a small pool of individuals who could provide information to inform the practices at a singular school. This study offered multiple perspectives on the same idea, ultimately allowing for a robust set of recommendations to better the school's RJ program moving forward. This study will be provided to the school founders and chiefs to make recommendations to strengthen the RJ program at this school site and throughout the entire organization.

Organization of the Dissertation

In Chapter 1, I presented an introduction to my research. Background information was provided for Restorative Practices (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998) and SEL (CASEL, 2024). frameworks. I also outlined the problem with punitive disciplinary practices and the disproportionality in discipline rates between White and African American/Black and Latine students. I described the purpose of my research, the significance, my positionality, and the role this study will play in social justice work. I briefly outlined the research methodology. In Chapter 2, I will present a review of literature related to my research focus and a detailed description of my research methods in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will present student narratives taken directly from student interviews, as well as highlight emergent themes that came from interview content. Chapter 5 will present findings and recommendations, as well as limitations, delimitations, and a detailed plan of next steps schools can take to elevate student voice in Restorative Justice processes.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students are at the epicenter of school happenings and could offer valuable feedback and insight concerning curricular choices, school policies, and discipline processes. Often, students are not included in critical decision-making discussions that would allow them to offer authentic real-time input. This lack of student input is especially noticeable when it comes to school discipline processes. This study sought to illuminate student voices in decision-making regarding restorative and disciplinary practices at a free public charter school in Central Los Angeles.

This literature review begins with an exploration of punitive school discipline policies and their connection to the history of racism in the United States. Included data will illustrate the biased and disproportionate discipline statistics for Black/African American and Latino students versus White students. Subsequently, I will outline the intentions, frameworks, and successes of Restorative Practices in school settings. This section will also outline standard practices, training needs, and specific districts that have successfully used Restorative Practices. Primarily, this section will provide data to illustrate how Restorative Practices reduce the number of punitive disciplinary referrals in schools and improve overall school culture. Finally, I present the Restorative Justice Framework (Llewelyn & Howse, 1998) and the CASEL Framework (CASEL, 2024) as well as the rationale to how utilizing both frameworks can enable the researcher to capture a wider range of students' lived experiences and better understand the challenges they face within the educational context.

Racist School Discipline Practices

Punitive school discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion have become standard in response to minor offenses such as dress code violations, absenteeism, failure to follow classroom rules, and disagreements. Unfortunately, students lose educational time through the implementation of these practices. Isolating students from their school setting interrupts their educational progress, further harms on-campus relationships, and does nothing to reintegrate the student back into the classroom in a productive way (Losen & Martinez, 2020a). The following section traces the history of racist/biased discipline practices in schools from a historical standpoint.

History of Zero-Tolerance Policies

Many students find themselves suspended or expelled due to Zero-Tolerance policies at school. Zero-Tolerance discipline policies were created to keep weapons and drugs out of schools throughout the United States. Nevertheless, they have become the standard practice to punish students for less serious misconducts, many of which are shared amongst adolescent/teenage students (Oakland Unified School District, 2014). Zero-Tolerance Policies came about in the 1980s and

> quickly gained momentum, fueled in large part by rising rates of juvenile arrests for violent crimes and a climate in which young people were increasingly seen as dangerous. Feeling pressure to do something, Congress applied the rhetoric and intention of tough-on-crime laws to the school environment and passed the Gun-Free Schools Act in 1994. (Kang-Brown et al., 2013, p. 2)

During this time, the media focused on youth gangs and the rise of the teen "super predators" that would come of age by 2010. Many of these teen super-predators were urban African American and Latinos, and they were described as "relentlessly violent" (Castillo, 2015). Blatant racism and bias drive these policies even in places like schools where students are meant to learn about the implications and long-term negative effects of such systems.

Increasingly, Zero-Tolerance policies have been implemented to enforce rules surrounding minor infractions such as lateness, dress code violations, and other nonviolent infractions. As noted in a study on the juvenile justice system, "it has been consistently documented that punitive school discipline policies not only deprive students of educational opportunities but fail to make schools safer places" (Ally et al., 2021). These policies do little to prevent transgressions but serve as harsh punishments to make a statement to others in the school community. Suspensions/expulsions are usually served by a student in a solitary or silent setting with little-to-no academic support for the student. This practice prevents them from learning the curriculum while they are away and does not necessarily address wrongdoing or create a plan for the student to respond differently moving forward.

Researchers for The UCLA Civil Rights Project kept track of lost instruction resulting from suspension in California schools from 2011-2019. The research found that Black students lost a minimum of 26 hours more than their White counterparts (Losen & Martinez, 2020b). Not only does suspension rob students of instructional hours, but according to Pearman et al. (2019), suspension/expulsion creates significant inequities in student learning outcomes and graduation rates. Additionally, research shows that being suspended "increases the likelihood of dropping

out, from 16% for those not suspended to 32% for those suspended just once" (Balfanz, 2013, p. 57).

In 2015, Okonofua and Eberhardt of Stanford found that Black students' misbehavior was significantly more likely to be viewed as problematic than the misbehavior of White students. Additionally, "not only were the infractions of Black students treated as more extreme than the same infractions produced by a White student, but Black infractions were also viewed as more connected—one infraction informed how the next infraction should be regarded" (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015, p. 21). Non-White students are frequently referred for less severe offenses, causing a chain reaction regarding disproportionate amounts of students of color being suspended, expelled, and—down the line—involved with the American legal system (Kelly, 2019). These policies perpetuate and contribute further to racist practices in schools.

Inequities in Discipline Data

Not only are school disciplinary practices traditionally unfair to non-White students, but they also feed students directly into the School-to-Prison Pipeline:

> Although Black students represent only 15% of students across the nation, 35% of students suspended once are Black, 44% of students suspended more than once are Black, and 36% of expelled students are Black. (Anderson & Ritter, 2016)

The disproportionality of behavioral outcomes continues to be clear: non-White students are punished more harshly and more frequently than their peers.

Expulsion is a significant step taken in school systems against behavioral transgressions. Studies have consistently found negative relationships between student removal and academic success. Additionally, most cases regarding student removal are for minor and nonviolent

offenses. Much literature in this field also suggests that teachers' biases and cultural misreadings contribute to racial disparities in school disciplinary actions. Exclusionary policies have adverse effects on academic outcomes. Expulsion is not a new practice, but it has become a more significant problem throughout the past five decades. Data tracked over the course of forty years is alarming:

> In 1972-73, only 6% of African American students were suspended during the year, as compared to 3% of White students (and 3% of Hispanic students). By 2011-12, 16% of African American students were suspended; this rate was more than twice as great as for Hispanic students (7%) and more than three times as great as for White students (5%). (Anderson & Ritter, 2016, p. 2)

A 10% increase may not seem significant, but when put into perspective that there are upwards of 49 million students in our country, this increase could amount to 4,900,000 students suspended.

The numbers mentioned above are alarming on their own, but more alarming is that, in comparison, Black students would account for more than triple the rate of White students when it comes to suspension. As noted by Anderson and Ritter (2020), "the schools Black students attended were the same schools that engaged in high levels of exclusionary discipline and thus, overall, disproportionate numbers of Black students faced school suspension". Inequities in education are perpetuated when non-White students continue to be excluded from the classroom setting to serve suspensions and expulsions. Students affected by these inequities will not only develop negative behavioral records but will also be put at a disadvantage academically.

Additionally, students who are excluded from class and school have shown significantly more

negative outcomes when it comes to mental health/emotional wellness.

A study by Welch and Payne (2018) found that schools with larger percentages of

Latino/a students are more likely to favor certain punitive responses and less likely to favor

certain mild responses. The percentage of Latine students is also related to greater use of certain

disciplinary responses in schools with less crime. Since the federal government began

documenting school removals in 1970, disproportionate representation of racial minorities in

school removal has been consistently documented and recent studies have confirmed the data

(Brown & DiTillio, 2013, p. 4). The link between disproportional school discipline data and

racism can no longer be denied.

As noted by Darensbourg et al., (2010), many times, African American males may

struggle academically, and they may not view school as a place where they can excel due to

biased educational practices. Supporters of harsh disciplinary policies believe that Zero-

Tolerance policies deter future misconduct. The opposite is true, as the evidence shows that

instead of reducing the likelihood of disruption; school suspension appears to predict higher

future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended. School

suspension is the top predictor of contact with the justice system for students who become

incarcerated by the ninth grade (Castillo, 2015).

Detention, suspension, or expulsion do not encourage the student to acknowledge the

harm caused, nor do they help repair the damage to interpersonal relationships. Instead, they

exclude students from their learning environments, which causes further harm and learning loss.

A 2015 study found that removing students from opportunities to learn without taking time to

repair the hurt promotes isolation. Student isolation from peers, adults, and other school community members is detrimental to building healthy and trusting relationships in the school environment (Castillo, 2015).

In addition to Zero-Tolerance policies within schools, some district leaders believe that students who misbehave should be removed from their traditional school settings and provided with alternative educational means. This negative belief system is a common thread seen in districts that rely heavily on zero-tolerance policies: "throw out the bad kids so the good kids can learn has served as the fallback argument of school leaders against discipline reform" (Losen & Martinez, 2020a, p. 33). While transferring a student to an alternative school may not seem as harsh as full-on suspension or expulsion, discipline data for alternative schools shows that many cannot adequately support students behaviorally, academically, or emotionally. Data from 2020 revealed that students attending alternative schools in grades K–12 lost nearly twice the number of instructional hours as students in non-alternative schools (Losen & Martinez, 2020b). Not only does relocation fail to address the root of misbehavior, but it further widens the gap in student learning outcomes and inequities.

Research conducted for the UCLA Civil Rights Project followed a single cohort of California 10th grade students through high school for three years to develop a study on school discipline. The study discovered that students who were suspended had only a 60% graduation rate, far below the 83% graduation rate for non-suspended students (The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, 2017). This trend deepens the School-to-Prison Pipeline for setting students of color up to be excluded by the higher education system. Zero-Tolerance policies are not just drastic but also historically affect Latine/Black/African American students at an alarmingly higher rate than

White students. "African American students, in particular, have faced the brunt of unfair disciplinary policies and staff practices that have led to the criminalization of African American youth across the education and justice systems, a trend referred to as disproportionate minority contact (DMC)" (Oakland Unified School District, 2014). Research from Losen and Martinez (2020b) showed that Black boys are slightly more than three times as likely as White boys to be suspended and nearly twice as likely as Black girls. This analysis also found that Black girls are six times more likely than White girls to be suspended. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2021). Discriminatory disciplinary practices result in consequences "primarily felt among minority students in the poorest and most under-resourced communities" (Schiff, 2013, pp. 5-6). Without interrupting this trend, students of color are at risk of being continuously set up for failure academically with a stronger chance of being referred to law enforcement.

Schools must address a list of complex issues to provide equal learning opportunities for all students and, further, to disrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Okonofua and Eberhardt (2015) illustrate how exaggerated responses to violations committed by Black students might contribute to racial disparities in disciplinary practices. Proportional discipline is not only necessary when students are of school age, as these patterns might ultimately feed into racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In their 2019 research, Gopalan and Nelson explain that the racial composition of schools and school districts—particularly the percentage of Black students—predicted suspension/expulsion rates (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019).

Research showed these trends will continue if disciplinary practices continue to be punitive rather than restorative. In California prisons as of 2017, 28.5% of the state's male prisoners were African American—compared to just 5.6% of the state's adult male residents. The imprisonment rate for African American men is 4,236 per 100,000 people—ten times that for White men, 422 per 100,000. (Hayes at al., 2022). Similarly, Latino men are overrepresented in prison: they are 41% of the prison population, but only 38% of the state population (Hayes et al., 2022). There is a clear correlation between school discipline and imprisonment rates in California. With Restorative Practices in place, students could work on their social-emotional wellness, reflect on their behaviors, receive support for future change, and these rates could be decreased.

Restorative Justice and Social-Emotional Learning

Restorative Justice is a way of thinking that dates back to Indigenous tribes. However, more widespread awareness arose in the 1970s when a probation officer arranged for his client to meet with his victims to discuss restitution. The positive responses from the victims led to the first victim-offender reconciliation program in Ontario, Canada (Wachtel, 2012). This practice was first brought into schools in the early 1990s with initiatives in Australia. Since then, school-based Restorative Justice programs have been studied extensively internationally, but more scholars have begun adopting these practices in the United States (González, 2011). Unlike the justice system, schools can provide an environment where injury to the community is clearly defined, and restitution can be decided upon by all parties (González, 2011).

Restorative Justice practices are an approach to resolving conflict that emphasizes dialogue, repairing relationships, and accountability (Wachtel, 2012). A central principle

underlying RJ practices is the notion that people are inter-connected in a web of relationships and these ties become strained when harm occurs. Not only are victims affected, but others in the community are also impacted. Thus, RJ practices seek to build community and repair relationships (Augustine et al., 2018). In schools, this means that students work with RJ practitioners to ensure that their relationships with peers and other staff members are restored and that all involved parties can move forward from previous harm.

School-based RJ practitioners follow the principles of Restorative Justice and aim to handle conflict with a non-punitive approach: "Neither a counseling nor a meditation process, [RJ] conferencing is a victim-sensitive, straightforward problem-solving method that demonstrates how citizens can resolve their own problems when provided with a constructive forum to do so" (Wachtel, 2012). Strategies for RJ include affective statements, restorative and community-building circles, informal one-on-one chats, mediations, harm circles, accountability projects, and other meaningful endeavors. These RJ practices are flexible, and practitioners adjust them according to specific situations based on individual/group needs. However, to build community and repair harm, practitioners commonly use relationship-building circles and harm circles (also called community-building and response circles (Hassoun Ayoub, 2022, p. 2) Restorative conferences are meant to give individuals a voice and:

> Provide victims and others with an opportunity to confront the offender, express their feelings, ask questions and have a say in the outcome, Offenders hear firsthand how their behavior has affected people. Offenders may choose to participate in a conference and begin to repair the harm they have caused by apologizing, making amends and agreeing to financial restitution or personal or community service work. Conferences hold

offenders accountable while providing them with an opportunity to discard the "offender"

label and be reintegrated into their community, school or workplace. (Wachtel, 2012, p.

6)

Relationship-building circles aim to build and sustain positive relationships across the school

community. When behaviors like fights or tension occur, RJ practitioners utilize harm circles or

mediation to address the harm.

Schools as Communities of Care

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) defined the fundamental

premise of Restorative Practices by highlighting that "people are happier, more cooperative and

productive, and more likely to make positive changes when those in a position of authority do

things with them, rather than to them or for them" (Wachtel, 2012, p.6). Schools need to develop

solid relationships, which can be done through everyone working together to better the school

culture. The IIRP suggested using a fair process in classrooms to allow students a voice in

establishing classroom norms and expectations. Additionally, teachers and other school staff use

affective statements (or "I" statements) that acknowledge their feelings and perspectives in

response to a student's actions (Wachtel, 2012, p. 6).

Teachers and other school staff use circles proactively to build communities in

classrooms and schools and reactively in response to an offense. When there is a behavioral

incident, teachers ask nonjudgmental restorative questions intended to "separate the deed from

the doer" (Augustine et al., 2018) and avoid shaming while leading offenders to reflect on the

impacts of their behavior and what could be done to restore the relationship. These approaches

include proactive strategies to build relationships and develop community, as well as reactive strategies to repair harm and restore relationships after harm occurs" (Augustine et al., 2018).

As explained, RJ practices rely on students and adults alike to let their guards down and be vulnerable with one another to work through struggle/conflict. Some studies have examined implementation features that appear to affect student discipline outcomes. Additionally, Augustine et al., (2018) also noted that schools implementing Restorative Practices that received intensive training and follow-up for staff had positive results in a range of discipline outcomes.

The primary purpose of RJ is for staff members to see students as people who have their own lives, histories, traumas, gifts, and personalities. Approaching students as though they are humans who are flawed versus students who are simply breaking rules or misbehaving allows for a humanistic approach to discipline and—more importantly—repair. A team of researchers (Okonofua et al., 2016) concluded that teachers could develop an empathic mindset about discipline and that these mindsets can directly affect student suspension rates.

Rather than providing punitive disciplinary measures such as suspension and expulsion, which alienate students from both their learning and their community, RJ practices aim to make students aware of the impact of their actions. When students and staff feel more connected to their school as a community, they are more willing to repair the harm done and build relationships back. As outlined by Augustine et al., (2018), some studies have reported increased openness and connectedness between students and teachers and greater respect for students after implementing Restorative Practices. Some studies report greater parent and community involvement in schools after implementation. By using Restorative Practices, students and staff

learn more about how their actions affect others. They also learn more about SEL and can gain practice utilizing primary SEL strategies within the community.

Restorative Justice in Practice

Punitive disciplinary practices rarely address the cause of negative or harmful behaviors. Restorative Practices allow individuals who may have committed harm to take full responsibility for their behavior by addressing the individual(s) affected by the behavior. Restorative Justice focuses on righting a wrong committed, repairing harm done, and repairing relationships that have been injured. In the process, "the victim and the wrongdoer have the opportunity to share how they were harmed, as victims, or how they will work to resolve the harm caused, as wrongdoers" (Schott Foundation, 2014). This process is highly conversation based and allows all participants to voice their thoughts/feelings/reactions in a safe space. A significant element of Restorative Practices is acknowledging SEL. Restorative Practices are modeled on how Indigenous groups promote peacemaking and engage with offenders. The idea behind Restorative Practices is that offenders must be "restored" to their communities through reflection, conversation, and making amends. The aim is to create strong communities that support and hold members to high standards. The model embodies a more positive approach to student behavior (Williamson, 2022). Restoring relationships through SEL and RJ will thwart the use of exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Benefits of Restorative Practices

The restorative process begins with the offender acknowledging the harm done to the interpersonal or community relationship(s). Approaching the issue through this lens allows those involved to establish a goal: to restore a previous relationship or create a stronger one moving

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forward. Accountability is a major factor in Restorative Practices. Each member of the conflict can begin by acknowledging their role to begin the restoration process. Once parties agree to participate in Restorative Practices/discussions, respect must be a guiding factor of the discussion(s). As noted by Title (2014):

> Respect is the key ingredient that holds the container for all Restorative Practices and keeps the process safe. All persons in a restorative process must be treated with respect. Every person is expected to show respect for others and themselves. Restorative processes require deep listening, done in a way that does not presume we know what the speaker will say but that we honor the importance of the other's point of view. Our focus for listening is to understand other people, so, even if we disagree with their thinking, we can be respectful and try hard to comprehend how it seems to them. (p. 1)

Respect is the basis for the entire practice of repairing and rebuilding. Punitive disciplinary measures fail to respectfully preserve the humility of individuals involved and instead further isolate them.

Restorative Circles

Restorative Justice Conferences and Circles are highly structured processes based on and rooted in Indigenous practices like the Anishinaabek (Office of Student Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Restorative Justice Conferences or Circles allow community members to come together to address harmful behavior in a process that explores harms and needs and a path toward accountability and repair. "Restorative Justice" is a philosophy of justice as well as a specific set of practices that bring together those who experienced harm with those who caused harm to "make things right" (Office of Student Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Rather than

suspending/expelling students and isolating them from the situation, Restorative Practices/circles allow them to face the issue head-on with specific guidelines. Repair is the main driving factor behind these practices — ultimately working to combat the effects of the School-to-Prison-Pipeline.

Honoring the Restorative Process to Facilitate Healing

In the circle, each participant has a specific role in reaching the goal of repairing harm. A typical Restorative Justice Circle looks as follows: first the facilitator holds and sets the space by welcoming all participants, each person introduces themself and their relationship to what happened. Then, people who have caused harm share what happened before, during, and after the incident and how they feel about it. Impacted and affected participants are then allowed to share what happened before, during, and after the incident, how they feel about what happened, and any questions they have. From there, supporting participants are invited to share any thoughts or feelings about what they have heard (Office of Student Conflict Resolution, n.d.).

