

Teachers' Perceptions About Using Restorative Practice Based Programs in Schools

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Abstract

This qualitative study is an investigation into teacher's perceptions about using restorative practice based programs in schools. A grounded theory approach was used to understand teachers' individual experiences, identifying both the positive features and limitations of restorative processes. Participants completed a survey with guiding questions that explored three main areas: (a) strengths, (b) limitations, and (c) overall teacher perceptions of using school based restorative programs. Analysis revealed that teachers support using restorative programs in schools but are concerned about limitations including funding, time commitment, and training. An emergent theory is presented along with a discussion of the research implications and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: restorative practices, restorative justice, teachers perceptions, school programs, school counseling

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The United States justice system, based mostly on punishment, has ineffectively addressed the increasing rates of crime and violence among youth in our country. The negative effect of this type of system can be seen in the impact it has had on the American school system with violent acts becoming more prevalent, even among the elementary grades (U.S Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Studies suggest that punitive measures like those currently used in our justice system do not reduce recidivism or decrease violence in youth (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011).

Violence continues to be a significant concern with 30 to 40 percent of male youth and 15 to 30 percent of female youth having committed a serious violent offense by the age of 17 (U.S Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). The Surgeon General's Report on Youth Violence (2001), indicates that among the greatest risk factors that contribute to adolescent violence are weak social ties that are first developed in the early elementary years. Despite much effort to search for solutions, youth violence continues to be an enormous challenge (U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, 2001).

Behavioral issues and violent acts such as bullying are major concerns for teachers, counselors, and administrators since student success depends on how well students interact with their peers and adapt to the school environment. The need for alternate disciplinary methods is evident in the rising violence and evokes questions of why schools have not been able to address these issues successfully in the past (Morrison, 2006).

Schools have consistently demonstrated that they are not prepared to deal with the increasing amounts of violence, bullying, suicide, and other critical problems affecting our society (Morrison, 2006). Ineffective disciplinary methods in schools have helped to perpetuate

violence resulting in rising rates of suspension, detention, and incarceration in students (Morrison, 2006).

Moreover, some experts argue that the problem lies in the lack of emotional intelligence of youth in our country. According to Goleman (1998), the increase in social pathology and violence in youth is the result of the lack of emotional literacy in our society. Goleman found that emotional skills such as empathy, responsibility, caring, and anger control have been greatly overlooked while intelligence and academics have been overstressed (1998). Moreover, Goleman established that the development of emotional intelligence is vital to helping individuals interact in socially acceptable ways (1998).

As one of the main support systems for youth, schools play an important role in helping to shape children towards making important connections with peers and adults. Schools also provide a foundation for youth who are not obtaining appropriate influence in their homes and after school environments. Additionally, schools help students gain the emotional skills needed to engage and interact positively with their peers (Goleman, 1998). For this reason, it is critical that schools examine alternative methods to discipline that are better able to prevent violent behaviors and help students reestablish relationships within their school communities.

In recent years, proponents of the restorative justice philosophy have begun to advocate for the use of restorative practices in schools. Restorative justice is a philosophy that was developed by the International Institute for Restorative Practices and its sister organization-the Community Service Foundation- in response to the inadequate punitive measures used in the justice system (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). The restorative justice approach allows individuals to understand the effect of their negative behaviors on those that have been harmed and helps individuals restore relationships and make amends (Zehr, 2002).

In school settings, restorative interventions are used instead of more punitive approaches to behavior management. Restorative practices work from a whole-school, strength-based model that allows for meaningful and supported opportunities for students take responsibility and be accountable for their actions (Zaslow, 2009). Students and teachers discuss inappropriate student behaviors and work collaboratively to reach an agreement that meets the needs of everyone involved (Varnham, 2005). Restorative activities include peer mediation, restorative conversations, classroom circles, thinking plans, check-in and check-out circles, small and large group restorative meetings, and formal restorative conferences (Macready, 2009).

At the primary level, restorative practices involve the entire school community. They help to instill values and skills and promote ethical principals for working with others (Moorison & Vaandering, 2012). At the secondary level, specific behaviors that disrupt the harmony of the school and classroom environment are addressed through problem-solving circles, conferences, and peer mediation (Moorison & Vaandering, 2012).

At the tertiary level, responses are geared toward the behaviors that have caused serious harm and involve all those that have been affected including families, students, and community members (Moorison & Vaandering, 2012). This model assists teachers, students, and parents in building, maintaining, and restoring relationships and making the school community a safe and nurturing environment for students.

Growing interest in restorative practice based school programs has been driven by the increasing truancy and suspension rates and by the rising number of students that are incarcerated each year (Wilson, 2010). Some schools have implemented restorative justice practices to help address student misbehavior and as a different way to approach suspension and expulsion (Henderson & Buchanan, 2013).

Although some changes have taken place in regards to discipline in schools, most school administrators continue to use and implement punitive measures such as suspension and detention that do not prevent or change student behavior. As a former educator, my interest in this topic came from my personal experiences in working with students and my first hand account of the ineffectiveness of the current methods.

Additionally, during the first year