Once it is time for facilitators to step in again, they ask questions to help guide the process. Facilitators are multipartial rather than impartial or neutral. This means they are equitably partial to everyone involved in the process. Facilitators will act to ensure that all participants can share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about the conflict and what could be done to improve things. Once everyone has shared their thoughts and feelings about what happened, the group will brainstorm options for repairing the harm. The group decides which options could best repair the harm, and those who caused harm share what they are willing to do to repair it (Office of Student Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Rather than rely on policies with no flexibility or nuance, these practices allow for a humane and dignified resolution.

The 5 Rs of RJ Foster Trust and Safety

Restorative Practices focus on the 5 Rs: Relationship, Respect, Responsibility, Repair, and Reintegration (Title, 2014). When students learn to recognize their own distortions in thinking, they are taking responsibility for their thoughts/emotions and subsequent actions. Restorative circles allow a place for students to speak freely, in a safe space, and with specificity about what is or was bothering them:

> Children will talk when they feel safe. This is a simple observation but one that has profound implications for schools. Some students who do not feel safe will end up in the office because they got into a fight. Some will elect to flee and start skipping classes or whole days. (Boyes-Watson et al., 2020)

Moreover, some will be disassociated from the work they are meant to do while at school. By opening up a space for restorative circles, students will be able to expand how they think of their emotions and reflect on any harm they may have done in a disciplinary situation. This process will also help deescalate and prepare students to be reintegrated back into the classroom safely.

While Restorative Circles help with repairing harm from an incident that took place, many programs miss the opportunity to do more work to prevent harm from happening in the first place. The Restorative Justice Framework (Llewellyn & Howse 1998) is effective with regards to reducing referrals, there is still a lack of support for students when it comes to helping them develop social-emotional awareness and skills. Cavioni et al.'s research (2020) highlighted the significant positive impact of SEL programs on students' behavior from kindergarten to high school. These benefits include improved social-emotional competencies across the five SEL competencies (CASEL, 2024), increased self-esteem and connection to school, better classroom

behavior, enhanced academic motivation and performance, as well as reduced conduct problems, bullying, aggression, and emotional distress such as stress, anxiety, and depression.

Success of RJ in Lowering Discipline Referrals

In a study done by Nicole Raffenbeul at St. Cloud State University, it was found that implementing RJ practices from year one to year three, the number decreased from 133 referrals to 20 and "There were 100% reductions in referrals for battery, physical injury, possession of knife/inappropriate items, and property damage, and there was a 33% reduction in referrals for annoying others" (Raffenbeul, 2019, p. 23).

School record data in high schools using Restorative Practices have shown a promising drop in the use of punitive school discipline (Gregory et al., n.d.). For example, in an urban largely African American high school, violent acts and serious incidents were reduced by 52% compared with the year before. In a rural high school, there was a 50% reduction in suspensions. Finally, in a large suburban high school, the number of incidents of "disrespect to teacher" and "classroom disruption" reduced by 70% after 1 year of the intervention (Gregory et al., n.d.). As explained by Fronius et al., some reports indicate that RJ has resulted in an improved school climate. Other reports indicate that RJ has led to increased student connectedness, greater community and parent engagement, improved student academic achievement, and the offering of support to students from staff (Fronius et al., 2019). The benefits of RJ are broad and, although they vary per school site, they are shown to be overall positive for the greater school community.

A study conducted at Kennesaw State University illustrated that greater RJ implementation levels were associated with better teacher-student relationships as measured by student-perceived teacher respect and teacher use of exclusionary discipline (shirley, 2023).

In addition, the findings offered some initial promise that high-quality RJ implementation may be associated with more equitable disciplinary practices:

> Namely, higher RJ implementation predicted greater teacher respect— a relationship that held for students across varying racial and ethnic groups. In addition, teachers who were perceived as implementing more RJ elements by their students tended to have fewer differences in the number of misconduct/defiance referrals issued to Asian/White and Latino/African American student groups compared with the large discipline gap for teachers perceived as low on RP elements. (Gregory et al., 2015)

While the research above pointed to the success of Restorative Practices when utilized to lower rates of disciplinary referrals, there is still a lack of research with regards to SEL paired with RJ practices. As outlined by Fronius et al. (2019), the research around SEL-based restorative practice programs is still developing but qualitative reviews and early research suggests it may contribute to reductions in discipline rates and potential improvements to school climate.

Social-Emotional Learning

Guided by the CASEL Framework (CASEL, 2024), students will be educated on how to develop strong social-emotional skills. These skills will help students with their cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, conflict-resolution abilities, and more. Ultimately, as the school population (adults and students alike) learn these skills, the overall school climate will be improved. As outlined in Chapter 1, there are three major themes covered in SEL: Promoting social and emotional learning, Promoting resilience, and Preventing social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (CASEL, 2024).

Students experience social and emotional development and challenges throughout their academic careers. Social-emotional wellness is key to overall student success and should be seen as equally important to academic preparedness. Since school personnel spend a great deal of time developing students as scholars, it should be noted the impact they also have on SEL and wellness. SEL is centered first upon three major themes. Theme 1 is "Promoting social and emotional learning," Theme 2 is "Promoting resilience," and Theme 3 is "Preventing social, emotional and behavioral difficulties" (CASEL, 2024). These themes lead the overarching goals of SEL and segue excellently into the five main competencies for students.

Overlapping Competencies of SEL and RJ

SEL has five main competencies which are interrelated and aim to help students be more reflective, aware of their feelings, and deliberate with their thoughts, words, and actions. The five main competencies are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2024). These competencies can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts, to articulate what is helpful to know and be able to do for academic success, school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and fulfilling careers (Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education, n.d.). Moreover, these competencies align extremely well to the guiding principles of Restorative Justice previously discussed in this chapter: Relationship, Respect, Responsibility, Repair, and Reintegration (Title, 2014).

Social-emotional learning teaches skills such as "recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. These skills allow

children and adults to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices" (Schott Foundation, 2014). In conjunction with each other, these practices would allow students to respectfully communicate about incidents and experiences. Additionally, these opportunities would prevent students from blindly being excluded from school settings.

Summary

Schools are often the place students spend the most time outside of their home environments. Therefore, schools should foster environments of care, repair, and safety for students. Schools that employ Restorative Practices have already taken steps to do this by acknowledging the unfair and biased discipline disparities for students of color. Many schools have also begun to incorporate SEL to better support students' emotional health and well-being. However, these practices would be more successful if they did not exist in a vacuum. This study sought to understand how students perceive and experience disciplinary and Restorative Practices in an urban secondary school setting. Accordingly, this study also sought to elevate and amplify the voices of students who have been most impacted by traditional school discipline processes and punishments.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

As outlined by the research presented in Chapter 2, despite much discussion on the implementation and success of Restorative Justice in school and community settings, findings on how racially marginalized youth describe and experience the process are scarce. This study aimed to understand how Black and Latine youth describe and experience Restorative Justice practices as well as the extent to which participation in a Restorative Justice program has shaped their lives. The study expanded the conversation by centering the voices and lived experiences of Black and Latine youth whose lives are directly impacted by the implementation of Restorative Justice practices. Additionally, the study humanizes research with young people by positioning them as knowledge-holders and informants, not simply subjects.

This chapter will provide an overview of this study's methodology, including the research questions, context, participants, procedures, and data collection. Subsequently, the analysis procedures are described before discussing the limitations and delimitations of this study in more depth.

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of learning more about the lived experiences of youth of color, this study highlighted the voices of typically marginalized individuals. The goal was to elevate the voices of students and include them as important stakeholders in future decision-making processes regarding RJ practice. The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do Black and Latine youth describe and experience Restorative Justice practices in an urban school?

2. What aspects of a Restorative Justice program are associated with Black and Latine youth perceptions regarding the betterment of social-emotional awareness and application in the restorative process?

3. In what ways can student feedback shape and enhance Restorative Justice practices?

Narrative Inquiry

This study was situated in the field of narrative research and was influenced by key scholars such as Bruner (1985), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), Miles and Huberman (1994), and Polkinghorne (1988). Bruner (1985) and Polkinghorne (1988) both posited that a narrative constructed by an individual is a storied telling of their experience in pieces and brought together as a whole that "culminates in an outcome" (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives written or told by a participant are sometimes the only way to fully understand an individual's experience around a specific topic or event.

Narrative research can come in the form of journals, interviews, or oral statements and is transcribed by the researcher for later analysis. The stories obtained from narrative statements become the researcher's qualitative data. Polkinghorne (1988) explains that narrative inquiry has two research possibilities: descriptive and explanatory. Descriptive narrative research uses the discourse constructed by participants to understand the meaning they make of an event (Polkinghorne, 1988). The purpose of explanatory narrative research is to explain through narration why something happened (Polkinghorne, 1988). The questions driving this study focused on developing a deep understanding of a particular context and process, and the research questions aligned with the goals of descriptive narrative research.

The process of narrative research influences the way that participants express their experiences. Connelly and Clandinin 1990) write that within narrative research, participant recounts of experience are also influenced by being a part of the research study itself. Chase (2005) described this process as having functions that serve as a lens to inform understandings and interpretations: Narrative is retrospective meaning-making, narrative is contextual, and narrative is socially situated and interactive (Chase, 2005).

Narrative as retrospective meaning-making allows the researcher to understand that "human beings reorganize, interpret, shape, and reshape their experiences and their meanings in the act of retelling" (Chase, 2005). Rather than positivist research, which may strive for a precise understanding of what a participant was thinking or feeling at a specific time or during a specific experience, the "contemporary narrative researcher" (Chase, 2005) understands that narrative is contextual (Chase, 2005). For this study, students used narratives to express the importance of past educational and behavioral experiences.

Since students' experiences do not exist in a vacuum, outside elements were also considered and factored into the narratives presented as research. Each participant's story is supported and hindered by the socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts in which it initially occurred and in which it is told. Within the narrative, a participant constructs identities based on settings, culture, location, and a host of other factors. As those factors change, identities change. In this study, students reflected on past experiences as well as recent experiences. This allowed them to retell some stories after having significant time to reflect on them and make meaning. As a participant retells their stories, the context(s) of those experiences shape the meaning-making. For this study, students' upbringing, community settings, and school experiences strongly

informed their narratives and how they continue to make meaning of them. Using this lens assisted the researcher in accounting for similarities and differences across multiple interviews of one participant and multiple participants. This allowed the researcher to compile a list of common themes and experiences across subjects.

Due to the nature of the study and the fact that the primary researcher worked and interacted 1-on-1 with the participants, the narrative process was socially situated and interactive (Chase, 2005). Stories told of lived experience can be seen as a performance–crafted either in the moment or in advance for the particular audience (in this case, the researcher), based on the setting and the believed purpose. Methods for ensuring the narrative is trustworthy will be discussed in a later section. However, it is essential to note that as an individual tells and retells their story, it changes as it reflects the surrounding context. This makes it no less accurate to the genuine participant.

Research Relationship

As noted by Glesne, researching in one's "backyard" (Glesne, 2006) is replete with potential benefits and risks. Familiar settings and people may contribute to ease of access and trust-building. However, it may also lead to researcher bias, differing expectations, or participant discomfort with the findings (Glesne, 2006). I was committed to a conscious self-awareness of the nature of relationships with my youth participants and their potential concerns. As a second-year administrator, I have a previous relationship with many students as a former teacher, club adviser, and supporter/supervisor of clubs and sports on campus. In these roles, I have developed a strong rapport with students.

The school setting I work within has always allowed and encouraged me to openly and honestly reference my positionality as a White female with students, staff, and families. These conversations served to create a stronger sense of trust and openness. The foundational goal was to create a rapport marked by confidence, trust, and even "mutual liking" (Glesne, 2006, p. 110). With this goal came an understanding that how participants define and obtain rapport may be culturally different from my background. This possibility was taken into consideration. Balancing the research relationship required an active self-awareness of my subjectivities. Awareness of how my background, life experiences, and overall history differs from that of each of my participants allowed me to exclude my own thinking/opinions when making meaning of participants' narratives.

Aligning with qualitative researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Peshkin, 1988; Wolcott, 2005), I considered subjectivity as a positive force in my research. Subjective responses to participants alerted me to directions to pursue or to avoid, along with a host of other decisions that needed to be made in the moment. On the other hand, unregulated subjective responses could have led to negative results. Therefore, I remained committed to monitoring personal subjectivity and engaging in reflective practices that brought subjectivities to light and accounted for them appropriately.

Important School Site Distinctions

As an administrator, I have been lucky to work in a school with a true open-door policy for students to walk into the Restorative Justice Coordinator/Assistant Principals' shared office. Unlike other school settings, our office is not gatekept, and students are welcome. Throughout the day, students come in to say hello to us (three administrators share one office space), ask for

snacks, check their grades, vent, take breaks from class, or fulfill other needs. The perception of the "main office" at my school site differs from many other schools I have attended and worked at. Students can connect with school administrators, voice their needs/concerns, celebrate their successes, and seek guidance. This environment allows us to build stronger relationships with students and builds trust between us as community members. This trust and community lent itself well to conducting interviews that yielded open and honest responses from student participants.

Before I presented the findings, and in the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledged my standpoint as a White female academic and administrator conducting research in a setting that is 98% non-White. I work and live in the community many of my students live in; however, I understand that I am a transplant to this neighborhood, whereas many students and families have lived there for years/generations. As a member of the school and surrounding communities, I strive to honestly and accurately represent students' experiences with school discipline and Restorative Practices. I acknowledge that my positionality influenced this project to some extent; my role as a school administrator allowed me direct access to students whom I may not have otherwise had access to as a researcher.

Methodology

This chapter will provide an overview of the methodology used in this study, including the research questions, context, participants, procedures, and data collection method. Subsequently, the analysis procedures are described before discussing the limitations and delimitations of this study in more depth.

This exploratory study, focusing on Black and Latine student experiences related to Restorative Justice practices, used three interview stages for thorough data collection. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black and Latine students using Seidman's (2006) three-interview series framework. The first interview set the stage by examining the context of the participant's experience. This includes understanding their background, educational journey, and other factors that may influence their perspective on discipline. In the second interview, participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which they occurred. This involved discussing specific challenges they faced, the support they received, and any pivotal moments that shaped their experiences with Restorative Practices and discipline. Finally, the third interview encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. This involved examining how their experiences in Restorative Justice have impacted their personal beliefs around SEL competencies and how they perceive their future selves.

Context

The primary investigator conducted the interviews for this study. The setting of the study was a free public charter high school in Central Los Angeles. The school serves roughly 540 students from grades 9-12. Ninety-eight percent of the student body in the school setting qualify for free/reduced lunch. This study took place over the course of 5 months. In particular, the study focused on the Restorative Justice program already in place at the school site. The behavioral tiers at the school site span from 1 through 4 and each level is handled accordingly based on the severity of the situation. In response, students are asked to participate in one or multiple of the following restorative activities: 1-on-1 conferencing, small-group circle, accountability project,

parent/guardian shadow day, educational trip, community service, mentoring another student, daily check-ins, or creating materials to teach others about a specific topic like campus safety or derogatory language.

Participants

The study used purposive sampling to recruit four Black and Latine students at an urban public charter high school in Central Los Angeles. The school serves roughly 540 students from grades 9-12. Ninety-eight percent of the student body in the school setting qualify for free/reduced lunch. Specific criteria were used for the selection of participants: they Self-identify as Black or Latine, have been referred to school administration for Tier 2 offenses and up on a minimum of three occasions, and are frequently mentioned by staff at grade-level, staff, or 1-on-1 meetings with administrators.

Recruitment

To recruit students, the following process was followed: First the Restorative Justice Coordinator at the school site gave the Principal Investigator a list of students who specifically qualified for the study based on the criteria (2+ times involved with RJ in a given year.). Then, the PI sent an email to all parents of students and students who qualified for the study. The parents received the information shortly before the students so that they were aware. The email explained the process of recruitment of students for a study around Restorative Practices in the school. The PI explained the qualifications: that students have participated in Restorative Practices at least two times in the past calendar year. If students were interested, they were instructed to reach out directly to the primary researcher via email or in person at the school site.

I met with students who expressed interest in private, 1-on-1 meetings. For students who were interested after our initial discussion, I set up a time to talk to parents/guardians and explain the study to them. In the initial contact with students/guardians I let them know the purpose of my study: to understand students' perspectives on the Restorative Justice practices in the school. I also explained to them why they are eligible to participate in my study (participated in Restorative Practices two times in the past calendar year), the process of the study, my intentions for the research, and explained that they can say no or cease participation at any point during the study.

I then met with students and explained that they would be asked to participate in three 45-minute interviews with me and that the interviews would be recorded with consent from student and/or parent depending on their age. I explained that if they chose to participate, I would protect their identity by using a pseudonym for them and the school. Additionally, I reiterated that if they decided to participate but later decided they do not want to continue participating, they could leave the study at any time with no penalty. Their choice to participate in the study or not had no influence on their grades, behavior records, or status in the school. Lastly, I explained that parents'/guardians' permission was necessary for them to participate before we could get started.

If students understood all aspects of the research process and were interested, I sent home an information packet and informed consent form for parents/guardians to review. I also allowed for families to schedule phone or in-person meetings to make sure that all questions and concerns were addressed.

It is important to note that although the PI was an Assistant Principal, the Restorative Justice Coordinator was the individual in charge of assigning Tiers and Restorative

Consequences to students. The Restorative Justice Coordinator was the main assessor of harm and the designee for students when they participated in circles, reflection time, etc. I was tangentially involved in the process. Part of the protocol for when students receive a disciplinary referral is always a meeting with parents/guardians and school administration. As such, parents are in the know regarding past student behavioral offenses and participation in Restorative Practices. This study did not make parents/guardians aware of anything they did not previously know regarding their student's behavior.

Participants for this study included one school site administrator and four students between grades 9 and 12 who identify as Black/African American or Latine. I obtained youth assent and parent consent for all students under 18 years of age. Permission slips outlined that the study brings minimal risk.

Procedures

This study was a qualitative study that used interviews to explore participant' subjective experiences and develop a deep understanding of a complex problem. Rather than attempting to compare the experiences of multiple groups, this study aimed to explore how these particular students have experienced discipline in their school settings. Principal research focused on RJ practices rather than focusing on a school setting where punitive discipline is still employed. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to describe student perceptions of discipline practices, Restorative Practices, and student mental health supports.

Data Collection

Data collection included three individual interviews with Black and Latine youth and document analysis of school discipline reports and logs. The primary form of data collection was

in-depth (Yin, 2009), semi-structured, open (Glesne, 2006) interviews. Participants engaged in Seidman's (2006) "model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing" (p. 16), which is designed to occur in three phases.

Interviews

The in-depth research interview (Seidman, 2006) was selected because it is an effective tool for looking deeply into a specific issue confronting a population, learning from the richness of the participants' experience, analyzing the interviews for recurring themes or unique phenomena, and drawing conclusions and new directions for future research. Interviewing students allowed them to respond in a timely, honest manner and to expound upon their initial thoughts/responses. Interviews also allowed youth participants to become the narrators of their own stories and allowed the researcher to glean both how individuals make meaning of their lives and what meanings result (Chase, 2005).

Holding multiple in-depth interviews over a series of times enhanced the likelihood of building a positive rapport that added to the trust and authenticity between the researcher and the youth participants. In addition, youth participants can be sent a subtle message that their story has value when they become aware from the outset that they will be discussing their experience for many hours over several weeks. Lastly, interviews spread across several weeks allowed participants to reflect further and deepen their understanding of their stories between interviews. Each interview was scheduled for 30-60 minutes over six weeks. The interview questions were piloted with three practitioners in an abbreviated manner before formal research. The first interview highlighted student histories regarding educational careers, school experiences, and behavioral history. The second interview focused on students' perceptions of the current

Restorative Practices used in our school setting. The third interview allowed participants to reflect on experience, relate how they make meaning of their experience, and to make recommendations regarding what they believe would augment/improve the school's Restorative Practices.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Every interview was transcribed verbatim, except for sidebar conversations. At those points in the transcript, notes were added regarding the nature of the conversation, and the digital time stamp within the recording is included. Interviews were completed in settings and during timetables chosen by the participants over the course of six weeks. Data collection also included document analysis of school site disciplinary protocols, Restorative Justice Practice protocols, referral procedures, and discipline data.

These interviews aimed to explore how individuals interpret and describe the discipline process in our school, especially the systemic factors that support or impede this process. Additionally, the interviews focused on how students perceive the discipline process and how it allows (or disallows) them to be heard. Interview questions were developed based on my literature review and personal work/off-the-record conversations with students in my role as Assistant Principal. The questions opened the door for conversations about the students' individual experiences. Once transcribed, the transcripts of the interviews were analyzed for themes, coded, and organized accordingly.

Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data, such as interviews, focus group transcripts, or open-ended survey responses, to identify common themes or patterns in the data.

The data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process to describe emergent themes from participants' stories, uncover nuances about their experiences, note similarities and differences across the youth participants, and provide an interpretation considering the literature and the study's two conceptual frameworks. Below is a description of how I conducted the thematic analysis process.

- Familiarization with the data: I immersed myself in the collected data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

- Coding: Deductive coding was used in the analysis of the interviews using RJ (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998) and SEL (CASEL, 2024) conceptual frameworks. The coding process was completed by hand. I identified significant statements, phrases, or sections of the data that represented key aspects of the participants' experiences. These segments were then assigned descriptive codes or labels, which helped to organize the data (Saldaña, 2020). The coding process allowed me to specifically look for examples in which youth participants defined and made meaning of their experiences with RJ and the ways that RJ shaped their social emotional development.

- Interpretation: An iterative process of moving between the whole and the parts of the text, was applied during this phase. I engaged in a continuous, reflexive dialogue with the data, as I interpreted and reinterpreted the meanings within the context of the participants' lived experiences.

- Identification of themes: I analyzed the coded data to identify patterns, connections, and emerging themes that capture the essence of the phenomenon under investigation.

I paid particular attention to finding similarities, differences, frequency of shared

experiences, perspectives, and practices, and comments that exist within each code.

- Member checking: Since a vital component of narrative inquiry is capturing authentic

  responses that describe an individual's unique perspective, I utilized member

  checking, in which my interview transcript and initial coding of participant responses

  were given to each participant to verify that preliminary findings are in line with their

  intended meaning during their interview. Participants were able to edit, redact, or add

  to any information that had been gathered (Birt et al., 2016).

- Integration and synthesis: I synthesized the identified themes, offering a

  comprehensive understanding of how Black and Latine students understand and

  experience RJ. The synthesis involved integrating the themes with relevant literature

  and RJ (Llewellyn & Howse, 1998) and SEL (CASEL, 2024) frameworks that were

  identified in the previous chapter.

- Final write-up: Synthesized themes were then compiled in written, dissertation form.

  This process involved selecting "vivid, compelling extract examples, [the] final

  analysis of selected extracts, relating back the analysis to the research question and

  literature, [and] producing a scholarly report of the analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006,

  p. 87).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was that I recruited participants from my school site. To

address this, participants were reminded of the confidentiality of the study and the focus on

improving the behavioral/RJ program at the school site. Additionally, interview participants (and

families) were able to look through the transcript of the interviews as well as review my analysis of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide a framework for considering tenets of quantitative research which are incongruent with qualitative studies (as cited in Alexander, 2019). Validity, in particular, is recast with a call for scholars to scrutinize a study for its trustworthiness. According to Alexander (2019), trustworthiness refers to the assessment of the quality and worth of the complete study, while helping to determine how closely study findings reflect the aims of the study, according to the data provided by participants. The intent is not to look for external validity and reliability in the traditional sense but to ensure that the study results can be trusted and authentic. The limitations of this study include reliance on participant memory, the accuracy of participant reconstruction of lived experiences, sample size, interview time, and my positionality as Assistant Principal.

I relied on triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity to establish trustworthiness. This involved using multiple methods or sources of data to corroborate the findings. Researchers can use multiple methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and observation, to gather data on the same phenomenon. They can also use multiple data sources, such as interviews with different participants, to verify the findings.

Member checking allowed me to share the research findings with participants to get their feedback and confirm that the findings accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. As previously stated in my positionality statement, reflexivity allowed me to be transparent about my own biases, assumptions, and perspectives, as well as how they may have influenced the research findings.

Additional limitations of this study included the relatively small sample size and demographics and the use of self-reported data. Because this study focused on a small pool of individuals' experiences within one school site, the potential for generalizability is lesser than it would be with a larger population of participants. Additionally, interview participants may have self-reported based on what they thought I would want to hear or omit information out of embarrassment/shame, even with the knowledge that their responses are confidential and will be used only for this study.

Delimitations

The choice to limit this study to participants representing students who have been involved in a significant number of behavioral referrals in the school site is a delimitation. Even though the sample size was small and from only one specific site, this pool of students and their answers allowed for disciplinary patterns within the school and the larger educational community to be discussed/explored. A positive of this study, including only students from my school site, is that their responses helped inform the school about recommendations for the overall Restorative Justice program. Sharing these recommendations may lead to change within the Restorative Justice framework at the organizational level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a qualitative study employing a series of in-depth interviews was conducted. This method was selected to learn primarily about the experiences of youth of color with Restorative Practices in an urban secondary school setting. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, there still needs to be more research to illuminate and give power to youth voices concerning school disciplinary and Restorative Practices. Also needed is research to explore the success of

combining RJ and SEL competencies as they pertain to reducing school discipline referrals and

overall student emotional wellness.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter focuses on the experiences of Black and Latine students with Restorative Practices at a free public charter school in Central Los Angeles. Through a detailed exploration of student narratives, this chapter aims to foreground students' voices within the RJ framework, offering a complex understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions to hear about Black and Latine students' experiences with RJ practices at a free public charter school in Central Los Angeles.

1. How do students at an urban high school perceive and experience RJ practices?

2. Which elements of a RJ program align with urban students' perceptions of improved social-emotional awareness and application within the restorative process?

3. In what ways can student feedback shape and enhance Restorative Justice practices?

In order to understand Black and Latine student understandings and experiences with Restorative Justice, I employed Seidman's (2006) three-part interview protocol. Each youth participant completed three semi-structured interviews to capture data about various aspects of their RJ and school discipline experiences. The first interview explored the students' overall perceptions and experiences with Restorative Justice practices. The second interview explored students' perceptions of improved social-emotional awareness and application within the restorative process. The third interview explored how students made meaning of their experiences with Restorative Justice practices.

While semi-structured interviews were the primary method of engaging with students, I adopted a more dynamic and inclusive approach to data collection. Acknowledging the potential discomfort and restrictiveness of traditional interviews, I incorporated alternative methods to capture the students' spontaneous and voluntary insights. This approach, which allowed for natural conversation, facilitated the development of trust, enabling students to respond more genuinely. Additionally, participants were encouraged to share additional reflections or thoughts through various means such as in-person conversations, notes, personal journal entries, or emails after the initial interviews. This openness led students to further elaborate on, clarify, or revise their initial thoughts as needed. Their active participation and frequent unscheduled check-ins demonstrated their investment in the study.

This chapter is divided into two parts. First, I provide vignettes of the youth participants. The vignettes serve as a rich, contextual backdrop that places the participants' experiences and viewpoints within the framework of their individual histories, cultural origins, and social circumstances, allowing their voices to be heard more fully. My goal was to present the young participants as complex individuals, a method that both humanized the data and emphasized how crucial it was to view the participants as real people, whose contributions to the study are inextricably linked to their identities, experiences, and nuanced lives.

Next, I present the findings which highlighted the fact that students were able to discern how and why RJ is more effective at improving student behavior than traditional punitive practices are. To obtain a more nuanced understanding of how students view Restorative Practices, I used the following research question as a guide: 1. What aspects of a Restorative Justice program are associated with Black and Latine youth perceptions regarding the betterment

of social-emotional awareness and application in the restorative process? This question asked

students to identify specific elements of the RJ process that were most effective for them. The

findings exposed a need for relational trust in the RJ process, and the importance of deep

dialogues to explore meaningful avenues for growth.

<p style="text-align:center">Vignettes of Youth Participants</p>

Before delving into the empirical data, I provide vignettes of the youth participants. The

vignettes serve as a rich, contextual backdrop that places the participants' experiences and

viewpoints within the framework of their individual histories, cultural origins, and social

circumstances, allowing their voices to be presented authentically. My goal was to validate the

young participants as complex individuals, a method that both humanizes the data and complies

with the standards of ethically correct and fair depiction.

Javier

Javier grew up in a central Los Angeles neighborhood that was close-knit and one he

described as "chill." As a multilingual individual, Javier "grew up with some White people," who

helped him to "learn better English." His family primarily spoke Spanish at home. Javier was a

very pleasant student who got along with nearly everyone. He laughed in class with students who

played sports, who loved the arts, and some who liked to skateboard. Unfortunately, his

proclivity to be social got him into trouble with teachers at times. Javier stated that he had not

always been able to make friends and that he really appreciated being able to laugh and joke with

others in school. He loved feeling accepted and was a positive influence when it came to

accepting others. Javier had an extremely inviting personality and others were drawn to him. He

could talk for a long time about any given number of topics, which is a skill he always worked

<p style="text-align:center">62</p>

on honing. As he said, "I can be silly and laugh a lot," and sometimes this created an issue in classroom spaces.

As a freshman, Javier made some choices to "fit in" that caused him to be in disciplinary trouble. He has noted that in general, he found school to be "boring but fun at the same time" and that being social with others is what ultimately made school fun to him. Javier loved to have good conversations and expressed that he had "a good family bond" with his mom and dad. His personality was jovial and sweet for the most part, but he also struggled with getting frustrated when he did not feel as though he was being heard. This happened with his teachers throughout his entire school career. His parents have been disappointed with him over this before, but in his earlier schools they were not part of the discipline discussions. As such, they were often called and told that Javier had to serve detention with little to no other conversation or elaboration. Javier said that he appreciated the fact that his parents were called into our office, or called on the phone, to "help them understand the whole situation" and so that "they could give feedback" on what could be done to help him since "they know what makes him upset or happy." Javier greatly valued and appreciated when adults had a positive view of who he was. Punitive discipline has made Javier feel "stupid" or like everyone thought he was a "bad kid".

Javier was a major music fan and idolized Tyler, The Creator, Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and Drake. He said he liked their style, but mostly that they seemed like they "kept their friends around them." Javier's goals were to "be rich," do a job that is fun, and stay close to his family. It was only once he started high school that he felt like he was someone who could do well in college and explained that positive reinforcement at school helped him change the way he thought about himself and his capabilities. He has not always felt confident in his academic

abilities but worked hard to develop that confidence with the help of his teachers and administrators.

Javier explained that he would be the first in his family to attend college. He knew that his "family would be proud no matter what as long as he's being a good person and happy," but he hoped to one day attend school and with the hopes that he will make good money for himself. Shaq, one of Javier's personal idols, was someone whom he thought had a similar personality: "goofy, but he got good grades, too."

Javier was the sole sophomore participant in this study. His freshman year in high school was mostly positive. However, he did have a few behavioral incidents which landed him in the main office with the Assistant Principal and RJ Coordinator. A major incident involving Javier included a leaked group chat which included sarcastic comments and unfavorable photos of a classmate. The content of the chat was innocuous in that it did not involve anything risqué or inappropriate, but it was damaging in that it put a wedge in long-lasting friendships that Javier had maintained for many years before. Additionally, his parents began to distrust and limit his activity online. He was forbidden from using his phone at all, leaving him feeling frustrated and disconnected. During this time, Javier was not pleasant at school, showed a range of negative emotions and behaviors, and consistently asked if he could have his phone back.

After a full investigation of the incident, there were many one-on-one conversations with administrators, including the Assistant Principal(s) and the RJ Coordinator. These conversations explained Javier's restorative steps: no phone in school, limited phone time at home, reflection/discussion time during nutrition and lunch, campus beautification, and an apology letter. Javier was happy to complete these activities but lingered in the office especially when it

was time for us to sit and talk with him one-on-one. These conversations allowed us to begin getting to the bottom of why Javier behaved in certain ways in school, particularly in spaces where he was encouraged by his friends. Javier cited the desire to be accepted by others when recounting why he contributed to a group message he knew was not appropriate or kind. This admission was abrupt and while it may seem somewhat typical for a high school student, it spoke volumes. Javier frequently reminded us that he was not a "bad kid". It was obvious that he valued our opinions of him and wanted to show us that he was more than just this incident. Through discussion, we saw how great of an individual he was. Additionally, he saw that his mistake did not define him in the eyes of adults at school, which left him feeling relieved. Javier continues to check in at the office to this day, letting administrators know about his grades, outside life, etc. The relationships Javier built during a tough time have grown into extremely positive supports for him while on campus.

Omid

You could hear the clips on the bottom of Omid's bicycle shoes coming each day as he walked into the main office. His daily routine included coming in to wish us a good morning, dropping off his clothing for later, and making sure that he had eaten his breakfast for the day. Omid was obsessed with riding his bike and participated in rides all over the greater Los Angeles area with people of all ages. Omid looked to this as a form of community for him, one that is much more positive than the other options he may have had in his neighborhood. Omid took major risks, pushed himself to his physical limits, and was a daredevil to put it mildly. He has had road rash from falls, has been hit by a car, and has flipped over his handlebars numerous times. His thinking matched—Omid is a student who was willing to say the quiet thing out loud

— even at the risk of making others uncomfortable. Plain and simple: if you put rules into play and could not explain them to Omid, he would challenge and question you until you could or, on some occasions, could not.

Omid was a student who would talk to mostly anyone; he did not belong to a clique. He had a small pool of friends, but he would acknowledge that he knew he was a solo act. Omid saw beyond the drama of high school and had the perspective of someone much older than his years. Omid experienced several extremely negative and traumatic experiences in his life. Unfortunately, school has caused him trauma, too. Many of these rough personal situations caused Omid to be the "man" of the house — even when he was of middle school age. This taught Omid that he had to be on edge and ready to protect himself and others at the drop of a hat. When in school, however, these behaviors caused him to clash with adults and develop a reputation of being a "troublemaker" or someone who was "not the right fit for our school." He even ran into some difficulties becoming more comfortable with his current school administration and instructional team. Still, he pushed through.

One of Omid's best qualities was that he was always willing to reflect and apologize. His reactions were sometimes severe and disrespectful; there is no denying this. Omid has cursed at fellow students, gone off on adults (or in the vicinity of adults), and has walked out of class or off campus on numerous occasions. What not everyone saw, though, was Omid reflecting afterward. Omid was known to sit alone for lengths of time, ruminating on what he could have done differently. In certain circumstances, administrators have found Omid alone and in tears over the way he handled a situation. Omid was a deeply emotional and reflective person who worked hard to get better at everything he did or endeavored to do.

Omid's intellect caught the attention of a particular teacher who provided him with a philosophical text about doing self-work. He shared that this was a personal favorite of his that helped shape him into the adult he had become. Omid carried this book around and spoke of it as though it was his personal Bible. Omid often cited wanting to improve himself, mostly for his mother and siblings—but admitted that he did not always know which tools could help get him there. He struggled with being reactionary. He worked on controlling his fight-or-flight impulses (and knew a great deal about this physiological reaction from riding his bike on dangerous roads and terrain). Studying the nature of this reaction helped him gain an edge as a cyclist. The more he understood how to control his own psyche in that setting, the better he got at riding. As such, Omid appreciated the conversational piece of Restorative Practices put in place for him to take advantage of at our school because they allowed him to tamper his own negative emotions. He loved to learn—and when the learning was about himself, he was even more resolute.

Omid was a senior participant who had spent a significant amount of time in the school site's main office over the course of his high school career. As a student, Omid struggled with following the rules, often asking the purpose of any rule that seemed arbitrarily prescribed to students. Omid struggled to remain in class, stay on task, and manage his frustrations in the classroom. Rather than cause a full spectacle, Omid often chose to leave class and do his own thing. Over time, this earned him a reputation as someone who may not be "cut out" for a Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) High School.

Outside of school, Omid also had much stress placed on him. He lived with his mother and sisters and was the sole male in the house. Omid worked to support himself, made sure he got himself to and from school and work each day, checked in on his family, and still found time

to participate in cycling. Omid's soul and experiences significantly surpassed his age. He has been in and out of court over domestic matters and has shed many tears over the trajectory of certain parts of his life. It is not hard to see why Omid struggled at times within the confines of the "traditional" school environment. Omid had the most difficulty abiding by rules intended to keep order solely for the sake of order. Typically, his challenging of the system remained largely non-disruptive. Still, he was not perfect. He made choices that were not mature or safe, which is how we got to know him so well as an administration team.

Omid was referred to the office for non-violent offenses, but he also was referred for having items on campus that were not safe. As such, these items were taken from Omid despite his best efforts to assure us that he would not utilize them while at school. We worked diligently with Omid to help him understand that, although he is very self-sufficient, he must also learn how to exist in society in a way that is productive and not harmful to his own well-being or freedoms. This idea is complicated in itself. Talking it out and diving into the complicated reality of these opposing ideas is another beast altogether.

Through numerous discussions and with much patience, Omid began to hold these complicated realities in juxtaposition with one another. He realized that he could be a fully independent and unique individual while still following societal rules that could help him succeed in life. He had an inherent meter to determine who was speaking to him in a patronizing or judgmental way, and he cited that until he arrived at this school, this is what most of his other school discipline experiences felt like. Omid valued the open-door policy his school administrators had. He seized the opportunity to learn from, ask opinions of, and challenge the

thinking of adults often. His insights have greatly informed the findings of this study. Additionally, he has unknowingly influenced some changes to policies at his school site.

Catherine

Cat's demeanor was unmistakably sweet although she was somewhat shy and kept mostly to herself and her friends. Cat was a student at our sister middle school and created friendships that have lasted since her younger teenage years. Cat was extremely interested in hair and makeup; she came to school each day making sure her look was perfect with extra products in tow just in case. During breaks, you could find Cat in the bathroom helping her friends with their hair or makeup or just giggling and gossiping in a very contagious way. Cat was easy to talk to, quick to think deeply in a situation, and deeply compassionate once you got past her somewhat shy demeanor.

Cat grew up in Los Angeles not too far from the school site. As a big sister, she was protective, gave good advice, and always made sure that she thought ahead about what her younger sister could possibly need. This is not to say that Cat did not have an edge; in fact, her edge came from her life experiences. Cat was familiar with loss on a deeper level as she lost her mother at a young age. Although she had a stepmother and step-sisters, she still viewed herself as a "mom" to her younger sister and did her best to support her father when she could. It was clear to see that Cat inherited the loving and caring qualities of a parent, but also the protective ones that sometimes got her into trouble at school. She admitted that, in these instances, she was the one who stressed her father out most. Cat was an extremely smart student who caught onto concepts in no time. She did not love the academic part of school nearly as much as she loved the

social part, but she could hold her own in both realms when she chose to, usually when her teachers made her feel welcomed.

In class, Cat had excellent ideas and insights, although she did not enjoy sharing her thoughts publicly or being put on the spot. It took time for Cat to feel trusting of others. At times, this created a clash between Cat and her teachers. When she was challenged or questioned, she quickly changed into a mode that helped her defend herself. At times, Cat became frustrated and spoke to adults or others in a way that did not seem aligned with who she was. She attributed this to feeling like people did not always try to get to know her or to understand that she felt uncomfortable with the entire class paying attention to her.

Not unlike many other teenagers, Cat sometimes got too caught up in drama. At times, this involved her in unnecessary situations at school that ended up with negative outcomes of varying degrees. Over the course of her time in high school, however, Cat grew immensely as an individual. Her frequent visits to the RJ/Assistant Principal office were frustrating for her at times, but she also saw them as important parts of her overall growth. Amid the raising of voices, tears, anger, and frustration, there was always a moment where it became clear that Cat acknowledged how her behavior could have been more mature. You could almost see this change in her face as she de-escalated.

Cat was a student who frequented the office on a near-daily basis. If not in the office, Cat was often pushed to class extremely late by campus aides or discovered while hiding out with her friends in the bathroom to avoid being in class. In discussion about why Cat avoided class/school, she often mentioned that she felt no distinct relationship with many of her teachers. Cat had a skill that allowed her to tell almost immediately if someone was being disingenuous

with her. Unfortunately, she has encountered a good number of these individuals during her school career, which has left a somewhat negative taste in her mouth. Cat was known to take advantage of visiting the office to avoid going to a class where she did not necessarily feel comfortable or accepted.

Over time, RJ supported Cat in taking shorter breaks, finding middle ground with certain teachers and staff, and keeping her grades up more consistently. Our discussions were some of the rawest, most honest discussions that were had with a student as an administrative team. This willingness to engage with us resulted in major growth in Cat's emotional awareness and control. Additionally, the relationships she had with trusted adults transformed into more positive and loving connections.

Justin

Justin was an extremely quick-witted and creative thinker. He spoke endlessly about his dreams of making music or movies and becoming famous. Additionally, Justin was a major soccer fan. As his teacher, I would often catch him propping his phone up behind his computer to watch soccer rather than engage in class. One thing about Justin was very clear: he was passionate and dedicated to the things he held dear and loved deeply. Justin was outgoing, could talk to nearly anyone at school, and made entire rooms crack up with his jokes. He was athletic, driven, and innately philosophical. In class, Justin was known to try to get the teacher off track, not with something trivial, but rather by asking deep questions about life, human nature, or the state of the world. Justin was often a student who brought a new perspective to the course texts or topics. He also challenged many ideas that were thought of as "traditional" and frequently asked questions about who decides what is "right" and what is "wrong." It was clear to see that

Justin's brain did stop thinking about the things he had an interest in, and, at times, this got him into difficult situations at school.

Justin was known to walk out of class without permission to take a call about an opportunity to play soccer, a job opportunity, or something else that was not directly related to school. Although he knew this was typically against the school rules, Justin would make decisions to invest in himself and his own interests anyway. When he was in class, Justin was a student who would likely be referred to as a "class clown." Though extremely smart, Justin often distracted himself and others. He was often referred out of class for joking around or making brash comments. Other times, Justin would walk out of class on his own to visit a friend elsewhere. He sometimes tried to get attention in ways that drew more negative responses than positive ones. These instances landed Justin in the office where the discussion inherently turned to his decision-making and impulse control.

Justin was involved in a handful of disciplinary-related discussions stemming from him walking out of class, speaking disrespectfully to another student and/or staff member, and misusing classroom materials. Justin was not a violent student, and really enjoyed having many others around him laughing at his goofy behavior. When done within the "rules" of school, even the adults appreciated his candor and quick wit. Unfortunately, this was not always the case, and Justin needed to be reminded of the expectations of the school somewhat frequently.

In high school, Justin has shown a great deal of growth. He credits some of this growth to a trip he took with his family to Mexico. He expressed that this trip changed his perspective on how much his family has done for him. For Justin, the seed was planted in Mexico with regard to how seriously he should be taking school. He admitted that sometimes he struggled to connect

this knowledge with his impulses, though. This was a continuous process for Justin. The impressive part of speaking with Justin was that he was always the one to first point out what he could have done differently or handled better. Although many times these admissions came with some final laughs or frustrations he needed to get out of his system, once Justin returned to a calmer state, his vulnerability allowed for strong, in-depth conversations.

Justin participated in Restorative Practices on several occasions, during which he became much more introspective and reflective about his own behavior. He admitted that he usually knows what he should do deep down, but that at times he feels he cannot control his actions. As an administration team, we worked with Justin a great deal on making sure that his actions matched what he knew was in his best interest. This was an ongoing process, but it is one that he cites a great deal when discussing his own personal growth and development. Although Justin was not completely free of any disciplinary referrals in his final year, Justin, his family, and our school administration were proud of the significant reduction in negative behaviors and discipline referrals.

Findings

The research questions aimed to gather baseline data on Black and Latine students' perceptions and experiences of RJ practices in an urban high school, as part of an exploratory study. Centering the voices of students who have been historically disciplined unfairly in the definition and understanding of RJ practices unveiled insights into systems often designed without their input. This approach acknowledged that these students may possess a unique lens, shaped by their experiences of inequity and injustice within educational settings. By prioritizing

their perspectives, schools can uncover critical nuances in how disciplinary practices are perceived and experienced, leading to more inclusive and effective RJ implementations.

Discerning Discipline: Students' Ability to Discern Between Punitive Discipline and RJ Practices

RJ sounds like a corny thing like for hippies, miss, but it actually kind of works—Cat

Student narratives highlighted a clear distinction between the retributive nature of traditional discipline and the reconciliatory approach of RJ. This discernment underscores a critical awareness among students regarding the intent and impact of different disciplinary strategies on their school experience and personal development. Traditional disciplinary actions—characterized by detentions, exclusions, and other forms of punitive measures—were perceived negatively by students, often leading to feelings of embarrassment, frustration, and a sense of being unjustly surveilled. These critiques highlighted a broader dissatisfaction with disciplinary systems that prioritize punishment over personal growth and understanding.

The value placed on being heard and participating in a process aimed at mutual understanding and reconciliation emerged strongly in the student narratives. This preference for RJ over punitive discipline suggested that students are more inclined toward approaches that utilize meaningful engagement and understanding in resolving conflicts. Justin started off by explaining that RJ is "a way for people to get things right." When I asked what he meant by "right" he explained that it was a way for "everyone to say what they need to say and get it all out there." Justin further explained that, in the past, "[he] was told that [he] had to do a punishment" and that "they basically told me oh well, you're in trouble, be quiet." I followed up by asking how the experience was different with Restorative Practices, to which Justin

responded: "here I can talk. You let me talk. Everyone gets to say something and that's how things get solved basically."

Omid explained that Restorative Practices are "better discipline." When I asked him to explain further, he mentioned that he was used to schools handing out/assigning detention or suspensions. Omid has also had other meetings at other schools where he was told that he needed to sit and listen when the adults spoke to him because he was the child. He explained, "That was rude and honestly, I felt like … screw them." Here, however, Omid appreciates the ability to speak. Just "to speak, dude" is enough for Omid to feel more welcomed to the process. When asked, Omid defined Restorative Practices as "Umm . . . hmm . . . this is serious. This is a way to make things right . . . for both sides. Like I mean, someone helps and both sides get what they want out of it." I followed up by asking Omid what he means by "getting what they want." He explained: "Ok, maybe not what they want in all of life, that would be crazy [laughing] . . . but it creates a place for people to say what they need to say and agree to leave each other alone or just be cool. Just whatever it takes to not have a fight or conflict again."

Javier's explanation of RJ was: "It kind of feels like we are doing the opposite of what other schools do maybe? I don't know miss . . . I don't know how to describe it." After some probing questions, I was able to get Javier to explain that he thought RJ was "when everyone had a big meeting to get to the bottom of something." By everyone, Javier meant the student, "the admin, the parents, and anyone else who knows about what happened." When I asked Javier what the group needed to "get to the bottom of," he explained that the goal was to:

> Make everyone happy again by letting everyone talk and to come up with a plan together
>
> for that to happen. Like sometimes, the student will need to do certain things like be in a

reflection meeting or write a letter if they did something wrong. Then the person who was hurt or whatever, they get the letter, and they can forgive the person maybe. They might not forgive them, but they understand that the apology was real, and they agree to be nice to them.

The process of developing discernment between RJ practices and traditional punitive measures did not unfold instantly for students. This nuanced understanding and preference for RJ over punitive discipline emerged gradually, as students experienced and reflected on the impacts of each approach on their school experience and personal growth. For Cat, it was important to note that she used to think RJ was "stupid" and did not take it seriously. She acknowledged, however, that being pushed into an uncomfortable situation and participating in the girls group helped her grow significantly. She also acknowledged that it helped her learn how to better communicate with others outside of the confines of the group. This allowed her to make new friends in classes or outside during breaks.

Omid described a similar journey of personal experiences, where initial skepticism or unfamiliarity with RJ practices gave way to appreciation. Since Omid's school's RJ practices do not isolate students, Omid was placed in a situation where he was asked to engage in discussion with the RJ Coordinator. Omid was not fond of this method at first. He wanted to "be left alone". However, having the time to sit and go through the questions or talking points in discussion is what "was chill about it". It took time for Omid to come around on this method. He explained: "I'ma be real miss, if I just had the sheet, I would have thrown that thing out and not thought about it." Sitting with an adult who eased Omid into the conversation, approached him as an

equal, and exercised much patience allowed Omid to slowly build trust and open up. His behavior and overall well-being greatly benefitted from talking things out with an adult.

Javier's initial resistance to RJ practices shed light on the challenges that come with the process. Over time, however, Javier came around to the method and became grateful that he had the support he was given. Initially skeptical and frustrated by the mandated reflection time, which he viewed as a just another punitive interruption of his social interactions, Javier's journey exemplifies a transformative engagement with RJ. Javier did not enjoy being in reflection time initially. This was because he did not have all his friends in class with him, so his break times were reserved for socializing. Since this was something he valued, he felt resentment towards the reflection time and the RJ Coordinator. He was frustrated that this caused him to miss out on time with his friends and he was rather dismissive when anyone else in the reflection space tried to speak to him.

However, over the course of the time he was in reflection, he realized that "some people [he was friends with] were the reason he was there in the first place". Javier learned this through his conversations with the RJC, but also through hearing other students reflect openly. Slowly, Javier realized that this method was more effective in getting him to pause and change. Javier's experience vividly illustrates the potential for RJ to foster self-awareness and accountability, making it a preferred approach among students for navigating conflicts and learning from their actions.

Omid's reflection also highlighted a significant shift in his perception and appreciation of RJ practices, particularly the value of reflection time as opposed to traditional punitive measures. Initially skeptical and dismissive of reflection activities, which he encountered in middle school

as mere worksheets, Omid contrasted these experiences with his engagement in RJ practices that involved interactive and introspective elements. He underscored the ineffectiveness of detention and solitary worksheet completion, which lacked any form of meaningful interaction or guidance from adults. In contrast, Omid recognized the benefit of being prompted with probing questions during reflection sessions, which encouraged a deeper self-examination of his actions and their implications.

This process, facilitated through both discussion and written reflection, led him to see the utility of articulating his thoughts on paper, allowing for a more profound engagement with feelings of responsibility. He appreciated that reflection time because "now that I think about it, they're actually pretty helpful" because:

Instead of just thinking about it, you actually write it down. And then, I don't know, sometimes it depends on how you feel about it— the guilt kind of kicks in. And that's where you just, I don't know, you just start thinking about it a lot. You realize what you did, yeah, and how you could have just done something completely different.

For more specificity, I next asked students: "What have your experiences with Restorative Practices (restorative circles, reflection time, accountability projects, etc.) been like? Please describe in as much detail as possible." All students took a moment to collect themselves and recall their experiences. Students were pleased to discuss their experiences with RJ. Through observation of body language and expressions, it was clear that students felt apprehension while discussing their punitive experiences. However, while discussing their RJ experiences, students' overall demeanors became softer.

Each student recounted participating in reflection sessions with the Restorative Justice Coordinator (RJC) during their lunch breaks. Although this meant sacrificing their free time, they came to see these sessions as valuable opportunities for personal growth. They particularly appreciated the chance to discuss their actions and reflect deeply on their roles within their school, community, and society. The dedicated time allowed the RJC and Accountability Project (AP) facilitators to listen and guide students through meaningful conversations. This nurturing environment facilitated personal development under the guidance of adults who shared their own vulnerabilities and mistakes. For instance, Javier expressed liking the opportunity to hear that adult (APs and RJCs) "were not always good and had to apologize and stuff too when they were kids."

Javier also reflected on the success of Restorative Practices as they pertain to his decision-making. For Javier, a strong plan to help him stay on track was integral to his overall behavioral and academic success. The most important part for him, though, was that he got to be a part of the discussion and creation of the plan: "I was sort of treated like an adult even though I messed up this time," adding: "I think it's good because if you sign something like a contract or a waiver that it pushes you to not get in trouble." Javier also added that it is hard not to stick to something when you get to be a part of its creation. "Yeah, I mean how are you going to not do the things you said you would do?" Javier asked.

Dedicated space and time for the RJC and AP to hear students out, coach them through tough emotions, and acknowledge the real-life implications of their actions helped students contextualize how their choices and behaviors could affect them on a larger scale. All students noted that they wanted to "be pulled from class" so they could finish the conversations because

"it was short at lunch" — especially if there were multiple students in reflection time. Although students appreciated the existence of reflection practices, they each expressed wanting more time and more frequent opportunities to engage in said practices for the sake of being thorough.

In reflecting on his experiences with RJ, Javier articulated the value of collective effort, stating "it takes a village." He stated the importance of having everyone involved to solve problems, emphasizing the necessity of consensus and clear agreement on the terms of resolution — "to make it better, we need to make sure we agree with each other and agree on what terms we should follow." When I asked him to clarify, Javier explained that he felt all members of an incident should be included in the post-incident discussion.

Students should not just be talked to or at, but should be given the opportunity to provide context, "explain if something happened at home," or to provide ideas of how they can repair the harm they have done. During our second interview, Javier referenced a specific incident in which he was involved. He realized on his own that he was somewhat forced to participate in something he knew could be problematic, but that he did it so that he would be accepted by his friends. In his meeting after the incident, he was given time to explain what happened, dissect his thinking, and explain to the administration and his parents why he made the poor choice.

Javier's personal experience illustrates the value of a participatory approach where all parties involved in an incident, particularly students, are given the chance to contribute to the post-incident dialogue. This includes allowing students to provide context for their actions, such as personal circumstances or pressures that may have influenced their decisions, and to suggest ways to amend the harm caused. Through this narrative, Javier highlighted the importance of understanding and teamwork in RJ to achieve meaningful resolution.

Unfortunately, meaningful participation in the conflict resolution process is not always a guarantee. Cat had a lot to say about the RJ process. In one particular instance, another student involved Cat in an unfavorable situation. Since it was something that could have caused potential harm, all students involved were given similar restorative steps to take. For Cat, this felt unfair for a few reasons. First, Cat asked, "yeah like why did we get told our punishment? We didn't even get to calm down and talk, he only saw us when we were heated, and that's how he just judged the situation" (speaking of a Home Office administrator). She added, "Like why didn't you guys get to help us in that situation?" Cat expressed that she would have preferred if the AP/RJ team worked with her because "he made a punishment for us just based on the written down rules but why didn't he sit down with us and ask us what has been going on?" For Cat, it was important to give context that she had been previously targeted/attacked and that her actions were taken to protect herself.

Cat said she felt "like a little kid" because she did not get to participate in the discussion at all until the set of consequences were established. By then, her input was not taken into consideration:

> Like it was just kind of like we were told we had to do this because we were involved, but you know we were trying to avoid that. And then when we end up in reflection time it feels like . . . why would we get the same punishment as the person who started the fight with us? And I know you and Mr. knew this, but they didn't know it. They told you to tell us the punishment, they didn't talk to us directly and I feel like if he had let us explain more he would have got it.

I asked Cat to try to pinpoint specifically what she felt could have been handled better.

She explained,

> We had to stick up for ourselves, but we also had to get a punishment and I don't think
>
> that's fair. Like, I think everything needs to be talked about more to understand and get to
>
> the bottom of why something happened, I mean, I know we didn't do nothing at all, but it
>
> just seems like sometimes the person who was attacked or whatever, why do they have to
>
> be part of RJ in the same way as the person who did it?

Cat's narrative brought to light the challenges students face when they feel their voices are not heard or considered in the aftermath of incidents. In her account, Cat and others were implicated in a situation that escalated, leading to a set of predetermined steps handed down by the administration. Without an initial dialogue to understand the context or emotions of the situation, Cat felt frustrated and silenced.

This research into students' perceptions of RJ practices at an urban high school uncovered an appreciation for the shift from traditional punitive measures to restorative approaches. Students demonstrated a strong preference for engaging meaningfully with adults who guided them through the RJ processes. This guided engagement allowed them to see the value in reflecting and discussing their behaviors within a supportive environment, leading to a significant shift in how they view discipline.

Relational Trust and Deep Dialogue: Key Drivers of Social-Emotional Growth in Restorative Justice Programs for Black and Latine Youth

In the following sections, student narratives addressed research question 2: What aspects of a Restorative Justice program are associated with Black and Latine youth perceptions regarding the betterment of social-emotional awareness and application in the restorative

process? Students identified specific elements of the RJ process that were most effective for them: relational trust and the importance of deep dialogues to explore meaningful avenues for growth.

Relational Trust

Trust is a foundational element of any strong relationship. For Omid, trust means:

Just not judging me, dude. Just letting me be me, and I know that can be hard if I do something bad, but don't start with the bad thing as an attack. We can discuss the bad thing I did, or I might do. But let me come to that as a person on my own and then we can talk.

Trust was a major factor in getting to know, or even having access to, Omid. At our school, he felt as though he could go to a small handful of trusted adults who were innately kind and did not judge him, often offering him time and space for discourse. These adults have worked through what was at first an extremely tough exterior. With patience and dedication, these adults proved to *him* that they could be trusted. More than anything, these individuals religiously told Omid and other staff members that they trusted him to be an amazing individual and student, no matter if they had seen a less-than-favorable side of him on occasion.

Omid's story emphasized the importance of non-judgmental support. He wanted to be heard and accepted for what he was and did not want to be judged based on what he had done in the past. The patient and committed adults who saw past his "tough exterior" to see him as an amazing individual demonstrated how trust creates a safe space for students to come out, talk about what happened, and grow as a person.

Omid let me know that many teachers and staff have previously told him "I've heard about you," as a sort of threat. From there, he found it hard to connect with these adults enough to gain their trust or approval. Additionally, he explained that this made him "not want to care" about those classes, as he felt like teachers had already decided who he was in their minds. One of the biggest obstacles to trust is pre-judgment, as Omid learned when teachers said they had heard about him. These types of interactions send a message to students that their identity is predetermined based on past behavior, which discourages authentic relationships that foster student growth and development.

Still, many staff members reacted negatively to Omid's behavior. Omid was kicked out, sent to detention, sent home, excluded from class activities, not welcome to extracurriculars. What Omid appreciated about his school site was the ability to be heard. Even more so, Omid understood that with trust comes flexibility and patience. Restorative Practices do not change behaviors, relationships or even fully repair negative situations overnight. The process takes time, and Omid was willing to be patient, sit with emotions, and acknowledge how he could have done better. When discussing his previous experiences with RJ, Omid appreciated that "every cool teacher . . . [you have just], in a way, let it slide with regard to the exact rules and not like actually got me into big trouble immediately. So it gives . . . it gave me a chance to reflect on it." When asked if all staff members at the school site made him feel comfortable, he retorted with a laugh and a "hell no."

Similarly, Cat expressed that she frequently excused herself to the office to talk to the AP/RJ team because she did not feel as though she had that trust with many other adults in the building. When asked why this was, Cat explained:

You don't always know what someone is going through if you don't really have the time

to get to know them. And then you don't know what to tell them if you don't really talk to

them or trust them. And they can't really tell you what to do, or you might not listen if

you don't trust them.

Unfortunately, Cat explained that only a few of her teachers in her educational career ever really

made her feel comfortable and like they could be trusted.

Cat's preference for approaching the AP/RJ team highlighted the significance of building

trust in relationships. Trust goes beyond mere feelings of safety; it involves having faith in

someone's genuine concern, understanding, and empathy. Cat's capability to address her

emotions and engage in open discussions with the RJ team emphasized how trust enables

emotional regulation and productive conversations. She explained that to de-escalate, she relied

on going to the office for a talk or even just a break and that it would:

have to be the three of us (student, AP, and RJ). Yeah . . . That would calm me down . . .

like you talking and telling me what was wrong about what happened and stuff. And I'll

tell you because I feel comfortable because we always talk 'cause I'm always here."

When I followed up by asking if anyone would be able to de-escalate her in conversation, Cat

explained that "it definitely has to be somebody that I know well."

Javier's interview was particularly interesting in that he was the first student to suggest

speaking directly to a counselor/therapist as a means of support. Javier explained that he

appreciated the fact that our school had so many counselors because "the counselors can hug

you, calm you down, and they like, well you could, you could speak to them, and they won't tell

anyone. It's like a secret between them and you." When I asked why he felt the need for the

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discussions to remain secret, Javier explained that he wanted to know he could trust the person not to immediately call his parents (unless, of course, he was in danger). He also expressed that the counselors typically help walk him through situations so that he did not feel overwhelmed.

Javier explained that he likes how the AP and RJ check in with him on how he is doing and offer additional support as necessary:

> Yeah. Like, let's see, like if it's a bad day, maybe a counselor can help me out and I can express his feelings to the counselor. And with that, I can resolve a problem and understand why I acted like this and that.

Javier explained that he felt comfortable having these conversations, but that they were not always offered as an option with a trusted adult. On those occasions, he often shut down. As a result, he was sent out of class on numerous occasions without a teacher ever stopping to ask if he was ok or if he would like to talk. To connect and problem solve, Javier needed a consistent foundation of trust with an adult.

Justin noted that he really felt strongly about the power of connection, even citing a situation he had with me over 2 years ago. Justin explained how I was his teacher and that I did support him, but that "now we have a different interaction. Like [then] I'd get in trouble. Get mad. Get in trouble. Get mad. Curse you off. Storm out. Whatever happened." Justin reflected on the fact that he did not trust me enough to engage with me in discussion at first. He pointed out that the relationship with any teacher in a classroom setting limits one-on-one time and feels "one dimensional". This is how Justin felt about me at first, but "now, after all our personal conversations it's different because now we got to know each other more." This explanation led me to ask Justin if he felt we needed more counselors on site. While Justin admitted that they

would be helpful, he was more invested in the idea that "every staff member should feel like I can trust them." At the end of our first interview, Justin wanted me to leave with one major takeaway: students need to trust and be trusted at school for them to feel safe and accepted.

Justin could sense when someone was being fake towards him and he admitted that he disengaged with anyone who treated him that way because they made "no significant impact" on him or his personal growth. Justin continued to say the phrase "deeper connection" in numerous responses — so much so that he even apologized for repeating himself so many times. Relational trust takes time. Students often struggle to find someone at school who they feel as though they can trust and speak with openly. All students cited this as a major boundary preventing them from connecting deeply with members of their school community.

Students also cited that class time does not always lend itself as a space to develop trust with adults as there were numerous concepts to cover and typically other students in the room. To build trust, students noted that they needed a space to converse with staff outside of official class time. Additionally, students explained that trust takes time and that sometimes it felt as though teachers skimmed over the foundational elements of relationship building with their students. Cat, Omid, Javier, and Justin all expressed having negative experiences with staff members who did not take the time to get to know them. They explained that schools have always done a great job of implementing expectations for how students should treat school staff, but that the reverse typically seemed like a secondary concern.

Deep Dialogues

I think . . . Obviously, I keep emphasizing it. Deep conversations. Not punishments. —Justin

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Student narratives shed light on the influence that meaningful and profound dialogues exert on the personal and emotional development of students. Omid referenced the fact that the people he had trust in were people he had "talked to a great deal." In the school setting, Omid spent much time talking to his school counselor, to the Assistant Principal/researcher, the RJ coordinator, and a small handful of trusted teachers on site. Omid references the importance of the conversation(s) "getting deep into emotions" because "a lot of people are suffering with . . . their emotions . . . with dealing with their emotions." Omid understood that dialogue between any two individuals is a meaningful tool for expressing and unpacking emotions. Omid was a student who was deeply reflective—sometimes to the point where his entire day was dictated by a choice he made and how it subsequently made himself or others feel.

Omid placed great importance on engaging in conversations that explored emotions, which highlights the therapeutic nature of dialogue in RJ practices. He acknowledged that numerous individuals face difficulties in effectively managing their emotions, and engaging in meaningful dialogue provides an avenue to express, comprehend, and navigate these challenges. Omid's contemplation on how his days could be shaped by emotional reactions to his decisions underscores the significance of these dialogues. Omid thrived on conversations that surpassed superficial interactions, enabling a more profound comprehension of himself and his actions.

Omid's main point of connection with others was typically similar interests in hobbies. However, Restorative Practices made him realize that those connections were not always "real." He "was always taught to think before he spoke," but "it wasn't until just recently that [he's] actually taken it into massive consideration." Omid regrets that he spent so much time closing

himself off to people who could have been potential connections or friends if he had just thought about how to better communicate with them.

Omid began to cry during the second interview when I let him know that I had seen incredible growth in him over the past few years. He admitted that "sometimes he feels like his growth is not enough," but also that he was proud of himself for pushing his previously strict boundaries. Communicating with administrators shed light on the importance of "a deeper connection" with others. As a senior, Omid finally felt like he was excited about participating in his senior events. He explained that he finally felt like he was less of an outcast. Talking and opening up opened many doors for his social and personal growth alike.

Deep dialogues allowed a space for students to unpack and analyze what was truly happening in a situation. An adult guiding or participating in this deep dialogue creates a space for meaningful questions to be asked and insightful advice to be given. Additionally, it provides a space for students to give context to situations they may have experienced or have been involved in.

It is important to note that the opportunity for deep dialogue offered Omid a crucial platform to process and reflect on broader social issues. This space enabled him to articulate and make sense of his own experiences within the larger context of systemic injustices. Since Omid was such a philosophical individual, he also thought about how systems outside of school were not set up to support him or others like him. As a student who spent much time in downtown Los Angeles cycling through some of the toughest neighborhoods, he saw systemic racism and the mistreatment of civilians by police first-hand. Some might have called Omid "street smart," but he was really just observant of his surroundings and the many different systems in which he

exists as a Latine male each day. Omid did not shy away from acknowledging racism, bias, or mistreatment. In our final interview, Omid made connections between traditional school discipline policies and laws enforced by the police. The discussion swiftly turned to the School-to-Prison Pipeline (although he was unaware of this exact term as a studied phenomenon), with Omid noting that "some of my homies have been kicked out of school already and told they would be in jail." They always get kicked out "without being able to talk to the people at the school, too. It's . . . well, we're in school, so I'll say it's messed up, Miss."

Reflection as a Core Component of Deep Dialogues

The process of reflection was integral to the effectiveness of deep dialogues. Through reflective practices, such as thoughtful questioning and guided self-examination, students like Omid found opportunities to consider their actions and emotions deeply, leading to meaningful insights:

> I mean again, some people, for those people who were doing the—going to prison or something like that, they don't get to reflect in their own comfort zone, you know? They have to . . . and they're reflecting somewhere where it's just . . . you know, you don't get to sit outside or anything like that. I guess it helps me appreciate more of the chances I have to improve and become a better person.

Omid understood that these opportunities for deep introspection and reflection may not always exist. Thus, he tried to take full advantage of these instances to help the lessons stick. He admitted that the lessons became concrete for him through the conversations he had with adults to flesh out all his ideas.

What Omid appreciated about his opportunity to reflect is that he is not just "told" what to do: "I mean before, like in middle school, I used to find it kind of dumb. We had those reflection sheets." In other schools, Omid was given detention, where he sat in silence with no interaction with an adult or other students. Omid did not find it effective to quietly fill out a worksheet on his own and come up with action steps by himself. Omid appreciated that important probing questions were asked of him, either in discussion or on reflection documents, that helped him to really dig deeper. He appreciated that reflection time because "now that I think about it, they're actually pretty helpful". When I asked Omid to explain this, he said:

> Instead of just thinking about it, you actually write it down. And then, I don't know, sometimes it depends how you feel about it, the guilt kind of kicks in . . . And that's where you just, I don't know, you just start thinking about it a lot. You realize what you did, yeah and how you could have just done something completely different.

From this reflection spawned the opportunity for Omid to engage in meaningful conversation with the RJC or school administrators.

It took a while for Omid to realize how Restorative Practices informed his decisions outside of school. As noted previously, Omid's life outside of school was stressful at times. He recalled a moment where he was able to utilize skills we went over in reflection time in his everyday life: "It was like . . . for me to like . . . if it wasn't for my mom to step in front of me, I probably would not have reflected right there on the spot. But when I see her face, it makes me feel a different way." Omid explained that the thinking and writing he had done about the importance of protecting his family and making them proud had motivated him to be better in

difficult situations. He thanked us, noting "and that's the whole point of what we discuss. Like whenever you wanna do this or that…no. Those conversations changed me in a way."

In discussions about using these skills in real life, Omid admitted that before, "I would have been the first one to swing," but now he understands the significance of his actions, explaining that he has restraint now. Additionally, Omid has learned how to think about the potential repercussions of his actions: "Yeah, because it's either one bad hit to him or to me . . . and that could be it." Although this realization was brash, for Omid to consider the potential consequences and internalize them to change his behavior was extremely mature of him.

The scenarios Omid was able to work on in discussion with the school administrators helped him make better choices for himself and his safety in real time. At the end of our last interview, Omid reflected on how he has changed, but acknowledged that he is also still a work in progress. He worked hard to block out the noise from others, to avoid potential pitfalls, and to push himself to be accountable. With an inherently healing-centered focus, Omid stated that the biggest change in him was that "whatever I do, is just for me now . . . to make me better."

Community Circles Provide Space for Deep Dialogues

Community circles with a facilitator, talking piece, and clear expectations create a space for students to communicate in a way that feels safe and protected from traditional punitive threats. By setting clear expectations and norms, circle facilitators ensure that students express themselves in ways that are respectful and productive. These circles need scaffolding and clear guidelines to be effective and give students the voice they typically would not get in other punitive disciplinary situations.

Cat's interview uncovered a clear need for students to feel belonging as soon as we began talking. As a junior, Cat was recommended to be a part of a newly launched girl group on campus. This group was run by a counselor and a school psychologist. For Cat, this was not ideal at first. She wanted nothing to do with the group or meeting anyone new at school. She felt like her close friends were enough. However, after much persuasion, she joined. In discussion, she explained what eventually won her over:

> They would teach us . . . ok so . . . hold on, it's been a minute. Ok so, they would go around and ask us stuff and make sure that we have a way to get to know each other. Like one thing we like or one thing we don't like . . . just to get into a palace where we could talk. And then each person would say one thing they like and one thing they dislike and would all agree or disagree with that. And that's how we got the conversation going.

To Cat, the success of the group was first attributed to the fact that the facilitators "were really nice" and took the time to get to know each of the participants as individuals.

As sessions progressed, the group members began looking forward to it. Cat explained that this allowed students:

> To find people that way . . . that, like . . . you may agree on stuff or disagree on stuff and it allows you to see . . . you know . . . like I didn't know they've been through this too. I didn't know they had this happen too. Just stuff like that.

Common ground and being vulnerable created a clear sense of community within the group. Cat did not realize that she had little to no sense of belonging on campus until she finally felt like she did. She found it "weird" that for such a small school, there were so many different cliques. As someone who has experienced significant loss and other related traumas, Cat enjoyed knowing:

That other people have the same stuff going on . . . Like you can have them in a group

and let them talk, and maybe they will be friends. Like, we want to talk to teenagers that

can help us and be like "Oh yeah, I had that, too." Or adults that let us share things, but

they won't get us in trouble for it or whatever.

Feeling a sense of community where she was not judged was an important part of Cat's growth.

She attributes a great deal of her maturity to the discussions she had within the group and

explained that she would be willing to join another group one day because "some people, they

don't have someone to talk to, like a friend or a sister" and she would like to provide that for

others.

Lastly, Cat acknowledged that the one-on-one conversations, coupled with her group

sessions, caused her to start feeling sad about graduating. It took time, but once Cat felt like a

genuine part of the community, she appreciated it and knew that the real world will not always

offer the same support. Still, she knew that the skills she learned while at school would be

powerful tools once she is in college and beyond.

When I asked Cat to reflect on how the work we have done has helped her avoid conflict,

she explained that it has changed the speed at which she responds, as well as the way she

responds: "Ummmm . . . ok so . . . How you guys changed me. I mean sometimes I just step back

from the situation and think 'Is it really worth it?" We laughed together about the fact that she

had to admit that I was right for once, but Cat quickly refocused:

Ha, no I know but really. Like sometimes it's like "snap out of it!" so I really try. I mean

in certain other situations, obviously I may still have my moments, but you have taught

me to pause and think before I go and do something. And miss, I feel like we all have our,

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like, "bad" teenage years. And I feel like I did have that at one point, At one point I didn't

care about stuff. And our conversations have helped me figure out like . . . let me think

about this. Like why am I doing this?

Cat earned the skill of pausing and reflecting through the many conversations we have had with

her over the years.

Justin also recommended deeper discourse as a major element of building trust with

others both inside and outside of school. Justin explained that he felt "different" after our

interactions because "we connected in a deeper . . . Well, we had a deep connection. Especially

when we had that conversation about me coming back from Mexico. Yeah, I think that's what

excited me. Making these deep connections." Justin explained that he loved to make deeper

connections with adults who would hear him out, tell him when he's being unreasonable, and

give him some guidance to work through it. He attributed this comfort and trust for his ability to

open up and show "a side that doesn't often come out with people" to the RJC/AP or other

trusted adults.

Similarly, Justin expressed the power of having the time and space to speak to counselors

and administrators. As someone who liked to impress his peers, Justin admitted that the

conversations he had with trusted adults at school allowed him to be a more mature version of

himself. In reflecting, Justin explained that teenagers do not always take the opportunity to have

meaningful conversations with one another. This, to him, is a major reason for conflict between

individuals. When asked what could make his school's RJ program stronger, Justin repeatedly

cited deep conversations. Justin explained that the process in place now helps students to pause

and acknowledge their actions but leaves much to be desired when it comes to helping students

identify and name their feelings. He explained that, at times, he did not know the proper way to explain what he was feeling.

Since Justin chose to electively visit the administrators frequently, he was part of "conversations on a deeper level" that he attributes to his growth personally and emotionally. He also mentioned that, through talking to adults, students may begin to learn the skills to speak meaningfully to others about the issues that matter. From there, students may connect or bond with one another in ways that go deeper than just the surface. Justin understands that this communication has helped him to build bonds with his fellow classmates and soccer teammates and that they are all a part of a larger community/family as a result. Being part of the larger soccer community proved effective in strengthening Justin's accountability. He explained that "because I want to play soccer, I think it's good because it impacts you where you care. . . . Where . . . I'm trying to find the words . . . Where it hurts basically. Where it really matters." Justin never enjoyed feeling like he let his team down. This came as a result of having built a strong bond with his teammates both individually and as a community.

An incident that Justin was involved in also involved another soccer player on his team. He admitted that "when it initially happened, [he] was hiding his emotions because he didn't want people to see that [he] was embarrassed." He also felt "so exposed and weak and targeted" that he did not necessarily feel as though restorative processes would work. However, he obliged and admitted that "after our talk, we don't get along, we're not buddies, but I think there's that respect." As members of the same community, they offered each other the decency of honoring their commitments to remain cordial. They did this because they understood how a rift between them could affect the entire team and community. The lesson was learned through the pretext of

team unity, but communication allowed these individuals to make amends for the sake of the greater good, nonetheless.

Justin, too, started to think about the possible repercussions of his actions as a near-adult. From our discussions (as well as a significant incident from his second year in high school), Justin realized "what could happen in real life" and how careless actions could affect his future. Our scenario discussions with Justin were successful for him because they "provided real-life examples" for him to think through and consider the different outcomes. Walking Justin through these outcomes helped him develop the skill of pausing before he acts/reacts. Before, Justin said, "I was just being naive. I was just getting in trouble just to get in trouble. So, I wasn't thinking about the consequences."

Aside from working on possible scenarios, Justin did much work on pausing and trying to connect with what he was feeling. As an RJ/AP team, our discussions typically ask students to dig deeper until we get to the bottom of what is going on. Some individuals might see sitting in the office and talking to the administration team as a punishment, but Justin noted that "the most effective thing for me between us three has been that deep conversation. Okay, but that wasn't really a punishment. It just came out because . . . it was that side of me that never comes out much." Justin was intent on making sure to note that our discussions trained him to think differently on his own: "I think once people keep asking you those questions, you can sort of start doing that by yourself. Distinguish your emotions." Through consistency and care, Justin was able to center his focus on healing and personal growth rather than on carrying out traditional punishments. Justin continued to be a major proponent of one-on-one discussions:

Yeah. On a deeper level. Again. That talk we had. Those talks. It helped me think like a

man. Why am I doing this? The little kid would do this. Even the stuff I did last week.

This week. I wouldn't do that stuff again. I'm constantly growing. And I want to think in

a way that's more . . . I got this quote from somebody else. It was like you're either

helping yourself or you're not helping yourself. Yeah? So, every action you take

represents you. And that action that I took last year, last week. With Catie and her chair.

And Dominic's chair. I wouldn't do that again. It's constantly evolving. I'm constantly

evolving.

Justin's reflection on deep dialogues with school administrators highlighted his increased self-

awareness. By engaging in conversations that prompted him to think about his emotions and

actions, Justin began to recognize patterns in his behavior and understand his emotional triggers.

This insight allowed him to acknowledge his mistakes and recognize areas for personal growth,

illustrating the pivotal role of RJ in fostering a deeper understanding of oneself.

Justin's actions truly matched his words. His behavior incidents significantly decreased,

and he was proud of the fact that "[he] can now acknowledge when [he is] wrong." Even with

people he did not previously get along with, Justin realized that he "was better able to manage

those relationships. Maybe not get along, but better manage".

During a particularly meaningful discussion with Justin, he outlined a lesson he learned

while on a trip to Mexico with his parents:

Well, I think everyone has their own . . . I guess the journey you call it . . . of manhood.

My journey was going to Mexico and seeing the reality of my parents. And not just

people in Mexico, but millions of other people worldwide live in that same situation. It

just helps you think, "I'm blessed. And I'm 17 years old, not a kid. I'm a man." It's all

just spiraled into me, wanting to carry myself like a man. I still make mistakes, but it's

okay.

Self-compassion and a desire for personal betterment are skills that Justin pushed himself to

develop during our discussions.

After his previous incident in school, Javier thanked us for letting him explain himself.

He expressed feeling like "a high schooler finally" and was vocal about being proud that was

successful in explaining himself in front of adults. In our discussion, Javier expressed how that

conversation "changed [him] a lot." A simple meeting that created space for student voice helped

Javier to become more trusting of the process. It also helped him to feel like he belonged at the

school and that his "side of the story mattered." This is deeper than a discipline issue for Javier

and other students. Students are searching for answers and guidance to change their behaviors in

a more long-lasting way. Talking to the counseling and administration team allowed Javier to

develop a strong rapport with these staff members. Javier felt as though the overall counseling

and administration team allowed him a space to get to the bottom of what was going on in his

head—even when he was not sure what is going on himself. His favorite part was that he "didn't

feel judged" and knows we are always here if he needs us.

The narratives collectively affirmed that deep dialogues are an integral component of RJ

practices, serving as a powerful tool for emotional expression, conflict resolution, and personal

growth. Through these meaningful interactions, students can explore and experience social-

emotional learning and development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings underscored an appreciation for the shift from traditional punitive measures to restorative approaches. Students demonstrated a strong preference for engaging meaningfully with adults who guided them through the RJ processes within a supportive environment, leading to a shift in how they view discipline. The findings also pointed to the foundational importance of relational trust and deep dialogues in creating an environment where students feel safe to share and engage deeply with RJ practices.

Trust, built on non-judgmental interactions and recognition of each student's inherent worth, was crucial for fostering open communication and understanding. Trust, too, was essential for resolving conflicts and exploring solutions. The role of trusted adults was paramount in guiding students through their emotional learning growth and problem-solving processes.

Deep dialogues, characterized by their therapeutic nature and reflective components, offered students a tool for emotional expression and understanding, leading to personal insights and growth. These dialogues, whether 1-on-1 or within community circles and group sessions, facilitated students' personal growth and inspired positive behavioral changes beyond the school walls.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 4 focused on the experiences of Black and Latine students with Restorative Practices at a free public charter school in Central Los Angeles. Student narratives centered the voices of youth within the RJ framework, offering a detailed overview of their points of view and previous experiences. Three research questions guided this study: 1. How do students at an urban high school perceive and experience RJ practices?, 2. Which elements of a RJ program align with urban students' perceptions of improved social-emotional awareness and application within the restorative process?, and 3. In what ways can student feedback shape and enhance Restorative Justice practices?

Seidman's (2006) three-part interview protocol allowed students to expound upon their experiences with Restorative Justice and provided a deeper understanding of how these practices were perceived by each participant. To reiterate, the first interview allowed students to recall their experiences and provide context about their overall perceptions of RJ practices. The second interview allowed students to delve deeper into their perceptions of improved social-emotional awareness and application within the restorative process. Lastly, the final interview provided a space for students to make meaning of their experiences. Students participated in formal interviews, but it is important to note that students also provided context through casual drop-ins, emails, and other naturally occurring discussions at the school site. This offered students a sense of agency over their own answers as they could add to or redact from their responses at any given time. Providing students with this freedom and agency also allowed them to demonstrate their investment in the study.

Chapter 4 first centered student vignettes to familiarize the reader with each participant's distinct background, personality, and history. These vignettes presented students as well-rounded and rich human beings rather than simply as students who have been in trouble at school. Each participant is a complex individual, and centering their stories first created a space to humanize the data and emphasize how student contributions are inextricably linked to their identities, experiences, and nuanced lives.

From there, the findings highlighted that students were able to discern how and why RJ is more effective and preferred for students than traditional punitive discipline practices. To elicit more specific answers of how students view Restorative Practices, I used the following research question as a guide: What aspects of a Restorative Justice program are associated with Black and Latine youth perceptions regarding the betterment of social-emotional awareness and application in the restorative process? As such, students were able to identify specific elements of the RJ process that were most effective for them. The findings exposed a need for relational trust in the RJ process, and the importance of deep dialogues to explore meaningful avenues for growth.

The findings underscored an appreciation for the shift from traditional punitive measures to restorative approaches. Students expressed a strong preference for working with adults who guided them through the RJ processes within a supportive environment. Student responses also pointed to the utter importance of relational trust and deep dialogues in creating an environment where students feel safe to share and engage deeply with RJ practices. Trust allowed students to share and grow without feeling judged, while deep dialogues provided a therapeutic and safe space for students to work through their decisions and subsequent behaviors. The role of trusted

adults was paramount in guiding students through their emotional learning growth and problem-solving processes.

Reflecting on the emergent themes and reviewing the existing literature, I have pinpointed three key discussion points to address in this chapter: Student narratives highlight an alignment between RJ and SEL; trusted adults are pivotal in fostering SEL growth through RJ practices; and the capacity challenges in implementing RJ. Following an exploration of these topics, I will offer recommendations for the school site. To conclude this chapter, I will emphasize the importance of recognizing students as stakeholders.

RJ + SEL = Change

Student narratives demonstrated that RJ and SEL support and enhance one another. Through Restorative Practices, students engaged in experiences that fostered empathy, enhanced impulse control, and encouraged reflection on the impact of their actions on others. These practices not only allowed students to hear and consider different perspectives but also taught them to interact positively and collaboratively address challenges within their communities. The consistent application of RP offered a practical framework through which students could continuously exercise and improve their SEL skills.

In the following sections, I organize the discussion of RJ around the five SEL competencies as outlined by CASEL (CASEL, 2024)—self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-management. These competencies were cultivated and reinforced through the structured engagement in Restorative Practices, as evidenced by the compelling narratives of students actively participating in these processes.

Self-Awareness Through RJ

Focusing on the first of these competencies, self-awareness acts as a cornerstone of SEL, compelling students to recognize their emotions, values, and influences and how they influence behavior across contexts. Self-awareness is integral to students developing a safe and respectful presence within the school community. The self-awareness pillar asks students to consider their "values and how they influence behaviors across contexts". To do this, students examine their personal and social identities, as well as "personal, cultural, and linguistic assets" (CASEL, 2024). After students establish a stronger sense of identity, they begin to delve into "identifying one's emotions, demonstrating honesty and integrity, linking feelings, values, and thoughts, and examining prejudices and biases" (CASEL, 2024). This pillar is integral to the foundation of students' work with SEL.

Cat's experience in the girl's group was a compelling example of how self-awareness can be cultivated through Restorative Practices. When brought into the girl's group, Cat benefited from realizing that her personal, cultural, and linguistic assets matched those of some of the other group members. This allowed Cat to identify commonalities with her fellow schoolmates, ultimately allowing her to feel comfortable opening up to them in their group sessions. Cat had not previously thought of these students and their personal backgrounds, but rather just "saw them as people I wouldn't be friends with". The group gave Cat a new perspective on how individuals bond with one another and develop relationships.

Similarly, Javier's narrative illustrated self-awareness through Restorative Practices. Javier spent time thinking about his actions when he was in school or at home without his phone. Once his initial frustration with the 'no phone' agreement subsided, Javier opened up to the

administration team about his missteps. He admitted that he had made some mistakes and "did things with people who got him in trouble". He acknowledged that he had been short with us previously and took the time to apologize for his actions. This discussion was meaningful in that it got Javier to realize that he was not mad at us, but rather "at himself for acting like a kid".

Social Awareness Through RJ

The social awareness pillar helps students develop "the abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts" (CASEL, 2024). Omid explained that, over time, he started to think of going to school like "visiting someone else's house". This is because he knows "different houses have different rules and I'm not gonna be rude in someone else's house. So I do my best to try to treat school like it's someone else's house, even if I don't agree with how they do it". This perspective shift allowed Omid to consider others. Omid admitted, embarrassed, that before he "just cared about himself and what he wanted". He could see that this was harming his ability to interact with others, so he acknowledged that he had to give in and be more flexible.

When Justin recalled an incident he was involved in, he expressed that over time he developed the ability to remain friendly towards someone, even if he could no longer remain friends with them. The reason for this decision was that they both played on the soccer team and "he didn't want it to be weird for the team". Over time, Justin developed the necessary skills to consider how his behavior could affect others besides him. This work, done through numerous RJ discussions and consultations, allowed Justin to run through scenarios with the adults he trusted to consider potential implications. The adults encouraged Justin to pause and think about how his decisions could affect himself and the larger community in the long run. Previously,

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Justin was reactionary and did not think before communicating. Through his discussions with the AP/RJC, he was able to receive feedback about his reactions and make improvements based on their advice. Learning how to pause and think before speaking also allowed Justin to become and more effective and kinder communicator.

Social awareness not only focuses on individuals, as it encourages students to expand their learning to "identify diverse social norms, including unjust ones, recognize situational demands and opportunities, and understand the influences of organizations and systems on behavior" (CASEL, 2024). The social awareness pillar includes many meaningful elements for the development of student SEL competencies. However, a standout goal of this pillar is for students to pause, reflect on, and challenge the systems they interact with daily. By pausing and reflecting, Omid realized that rules were not always there to constrict him, but that they sometimes protected him too. This reflection helped shape a more mature perspective on school rules overall, and Omid grew to understand why certain expectations need to be implemented and enforced. The skills students learn by participating in SEL/RJ education are already promising. Moreover, the consistent acknowledgement of a shared goal to dismantle unjust systems deepens the effectiveness of this pillar. By working in direct opposition of unjust punitive systems, students will have more opportunities to share their thoughts, feelings, and insights, ultimately giving them more experience with SEL.

A major element of social awareness, too, is the "capacity to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings" (CASEL, 2024). Social awareness not only involves the capacity to empathize with others but also extends to understanding the broader historical and social norms that dictate behavior across different

contexts. However, there is a significant gap in the current RJ program, which often fails to adequately address the deeper systemic issues and historical contexts that disproportionately affect marginalized students. For youth of color, who are frequently confronted with racism and bias in their everyday lives, it is particularly vital that RJ practices do not simply stop at individual disputes but also encompass a thorough understanding of structural racism.

Relationship Skills Through RJ

Relationship skills were brought up by every student participant. They expressed that it took time to develop relationships with others; partially because they were never directly taught the skills to help them do so, but partially because the adults were seemingly never taught to do so either. As outlined by CASEL (CASEL, 2024), relationship skills include "the abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups" (CASEL, 2024). This pillar allows students to develop skills to navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed (CASEL, 2024).

In our second interview, Justin asked, "why should I talk to a teacher nicely if they speak to me in a way that shows they're annoyed with me?" This question came up when he recalled a moment when he was sent out of class for being "disruptive" within the first five minutes. He expressed that he did not enjoy how his teacher handled the situation, and that he might have been able to stay if he was given the opportunity to respond or the support to help him deescalate. Javier was frustrated when he wanted to speak to his counselor, but only teachers were available. He explained that "not all teachers are nice to talk to" and added, "especially

when you're already mad". When individuals have relationships with one another, they are more likely to hold each other accountable, be understanding, and to provide or seek support.

Justin expressed that he regretted "getting kicked out of class" because "it prevented [him] from working with and talking to people who were not [his] friends". In one of our final interview discussions, Justin pondered whether he would regret not getting to know some of his classmates more intimately. He said that he "probably could have had more friends", but that his emotions were "usually why he just walked out to be alone". Had Justin learned these skills earlier, he could have potentially built stronger and more consistent connections with his peers. According to Justin, part of the reason he was sometimes unable to do this was because he did not feel supported by an adult who could intervene "before he got pissed off".

Responsible Decision Making Through RJ

Having a trusted adult around to walk students through tough situations is meaningful, but students must also learn to develop these skills independently. Responsible decision-making focuses on considering "ethical standards and safety concerns to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being" (CASEL, 2024). Bonds developed with others through genuine relationship building can strengthen both interpersonal and larger community relations. This is the goal of RJ practices; however, many students enter RJ circles or discussions without the foundational communication skills they need to make them effective. Thus, SEL competencies must be developed to strengthen students' participation and ultimate growth.

Omid expressed that now, before he acts, he pauses and asks himself "should I be doing this?" His second interview included our most emotional discussion where he expressed that he

had to grow up quickly and be the man of the house. Omid expressed that although he used to just act out of anger, he never really thought about the ways in which he was putting himself in trouble and, more importantly, in danger. Omid explained that he wanted to do better for his mom and that "he can't see her cry without crying". He admitted that he never really thought about his behavior that way, and that he only began to because of us asking him how his mother would feel. Repeatedly discussing his mother's reaction got Omid in the habit of pausing to make better decisions to his best abilities.

Self-management Through RJ

It is crucial to clarify that the 'self-management' pillar of SEL may initially appear as a means for schools to enforce a culture of strict control over students. However, this tenet focuses instead on "the abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations" including "capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals" (CASEL, 2024). Rather than punish students for their behaviors, this pillar helps individuals to develop a sense of agency over their actions and intentions.

The key here is that this pillar allows students to work on these skills to manage themselves, rather than working to create a system where they are blindly managed by adults based on a set of written rules. Schools can educate students on these skills to create a culture of self-efficacy as opposed to a punitive culture where discipline is doled out by adults based on a set of arbitrary rules. As Omid noted:

> at least our conversations make sense. Like we talk about what I did or should have done
>
> better at. It's not wasting my time and I'm getting . . . fixed? I mean not fixed . . . but . . .

when I'm in those moments, I need someone to say, "hey bro, just chill" and that's what happens because you know me now.

Additionally, Cat expressed that she got in the habit of asking herself meaningful questions when she was in a situation that could turn negative. She explained that she "imagine[d] what we (the AP and RJC) would say to her in the situation" and allowed that conversation to guide her decision-making process. This ability to anticipate how we would guide her comes from her previous check-ins and the consistent reinforcement of expectations. When adults model responsible decision-making and communication skills for students, students can internalize these skills and utilize them independently.

Trusted Adults Are Pivotal in Fostering SEL Growth Through RJ Practices

Student narratives were very clear about the critical role that trusted adults played in fostering SEL growth through RJ practices. These narratives revealed that within the school environment, a select few trusted adults were pivotal in aiding students as they navigated their emotional landscapes and engaged in meaningful dialogues. Trusted adults, such as the Restorative Justice Coordinator (RJC) and Assistant Principal (AP), dedicated time to actively listen to students, coached them through challenging emotions, and helped them understand the real-world implications of their actions. This nurturing environment promoted personal development under the guidance of adults who were willing to share their own vulnerabilities and what they have learned from their own mistakes.

The enhancement of SEL competencies through RJ practices was primarily achieved through the establishment of relational trust and the facilitation of deep dialogues. These dialogues were characterized by open, meaningful conversations that provided a safe space for

students to freely express their thoughts and feelings. This reflective process was invaluable, as it encouraged students to explore and understand their emotions, values, and beliefs on a deeper level. Relational trust was fundamental in these interactions, ensuring that students felt supported and validated. This support allowed students to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, enhancing their capacity for self-reflection and personal growth.

However, it was crucial for adults to earn the trust of the students. Students expressed a need to feel comfortable sharing detailed contexts and accurate descriptions of their experiences in restorative situations. This comfort comes from a sense of trust, without which students hesitated to open up. When trust was established, students found that deep, meaningful conversations allowed them to explore and understand their emotions, values, and actions more profoundly. An essential aspect of this process was the support staff provided, which made students feel validated rather than shamed.

Justin's narrative illustrated the transformative impact of such trusted relationships. Justin explained that although he "didn't care what [you] said two years ago because I just wanted to make [my] classmates laugh", over time, he appreciated:

> That [you] got to know me and didn't give up. Because now we actually get along. And like, miss . . . the other day I wanted to leave, but you asked me where I was going by leaving class, so I just went back because I knew you were right.

As Justin's former teacher, there were certainly times when his behavior was challenging as I tried to teach the class. However, with patience and through discussions in the hallway, I got to understand the 'why' of his behaviors. This allowed Justin to feel seen and valued, even if he struggled to remain in class like he was "meant" to. The mere acknowledgement of his struggles

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allowed me to support him in taking breaks and getting back to his classwork. The small amount

of trust and agency I gave Justin helped him regain his composure and rededicate himself to his

work once he re-entered the room. Students consistently asked for the chance to be trusted and

seen. Even small opportunities like this one helped foster a trusting relationship between us.

The role of trusted adults in RJ practices was not merely supportive but transformative,

fostering a school culture that prioritized empathy, understanding, and personal growth. Trusted

adults were essential for implementing effective SEL and RJ practices, demonstrating the

profound impact of relational trust and deep dialogues on student development.

Capacity Challenges in Implementing RJ Practices

The Need for Time, Trust, and Accessibility

Students positively noted the distinction between RJ practices and traditional punitive

approaches, recognizing the value of RJ in their personal growth. However, they also identified

critical areas needing improvement, particularly the scarcity of time, trust, and accessibility

allocated to participate meaningfully in the RJ process. Students highlighted the limited number

of adults available for deep discussion. This was particularly critical for students facing complex

challenges both inside and outside of school, as they require substantial time and space to engage

with trusted adults who can guide them towards making safer and more responsible decisions.

Students were also disappointed with the fact that the adults they trusted and felt

comfortable talking to were a minority in the school rather than a majority, which identified the

need for more connection, trust, and discussion in the overall school community. Students all

acknowledged that the lack of consistent resources and trusted staff still left them feeling

disempowered at times. They expressed the desire to have a larger number of staff members to go to when they want to talk something out or need de-escalation.

The students were clear about their disappointment with one major part of the RJ process: it is typically only led by a small handful of adults. While this small pool of adults is trusted and effective, they cannot always make themselves available to everyone. As such, students do not always get to work through the RJ process in a timely manner, or with adults who have strong RJ/SEL skillsets. Even when students do get access to trusted adults trained in these practices, the number of individuals who are available to the full student body is inadequate.

For example, Cat cited her frustration with conversations needing to be cut short due to class schedules or trusted adults being pulled away to handle other responsibilities. Interrupting meaningful discussions leaves students feeling abandoned, confused, or with a general feeling of unease. These constraints prevented the RJ program from being as effective and possible, ultimately perpetuating the frustrations students sometimes feel at school. All students articulated that Restorative Practices must be given a dedicated time and space to accommodate more frequent and thorough check-ins with students.

Javier expressed that he wished he had a space to "take a minute before class in case [he] was having a rough morning or something like that". Although the AP/RJC office door is always open, admittedly it is also a revolving door. Over the span of Javier's individualized behavior plan, adults were able to check in with him, however it was not at the frequency or of the duration that would be ideal for all parties. From both ends, the contract felt a bit like a checklist to complete tasks rather than a genuine plan for deeper connection. Javier would have preferred "more time [with you guys] to talk and just make sure [I'm] doing better".

The primary investigator and RJC agreed that more time needs to be set aside for effective RJ practices. The RJC stressed that "we need time to sit with the students and get to know them before we can even go there". Getting to know students and building trust with them takes time. Teenagers can discern when conversations are rushed or when adults' attention is split. Omid explained that he "maybe really, really talked to like . . . five teachers ever? I don't know . . . but it wasn't a lot". With only two main administrators on site to facilitate RJ practices, this trend will continue, ultimately failing our students. Authentic resolution and repair cannot happen under a time limit. Incomplete resolution of situations was a common frustration for students. Cat explained that "once she got into the conversations, she did not want them to be cut off by having to go right back to class" because it felt like "it was halfway fixing something". Both the student participants and the administration team agreed that more dedicated time needs to be provided for students to do deep and thorough RJ work.

In addition to noting a lack of time, each student in the study highlighted that they had not received direct instruction in Social-Emotional Learning. During interviews focused on behavior and discipline, students frequently mentioned a deficiency in education on communication and emotional regulation. Despite evidence supporting its effectiveness, SEL has often been regarded as merely supplementary to school curricula rather than essential (Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices, 2022). Although the students attend a school that espouses a progressive mission and implements RJ practices, from their perspective, the framework seems more performative than genuine and robust.

Students articulated a general shortfall in the school's provision of social-emotional resources. For instance, Javier suggested that more frequent and proactive conversations with

adults could preemptively address negative behaviors through timely intervention and discussion. This proactive approach necessitates a committed effort from adults to engage with students regularly, providing a space for them to constructively express their feelings and concerns. Without integrating SEL comprehensively into the school environment, including setting specific times for its implementation, the ability to build genuine trust and facilitate deep dialogues remains limited.

Although students recognized the benefits of RJ over traditional punitive disciplinary approaches, they identified several challenges that hinder the effective implementation of RJ practices. These included a lack of sufficient time, trust, and accessibility. Particularly for students facing complex personal and external challenges, the limited availability of dedicated adults for deep discussions was a significant barrier. This scarcity affects their ability to engage meaningfully in RJ processes and underscores the need for schools to allocate more resources and time to ensure the accessibility of RJ practices to all students.

Summary of Discussion and Implications

RJ and SEL practices must be employed as tools to actively dismantle systems that hold students back and exclude them from opportunities. This requires education from experts, data analysis, and comprehensive training on SEL and RJ frameworks. Of course, this initiative does not have a quick turnaround time. It will take a lot of patience and dedication to change the overall culture of school discipline. But to ensure that RJ and SEL practices are effective, they must be grounded in anti-racism. This involves recognizing and addressing systemic racism, actively including student voices, and empowering students as leaders and stakeholders. By doing so, schools can create a more inclusive, supportive, and equitable environment where all

students can succeed. Adopting an anti-racist framework is not just an addition to RJ and SEL practices but the foundation upon which these practices can truly thrive and bring about meaningful change.

Synergistic Relationship Between RJ and SEL

The study demonstrated that RJ and SEL are intrinsically linked, with Restorative Practices providing a vital platform for the development and reinforcement of SEL competencies as outlined by CASEL (CASEL, 2024). These competencies—self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-management—are cultivated through RJ experiences that, for example, foster empathy, enhance impulse control, and encourage students to reflect on the impacts of their actions. These shifts change the overall behavior of students as well as the culture of discipline within the school.

Critical Role of Trusted Adults in SEL Development

The effectiveness of RJ in fostering SEL growth is significantly influenced by the presence of trusted adults. These key figures are essential in guiding students through their emotional and social learning processes. By establishing deep, trustful relationships and engaging in meaningful dialogues, these adults help students navigate their emotional landscapes and understand the broader implications of their actions.

Capacity Challenges in Implementing RJ

Despite recognizing the benefits of RJ over traditional punitive disciplinary approaches, students identified several critical challenges that hinder the effective implementation of RJ practices. Particularly for students facing complex personal and external challenges, the limited availability of dedicated adults left them feeling unsupported. This scarcity affected their ability

to engage meaningfully in RJ processes and underscores the need for schools to allocate more time and resources to the implementation of RJ. Restorative Practices at this particular school site were more often regarded as performative gestures than thorough interventions, highlighting the need for more adequate time and resources to augment success.

Extension Beyond Formal Roles

In order for RJ to be less performative, students will be expected to learn RJ basics and SEL competencies in addition to their traditional coursework. Teachers, too, must be fully aligned with this initiative if a shift in culture is going to take place. This shift will take a lot of education, training, and trust. Building relational trust requires too "the willingness of members of a school community to extend themselves beyond what their role might formally require in any given situation. Actions are made in an effort to reduce others' sense of vulnerability" (Becker et al., 2021). This trust takes a perspective shift. Historically, teachers are seen as the disciplinarians in classrooms. Teachers must be taught to step back from this perspective and change the way they interact with student behaviors. Thorough training in RJ and SEL can assist in them doing so.

Omid expressed that he did not feel the desire to change when he was "just kicked out because he broke a rule", but rather that he wanted to change when adults would sit and talk to him about the impetus for his actions or the "why" of the rule. What Omid wanted was a person to see him for who he was rather than just as someone who broke a rule and needed to be punished. Omid craved discussion and the chance to explain himself and listen to a differing perspective.

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The effectiveness of SEL and RJ practices is significantly dependent on the existence of trusted adults. A trusted adult serves to help a student to de-escalate, reflect, and to utilize SEL competencies in meaningful and productive ways. By establishing deep and trusting relationships, these adults help students navigate their thoughts and communicate their feelings. Also, they make students aware of the potential implications of their actions.

Recommendations for Integrating RJ and SEL in Educational Settings

In the following section, I outline a series of strategic recommendations aimed at integrating RJ and SEL into the fabric of school culture. Uniting RJ and SEL into a single initiative will allow for a seamless integration into the school's core philosophies, which will enhance their synergistic benefits. Next, it is crucial to develop mutually reinforcing RP and SEL skills and mindsets among all staff to establish a consistent and supportive culture. Lastly, illuminating student voice by increasing agency is essential to fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility in students, allowing them to actively engage in and contribute to their educational experience. Allowing students, especially students of color, to have a legitimate voice in school happenings is also inherently anti-racist in that it goes against traditional racist power structures in many aspects of American culture and education.

Analyzing the current structures also allow community members to practice cultural humility so that they:

> are able to work towards transformative practices by addressing current and persistent structural barriers. Further, they must also acknowledge that systemic inequities occur due to hegemony, or the dominance of a shared system of institutional practices that reinforce White supremacy as the accepted standard. (Pham et al., 2021)

School community members can practice cultural humility by making decisions to deliberately work against structural racism, White supremacy, and bias.

Align RJ and SEL Under a Single Initiative

To maximize the cooperative benefits of RJ and SEL, educational institutions should consider aligning these approaches under a single, cohesive initiative. This unified framework would ensure that neither RJ or SEL are perceived as separate or supplementary elements. This unified framework will allow students, staff, and community members to engage in SEL and RJ practices cohesively, supported by integrated policies, a unified vision, inclusive daily practices, transparent tracking systems, and reallocated school funding.

Create Integrated Policies and Practices

Schools must not only think of RJ and SEL as a single, cohesive initiative to optimize their collaborative advantages, but they must ensure that these practices are then significantly integrated into policies. Combining the philosophies and practices of each will guarantee that both RJ and SEL are viewed as equally important rather than as extraneous components. This will ensure that adequate time and resources are dedicated to the education on and development of each initiative. The initial steps to achieving this alignment are outlined below for schools to create and implement policies based on the guiding principles of both SEL and RJ.

Establish a Unified Vision and Mission Through a Committee

To ensure that there is a strong mission and vision, a committee of educators, administrators, students, and community members will work together to articulate a unified vision that encompasses the goals of both RJ and SEL. This work will be done through the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders who can work to define how this vision aligns with the

school's overall mission and values. The importance of a supportive, equitable, and inclusive learning environment through SEL and RJ should be at the center of all planning to ensure that actions align with the overall mission. This mission should guide all subsequent decisions and actions to see the vision come to fruition.

Develop Inclusive Policies

A clear mission and vision will aid in the creation of policies that thoroughly consider the needs of students, the community, and work to achieve the positive goals of combining SEL and RJ at all times. This can be done through first conducting a thorough review of existent disciplinary policies and revising them to be more inclusive of RJ and SEL competencies in concrete ways. For example, rather than students serving detention in silence, they will serve reflection time with the support of an RJC or another trusted adult who has been trained in SEL. This space and time will lend itself to the utilization of SEL and RJ competencies to help support students in conversation. While some instances may require additional, more comprehensive interventions, discussion should be a foundational component of all IRPs. Additionally, all other punitive disciplinary measures must be replaced with RJ-centered practices that incorporate the foundations of SEL.

Incorporate Inclusive Policies into Daily Practices

Policies will require strategic implementation and practice. As such, RJ and SEL concepts must be incorporated into academic lessons and routines to ensure that these skills are not taught in a vacuum. Lesson plans and activities for all subjects must integrate SEL skills as well as utilize Restorative Practices whenever appropriate. To do this, it is imperative that SEL competencies and Restorative language are incorporated into common classroom language as

well as utilized frequently by staff in classroom management strategies. Consistency is imperative to the success of this implementation. As such, support systems and data collection will help drive consistency and allow for timely adjustments as needed.

Establish Support Systems

Develop support systems, such as RJ coordinators and SEL specialists, to assist staff and students in implementing these practices effectively. These adults can become the go-to resources for individuals to consult with on campus. These specialists can provide SEL and RJ education, provide or refer to counseling service, run community and restorative conversations/programs, and create and train students and staff on how to use SEL toolkits.

Community and family engagement are also integral to the success of RJ/SEL implementation at school. Educating families and community members will create a seamless expectation between school staff and family/community about expectations. This collaboration can be created through school-delivered workshops, information sessions, dissemination of information, and providing community support and guidance to enhance RJ/SEL practices both on and off campus. Additionally, the school can work with community organizations to bolster the success of these initiatives.

Establish Tracking and Growth Systems

To monitor the success of RJ/SEL initiatives, mechanisms for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness must be established. These mechanisms may involve student and staff surveys, creation of focus groups, performance assessments, or community meetings each month to track progress. This data should be collected and analyzed frequently by the leadership team, RJC, and committee members to assess which elements are successful and

which elements need to be enhanced/tweaked. Practiced and policies can be adjusted based on feedback, data tracking, and experiential input.

Transparency Is Key

Since this initiative is new and involves the entire community, it is important that progress not only be monitored and evaluated by the school and committee members, but also that it is shared with the community for transparency purposes. This initiative belongs to the whole community and, as such, the community should be privy to the successes and challenges. This communication can be carried out through monthly community meetings, newsletters, a shared hub for data collection and analysis, and formal reports. Successful elements of this initiative should be celebrated through awards, shoutouts, rewards, or other community-decided benefits to build momentum and create more cohesion/buy-in.

Data Tracking and Analysis

The school RJC and AP will be responsible for tracking overall SEL/RJ goals using a school-based data tracking system. This tracking method will allow for the privacy of students who have been referred for behavioral indiscretions. The tracker, which is already in place at the school site, keeps information on students' behaviors, the location and time of the behaviors, the steps taken to intervene, and any additional comments school staff would like to provide to give context to the situation. This tracker will also be used as a tool for students to analyze the success of the task force on a larger scale, focusing specifically on trends by demographics, grade levels, and months. By removing names and details for privacy, the RJC and AP can provide monthly data reports on student behavior referrals and restorative steps. This will allow for accountability in implementation and will also expose students to the process of goal tracking and data analysis.

Tracking behavior trends and RJ implementation is a systematic way to ensure that RJ/SEL becomes a consistent part of school discussions and culture overall. Dedicating a time for these lessons each week, as well as scheduling monthly meetings, will help keep all community members accountable to a common goal of changing the culture of the school to one of care and repair. The schedule and format will also allow all stakeholders to contribute their ideas consistently and hold the larger community accountable.

School Funding Allocation

The school site must continue to bolster the program through funding that can be used for materials, training, community events, and overall support for the initiative. Keeping in mind that school budgets are often tight, it would be beneficial for the school site and leaders to identify beneficial partnerships, apply for grants, and reach out to the community for other funding options. This funding should be used directly to educate, provide materials, and strengthen the program already in place through the training of students, staff, and families.

Develop Mutually Reinforcing RP and SEL Skills and Mindsets Among All Staff

The RJ program at the school is foundational but relies heavily on three administrators to serve 540 students, creating an imbalance that undermines the attention and support students need. Expanding RJ training to more staff members will foster a safer, more positive environment where students are more likely to trust and engage with a broader range of adults. Adequate training ensures RJ practices are implemented effectively, preventing surface-level engagements, and promoting deep, restorative dialogues that support understanding and growth.

Developing SEL competencies among staff is crucial for meaningful communication and trust-building with students. Regular professional development sessions focused on RJ

principles, along with opportunities for staff to observe and participate in RJ circles, are essential. This approach helps integrate RJ practices into the school culture consistently, moving away from punitive measures and performative implementations. By fostering genuine buy-in from all staff, schools can ensure that RJ practices support meaningful self-reflection and growth, addressing students' needs comprehensively.

Comprehensive RJ/SEL Training for All Staff: Consistency and Authenticity

To address these training gaps, it is essential to provide comprehensive RJ training for all staff members. Consistent and authentic implementation of RP and SEL across all staff members ensures that these practices become ingrained in the school culture rather than being perceived as performative. Students are quick to recognize insincerity, and genuine commitment from staff is crucial for these practices to be effective. Training all staff ensures that every student interaction reinforces the same principles of empathy, respect, and Restorative Justice.

Aside from acknowledging that being sent to the office isolates students and carries a stigma, students felt that many of their teachers sent them away for the RJC to handle the situation rather than attempting to engage in these practices themselves. Teachers need to become familiar and comfortable with these practices, talking points, and methods of guidance for instances when the RJC or AP are unavailable. Although each student participant expressed having a small handful of adults on campus they can trust, this is a far cry from having access to these supports in all school spaces. When students are led by adults who focus more on adherence to rules and obeying directives than they do on the development of authentic and responsible individuals, they are failed. Students, particularly those from challenging

backgrounds, have developed keen skills to detect when adults are being disingenuous, underscoring the need for genuine engagement and trust-building efforts from school staff.

As part of staff members' job descriptions, they should be expected to uphold the principles of SEL and RJ practices whenever interacting with students, staff, or family members. These expectations should be taken as seriously as the other teacher duties outlined in a contract, such as lesson planning or accurate assessment of student work. All school staff need to be trained on how to seamlessly integrate both RJ and SEL foundational beliefs into their daily practices. This might come across as radical; however, we train teachers to take tests in their content areas in order to become teachers.

We trust educators to keep our students safe and educated daily. This should not just mean physically safe. Teachers should be trained and required to pass SEL and RJ competency assessments to work with students. This allows families to trust that their students are in good hands, not just academically but emotionally. This training should be embedded into the school's annual training schedule, akin to other mandatory trainings such as those for sexual harassment and student risk assessments. Authentic buy-in from all staff members is essential for initiating and sustaining cultural change within the school.

Students have collectively agreed that many teachers and school staff lack the ability or willingness to engage in meaningful conversations that promote growth and healing. McCall et al. (2023) emphasized that:

> Even with the most well-researched and developed equity-focused social-emotional curriculum, the experience or expectation of discrimination for students of color may remain high and negatively affect them academically, socially, and emotionally. This is

because the adults delivering the curriculum, other adults within the school building, and/or the guardians of their peers may inadvertently negatively influence their experience at school, making it an unsafe or unwelcoming space.

Training should cover a range of topics, including the core principles of SEL and RJ, strategies for building relational trust with students, and techniques for facilitating restorative conversations and circles. Historically, teachers have been seen as disciplinarians in classrooms. Teachers must be taught to step back from this perspective and change the way they interact with student behaviors, with thorough training in RJ and SEL assisting them in doing so. Additionally, staff should receive ongoing support and coaching to help them integrate SEL and RJ practices into their daily interactions with students. Omid expressed that he did not feel the desire to change when he was "just kicked out because he broke a rule." Instead, he wanted to change when adults would sit and talk to him about the impetus for his actions or the "why" of the rule. By creating a culture of continuous learning and improvement, schools can ensure that all staff members are equipped to support students' social-emotional and restorative needs.

Fostering Community Buy-In

Successful implementation of RJ and SEL practices requires active participation and support from the entire community, including families and local organizations. Families and community members play a crucial role in reinforcing the school's efforts to create an inclusive and supportive environment. To achieve this, schools should engage families and community members through regular communication, workshops, and events that educate them about RJ and SEL practices and their benefits.

By fostering these partnerships, schools can ensure that the principles of RJ and SEL are reinforced both at school and at home, creating a consistent and supportive environment for students. Engaging the community in this way not only helps to build trust and buy-in but also empowers families to support their children's social and emotional learning.

One important aspect of fostering community buy-in is cultural humility, which involves a commitment to continuous learning and self-reflection. Cultural humility is not a fixed state but an ongoing process that includes understanding the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students and their families and being open to feedback and new perspectives. Schools should provide training and resources to help staff develop cultural humility through workshops, discussion groups, and opportunities for community engagement.

For this initiative to be successful, all community members must be committed and actively involved in monitoring its success. Cultural humility is essential for advancing social justice and requires individuals to move away from a position of superiority, engaging respectfully with BIPOC students, families, and communities (Pham et al., 2021). Introducing cultural humility promotes conversation, collaboration, and service by encouraging ongoing self-awareness practices, including critical reflexivity, understanding power and privilege, and sustained actions like social justice advocacy (Pham et al., 2021). Ensuring that all students, staff, and community members embrace cultural humility as the foundation for RJ/SEL success allows for continuous reflection and improvement towards positive change.

Cultural humility also focuses on elevating the voices, needs, and concerns of BIPOC communities through partnerships based on mutual respect and trust (Pham et al., 2021). The principles of cultural humility aid in understanding power, privilege, and oppression,

acknowledging white privilege, and addressing White-centric power structures and curricula. This acknowledgment is crucial for the success of SEL and RJ education through dedication to reflexivity and anti-racism. Including students as stakeholders disrupts traditional power structures that often silence them.

Current SEL programs still face criticism, with some viewing them as "White supremacy with a hug" (The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2021), presenting as inclusive while maintaining power imbalances. Without proper planning and a goal to dismantle racism and inequity, SEL curricula can inadvertently reinforce existing inequities by failing to address power differentials (McCall et al., 2023). For schools to truly transform their culture of discipline, staff must acknowledge and learn about the systems that work against the student body both inside and outside of school.

RJ Practices Must Be Less Performative by Tapping Into Students' Experiential Input

Students have expressed significant frustration with their exclusion from discussions about disciplinary actions and their inability to provide input or context regarding incidents. While RJ practices are designed to be non-punitive, they often fall short of being fully restorative due to a lack of student voice and engagement. When students are excluded from the decision-making process, RJ practices become performative rather than transformative. The essence of RJ is to repair harm through meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. However, when students are merely checking off boxes on a checklist to complete an IRP, the process becomes mechanical and loses its intended impact. This perfunctory approach fails to address the root causes of the behavior and does not foster genuine healing or growth.

A lack of resources further exacerbates this issue. Students who participate in RJ practices often do not receive the direct attention they need from adequately trained staff. As a result, RJ sessions become task-based activities focused on completing assigned tasks rather than engaging in genuine conversations. For instance, Justin expressed a desire for more conversation-based RJ sessions that focus on authentic dialogue, rather than simply fulfilling the requirements of an Individualized Restorative Plan. This highlighted the need for RJ practices to prioritize meaningful engagement over procedural compliance.

To truly make RJ practices less performative and more impactful, it is essential to fully integrate student voices into the process. This involves providing students with the tools and opportunities to communicate their perspectives, involving them in discussions about disciplinary actions, and ensuring they have a say in the creation and implementation of their restorative plans. By doing so, RJ practices can move beyond mere procedural compliance and towards fostering genuine dialogue, understanding, and healing.

Moreover, while administrators and policymakers rely on research and theoretical models to make decisions, these often lack the experiential input from students. Students who have been involved with disciplinary systems in schools possess valuable expertise that largely goes untapped or unacknowledged. Students of color in urban schools, who often face daily experiences of racism, bias, classism, and prejudice, are acutely aware of the systemic racism that permeates their school environments. These students understand that RJ practices require an anti-racist layer providing a stark contrast to traditional disciplinary methods that often exacerbate feelings of marginalization.

Students appreciated that RJ offers them a chance to explain their perspectives, provide context, and reflect on their actions. For instance, Omid shared that traditional disciplinary actions, such as being publicly sent to the office, did not deter negative behavior but rather intensified his and his peers' resentment towards the system. RJ practices, when implemented with fidelity and supported by SEL competencies, allow students to engage in meaningful self-reflection and develop a deeper understanding of their actions and their impact on others against the backdrop of system racism. Students' experiential input provides critical insights that can help tailor RJ practices to be more effective and meaningful, and anti-racist.

Student Agency

To truly enhance the effectiveness of RJ practices, it is essential to move beyond performative actions by actively incorporating students' experiential input. Students, particularly those who have navigated disciplinary systems, possess valuable insights and expertise that often go untapped. Recognizing these students, especially students of color who frequently encounter systemic racism, as critical stakeholders and leaders is fundamental to the success of RJ initiatives. Student agency and voice have become critical components in increasing student engagement, which also has implications for student outcome (Reed Marshall, 2022). Agency is defined by Samman and Santos (2009) as an individual's or group's ability to make purposeful choices. Students are often not provided the ability to participate in school-based decision-making processes. If students are given agency, they are also given voice, which is described as:

> The ability and willingness to speak up for oneself and make ideas heard and needs expressed. Voice also relates to an individual's capacity and willingness to see the

needs of others and speak up on their behalf when the person is unable to do so. In a

classroom context, this would include a student's ability to behave in socially just

ways on behalf of others. (Samman and Santos, 2009)

When students are encouraged to use their voices, they are encouraged to be active members

of their school communities, ultimately making them feel more valued.

Recognizing Students As Important Stakeholders and Leaders

To truly empower student agency, schools need to recognize students as important

stakeholders in their own growth and the growth of the community. Students should not be

discounted as thinkers or stakeholders due to behavioral indiscretions. In this study, students

brought to light three major findings: first, that they are aware of the options schools have when

it comes to choosing how to handle discipline, and that RJ is an option that feels more caring and

inclusive than traditional punitive practices. Second, they identified the need for relational trust if

RJ practices are to be genuinely successful. Relational trust is built through day-to-day social

exchanges in a school community and supports the moral imperative to take on the difficult work

of school improvement. Lastly, students expressed the crucial need for deep dialogues in the

overall change process. Dialogues with trusted adults and peers have been attributed to much of

these students' growth and development as individuals.

Restorative Practices are currently too adult-centric and do not adequately involve students,

who could significantly contribute to improving these processes. As thoroughly and brilliantly

explained by the students, Restorative Practices are a great foundation for changing the

landscape of school discipline. However, these practices are too adult-centric and do not give

enough responsibility or onus to students who could contribute to making the process better. The

fact that the youth are clearly articulating this connection highlights the importance of involving them in the conversation about their education and discipline. This suggests that educational policies and practices should be designed with direct input from students, as they are the best indicators of what methods are most effective for their growth and development. The primary implication of this study is the strong connection between social-emotional awareness and Restorative Practices as clearly expressed by the youth. This finding underscores the effectiveness of Restorative Practices in enhancing social-emotional competencies among young people but also emphasizes the importance of youth voices in shaping educational and disciplinary approaches.

Development of a Student-Led RJ Task Force

As illustrated in the interviews, students urged to be included in important discussions about school discipline. To encourage student engagement and discourse, an RJ task force should be developed. For inclusivity purposes, this task force should include an administrator, one teacher from each grade level, multiple students from each grade level (no limit should be placed on this in order to support student buy-in), two parents/family members from students in each grade level, at least one campus aide, one instructional aide, one coach, one front office staff member, and one representative from the custodial/maintenance team. This variety will allow for perspectives of multiple school stakeholders to be heard.

This task force will meet once per month on a larger scale with all members present. Each month, tasks and goals will be assigned to students to carry out. These tasks might include development of additional SEL/RJ lessons, facilitation of community circles, serving on a panel to help determine restorative steps for students to take, eliciting feedback from students and staff

about the overall RJ program, or doing research to keep abreast of the most current RJ/SEL research. This task force will be largely student-centered, which allows for a strong platform for students to share their insights and ideas with school and community members. This task force will ensure that student voice is consistently included in important decision-making processes. It will be run by the school RJC and AP team and will receive support from other school community members for utmost success.

Empowering student agency can be achieved by establishing student-led councils or committees that participate in the planning and execution of SEL and RJ activities. Existing research often overlooks how students perceive the effectiveness of Restorative Practices, largely because current practices are too adult-centric. When students are encouraged to step out of their roles as mere recipients of disciplinary actions and into roles as leaders, they contribute more effectively to the community.

Incorporating student leadership not only validates their experiences but also leverages their unique insights to create a more inclusive and effective educational environment. Student-led initiatives can provide peer support, mediate conflicts, and offer a platform for student voices to be heard and acted upon. This approach helps to dismantle the traditional power imbalances between students and staff, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among students. Recognizing students as stakeholders and leaders also involves providing them with the necessary skills and opportunities to lead effectively. This can include training in conflict resolution, communication, and leadership skills, as well as creating formal structures for student involvement in school governance. By doing so, schools can ensure that student leadership is not merely symbolic but has a tangible impact on school policies and practices.

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Students as Stakeholders

Gap in Literature on Student Perceptions of RJ Practices

Existing research lacks emphasis on how students perceive the effectiveness of Restorative Practices. This is because of current Restorative Practices being too adult-centric. Students are engaged in the process only partially, leaving room for adults to handle the situation more traditionally and assign punishments rather than work on a plan with the student. When students are not equipped with the tools to communicate effectively and given the space and trust to do so, their important input remains quelled. When we see students as important stakeholders to inform growth, we encourage them to step out of their roles as students and into roles as leaders of their communities.

Untapped Expertise of Students' Experiential Input

While administrators and policymakers rely on research and theoretical models to make decisions, these examples lack the experiential input from students. Schools are meant to educate, protect, and shape adolescents. Students will make mistakes, have missteps, and misjudge situations. All of these are part of the learning and growing process, which is stifled by punitive discipline but enhanced through RJ practices.

Although RJ and SEL practices are obvious departures from traditional punitive discipline practices, current SEL programs are still met with criticism. Without proper planning and a goal to dismantle racism and inequity, the ideals taught in SEL curriculums can reinforce extant inequities by failing to address existing power differentials (McCall et al., 2023). Acknowledging the traditional and inherent power imbalance between students and school staff

members will allow this imbalance to be disrupted through deliberate steps to include student voice.

Students Are Not Their Mistakes

Students should not be discounted as thinkers or stakeholders due to behavioral indiscretions. Students in this study brought three major findings to light: first, that they were aware of the options schools have when it comes to choosing how to handle discipline, and that RJ is an option that feels more caring and inclusive than traditional punitive practices. Next, students identified the need for relational trust if RJ practices are to genuinely be successful. Relational trust is when "each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role's obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties" (Schneider, 2003). When students are welcomed into the community as important stakeholders, there will be a greater sense of responsibility to remain trustworthy and engaged in the betterment of the community. Lastly, students expressed the crucial need for deep dialogues in the overall change process.

Each finding has its own value and nuance; however, they are inextricably linked to provide strong supports to help students grow. Traditional punitive disciplinary measures do not provide students with a space to reflect and outwardly communicate about their missteps. Research shows, however, that:

> when we allow all children the opportunity to learn from each other about their varying experiences and backgrounds, we allow for them to more fully understand the social processes that lead to inequities and the role they play in perpetuating them. (McCall et al., 2023)

RJ practices allow for a structured way for students to safely share their experiences. Students are not only capable of learning from adults. On the contrary, students learn from others who have had similar experiences or backgrounds. Tapping into community engagement and discussion will allow for a more level playing field for all, where students are comfortable speaking about their behaviors and know that they have a space to go when they need to reflect or seek guidance.

What "Justice" Means to Urban Teenagers

In their interviews, all students challenged the fact that their punitive punishments and restorative steps were mostly always decided for them. This finding highlighted room for improvement and made clear the fact that students have a critical understanding of the notion of justice. This proves that participating in RJ fosters critical thinking skills and authentic buy in. All students challenged the systemic practices that have been used to discipline students and individuals of color both inside and outside of schools. Their preference for Restorative Practices indicates a social shift in how young people view justice: a nuanced idea that will look different for all individuals based on the details of the situation.

Although studies on the success of RP and the inclusion of student voice have been done separately, there is a lack of research on how student voice can directly inform such practices. A model needs to be developed to inform the inclusion of student voice in the process, the methods of educating students and staff on SEL, and the outcomes that are because of combining the two practices.

Adult Training in SEL + RJ Helps Develop a Culture of Care

As city dwelling students of color, participants are not unfamiliar with the ways in which society attempts to control them. These teenagers experience racism, bias, classism, and prejudice daily. They are aware of how the United States runs on inherently racist systems and principles that have, unfortunately, infiltrated school systems. Keeping abreast of social issues has proven to serve as a sort of superpower for these students. They are aware of the ways systems work against them each day. As such, students understand that RJ practices aim to be anti-racist, anti-biased, and most of all—fair—to all participants. Students prefer methods of discipline that are centered upon the betterment of the student through a community of care.

Student participants appreciated that the overall RJ process gives them a chance to explain themselves at the very least. Each student had the time to retell the situation from their perspective, provide context, and pause to reflect on what they could have done better. In the past, students recalled being talked at and "spoken to like nothing", leaving the office with a set of things to do to "fix it" rather than with a deeper understanding of the situation. Omid expressed the frustration of being sent to the office in front of everyone at a former school site:

> It's like . . . they just had to show that I got kicked out to so no one else did it. But at the end of the day, more of my friends just got mad that I got kicked out and they didn't stop doing anything because of it. If anything, it made them more annoyed with the teacher.

He cited the fact that he would have preferred to speak to the teacher outside, or to the principal in the office, but that he was hardly given a chance to speak at all.

This study illustrated that RJ and SEL are intrinsically linked. Restorative Practices allow a space for students to take solace, reflect, and create a path towards repair. Direct education and

implementation of SEL competencies allows individuals to develop the skills necessary to reflect and communicate well, ultimately making RJ more effective in practice. Self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-management are all skills that bolster the success of RJ practices. These skills help foster empathy, strengthen decision-making skills, and prompt individuals to reflect on their words and actions, as well as the impact they have on themselves and others.

Students interact with a range of adults on campus each day. Teachers, Instructional Aides, Coaches, Campus Aides, Counselors, Service Providers, and any other individual who interacts with students should be required to complete formal training in SEL/RJ frameworks and skill sets. Each year, teachers are expected to complete a set of trainings. SEL/RJ trainings can be included in this process for school staff. Not only does this prepare staff, but it also sets the tone that these trainings should be taken as seriously other topics integral to keeping students safe and cared for.

Staff Contractual Obligations

As part of staff members' job descriptions, they should be expected to uphold the principles of SEL and RJ practices whenever interacting with students, staff, or family members. These expectations should be taken as seriously as the other teacher duties outlined in a contract such as lesson planning or accurate assessment of student work. Teachers should be trained and required to pass SEL and RJ competency assessments to work with students. Strong, trusting relationships between students and staff are fundamental to effective education. RP and SEL training equip staff with the tools to build and maintain these relationships. As students interact

daily with various adults on campus, having a consistent approach to SEL and RP ensures that students receive cohesive support and guidance, fostering deeper connections and trust.

Develop Mutually Reinforcing RP and SEL Skills and Mindsets Among All Staff

Fostering a Supportive School Culture

A school culture rooted in RP and SEL creates an environment where students feel valued, understood, and supported. When all staff members are aligned with these practices, they collectively contribute to a positive and inclusive atmosphere. This cultural shift promotes a sense of belonging and safety, which is essential for students' academic and personal development.

The RJ program at the school site is foundational but currently relies heavily on the efforts of three administrators to serve a student body of 540, equating to roughly 180 students per administrator. This imbalance is a disservice to students, all of whom deserve the attention and support of trusted adults at school. Expanding training to more staff members will create a safer and more positive environment where students are more likely to trust and engage with a larger number of adults.

Although students appreciated the routines and procedures in place for them to participate in RJ practices, they still felt as though these practices remained at the surface level in many instances due to lack of training or available staff and resources. The key levers of RJ practices working effectively for students were trust and deep dialogues. Through the development of relational trust, students can safely dig deeper into situations, honestly reflect on their behaviors, and feel safe when exploring parts of themselves that may leave them feeling vulnerable. Without this trust, students are not compelled to share details of their lives or stories. As Cat

asked, "Why would I speak to a staff if they don't even try to speak to me or get to know me but then just yell at me cause I'm in the hallway. Like do you even know why I'm out here?" Each interaction adults have with students has the potential to either build or demolish trust.

Consistency, Authenticity, and Anti-racism in RJ/SEL Implementation

Consistency

Consistent and authentic implementation of RP and SEL across all staff members ensures that these practices become ingrained in the school culture rather than being perceived as performative. Students are quick to recognize insincerity, and genuine commitment from staff is crucial for these practices to be effective. Training all staff ensures that every student interaction reinforces the same principles of empathy, respect, and Restorative Justice.

Authenticity

Aside from acknowledging that being sent to the office isolates students and carries a stigma, students felt as though many of their teachers sent them away for the RJC to handle the situation rather than attempt to engage in these practices themselves. Teachers need to become familiar and comfortable with these practices, talking points, and methods of guidance for instances when the RJC or AP are unavailable. RJ and SEL competencies must become embedded in the fabric of the school community.

Lack of Consistent and Authentic Engagement by Staff

All students highlighted the typical disconnect between authentic Restorative Practices and what is often carried out in schools. Although the framework is in place to have restorative circles and conversations, many staff members were taught that punitive measures were the only way to manage student behaviors at school. This prevents them from being fully bought in on RJ

practices. For the culture of discipline to change, all staff members must be authentically bought in and engaged with the SEL/RJ frameworks. Additionally, students in this study cited that RJ was "different every time" for them. Although the content of conversations will naturally vary, RJ practices should be implemented consistently for them to become embedded in the natural culture of the school. Students perceive the implementation of RJ practices in their progressive school as more performative than robust and effective.

Repertoire of RJ Practices

As the RJ program at the school site is new, there are limited resources that are used to support students. Two administrators are responsible for the creation of IRPs or accountability projects. Additionally, students are often limited regarding the amount of time they can spend speaking to a trusted adult or administrator. The school site must work to create a repertoire of practices that will allow for more thorough implementation.

The repertoire of practices can include, but is not limited to, 1-on-1 conversations, community building circles, restorative circles, counseling sessions, small-group discussions, community education, community building events/meetings, community service projects, accountability projects, mentorship programs, staff check-ins, and IRPs. Students will also be given a space to provide feedback for RJ/SEL practices moving forward. As students assess the program and identify areas of need, they will be invited to discussions about improving RJ practices as important and informative stakeholders.

Community Buy-In

Families and The Larger Community

All students exist in their school communities, but also as members of other communities. For RJ to be successfully implemented at the school site, the larger community must also be involved. This school site is unique in that its mission is to disrupt the status quo and dismantle racist systems. Although families are aware of this mission, it has never been contextualized and explicitly connected to the needs of the community. Breaking down systemic racism and bias with families, acknowledging how these influences affect the community, and explaining how RJ could help repair these damages is integral to community engagement and buy-in.

Restorative Practices and Social-Emotional Learning cannot be performative, especially in schools. To change the culture of discipline within a school, difficult conversations must take place. It is imperative that the school first acknowledges all steps it currently takes to be inclusive and anti-racist, to identify where these initiatives fall short, and to plan to revise the school discipline and RJ policies based on data and student feedback. As such, school staff, students, community members, and any other stakeholders must be made aware of this initiative. It is imperative that all staff members who interact with students in any capacity be trained in SEL and RJ practices and how they can be used together to make meaningful change.

Community Building Practices

Inclusion of Restorative Practices should begin with the foundation of community-building circles weekly in students' homeroom class period. This space can be used to deliver direct SEL instruction as well as to encourage students to participate in circles openly. This space

is already dedicated to non-curricular student learning, so it lends itself to RJ/SEL lessons. Through homeroom, students will have the opportunity to receive direct SEL instruction from their teachers who have been previously trained before the beginning of the school year. All students, no matter their grade level, will receive these lessons at the same time and through the same method of delivery. This will create a sense of uniformity and will allow students to discuss and engage with the skills they learn each week.

Community Education on RJ/SEL

Families and community members are important stakeholders who contribute meaningful ideas for the betterment of schools. As such, all community members who are involved with students should be educated on the newly implemented RJ/SEL practices. The school site frequently hosts parent meetings and education sessions. As such, one monthly meeting should be dedicated to the RJ/SEL practices that students will learn in homeroom each week. This will create a sense of alignment and transparency, but it will also allow students to understand how these skills can translate to outside of the school setting.

As noted by McCall et al. (2023), "Each and every school stakeholder—school personnel, guardians, and students—has a role in creating a school environment where everyone feels safe to be themselves and fully engage in a learning environment". While many schools focus on students and how they need to change their behaviors to be "well behaved", SEL/RJ practices recognize that "it cannot just be the students who are learning more about themselves and others; this same learning has to be done with every stakeholder within the school community" (McCall et al., 2023). Change will happen with consistent buy-in and practices from all members of a school community.

Cultural Humility

For this initiative to be successful, all members of the community must be committed and actively monitoring its success. Cultural humility is a major part of that. Cultural humility is "a required skill to advance social justice [and] is a process for individuals to move away from a position of superiority, and to openly and respectfully engage with BIPOC students, families, and communities" (Pham et al., 2021). Introducing the concept of cultural humility will allow for a school landscape that promotes conversation, collaboration, and service by engaging in ongoing self-awareness practices. Major components of self-awareness in this context are "critical reflexivity, understanding of power and privilege, and sustained actions (e.g. social justice advocacy, alliances with communities) to improve outcomes of the individual and community" (Pham et al., 2021). Ensuring that all students, staff, and community members see cultural humility as the foundation for RJ/SEL success will allow for continuous reflection and efforts to improve personal accountability to the overall goal for positive change.

Cultural humility focuses, too, on elevating "the voices, needs, and concerns of BIPOC communities through collaborative partnerships based on mutual respect, trust, and commitment to learn" (Pham et al., 2021). The guiding principles of cultural humility help with the understanding of power, privilege, and oppression. Acknowledging white privilege and the existence of White-centric power structures and curricula is imperative to the success of cultural humility. This acknowledgement will then, too, bolster the success of SEL and RJ education through the same dedication to reflexivity and dedication to anti-racism. Including students as important stakeholders in the process also disrupts traditional power structures in schools that aim to silence students and urge them to be obedient.

Limitations

As outlined in Chapter 1, anticipated limitations of this study included a relatively small sample size, self-reported data, the relationship of the researcher to the participants, and the school site community size, which is significantly small. This study may have reduced generalizability due to its small sample size of only 4 students. Student participants may have reported past experiences in a way that could have contextualized them or put them into new perspectives over time. Additionally, students may have changed/altered their authentic answers to questions based on the researcher's positionality as an administrator in the school setting. All students all experienced Restorative Practices delivered by the same school, which could also explain the similarities in experiences and suggestions.

Although the sample size remained small, it allowed both male and female students to provide their perspective on Restorative Practices and punitive discipline. Student participants also ranged in age from 10th to 12th grade. Although students did need additional prompting or follow-up questions in their first interviews, once they began to answer, their responses were authentic to their personalities. Over time, students did have space from their previous experiences. This led to them reflecting on what could have been done better, however, students did not shy away from discussing their missteps or poor choices. The researcher's positionality was a primary concern regarding students being open and honest. Through the interview narratives, it became clear that due to the relationships we have built through RJ practices, students felt safe and comfortable enough to answer questions honestly. Therefore, these potential limitations had little-to-no effect on the outcomes of the interviews.

Conclusion

Although student voice is imperative in improving overall outcomes for students as related to RJ practices, there is still a lack of research on the success of combining SEL and RJ practices. Additionally, students cited the desire to speak to counselors/therapists in their interviews. There is a lack of research, too, on whether these supports would bolster the success of RJ practices. This study did not have a scope large enough to investigate the impact of counseling on the success of RJ, so this remains a question that has not yet been full explored in scholarly research.

This study was designed to highlight student perceptions of RJ practices, elevate student voice, and provide recommendations for how RJ practices can be strengthened at a free, public charter school in central Los Angeles. This study highlighted the inherent wisdom students have when it comes to justice and discipline in schools. Additionally, it illustrated that students are more connected to their school sites when they have feelings of trust and belonging. This belonging is built through deep dialogues with trusted adults and peers on campus. All students in this study proved themselves to be thoughtful, insightful, and reflective in their interviews. Students' humility, honesty, and voice informed a great deal of this study. The inclusion of youth voice and the impact of this wisdom will have positive influence on the overall RJ program, ensuring that it becomes more student-centered moving forward. This student empowerment also aligns superbly to the foundational principles of RJ: justice, fairness, and mediation for all.

In our final interview, I asked Justin what he would do to make the school's RJ program stronger. He explained that he felt as though students needed to be seen as equals: "My big idea would be just to be involved with them. Maybe not see them as students. Maybe. . . . Um . . . as a

friend?" I pushed Justin to explain this idea further by asking, "As a friend . . . so we get students to change their behavior through a friendship type of relationship?" Justin's response was beautiful and compelling:

> I think we can because that's like a built-in . . . built-in love that we can use to encourage them. I can't find the words for this, but it's a different type of friend. Like a good influence at school. You have friends that have helped — there's an experience that you guys have had together . . . you can talk . . . So it's a different type of friend. I don't know . . . Like how they can give you different perspectives . . . A better perspective. Like reality. A reality. Yeah. A friend could be a student, but it could also be an adult.

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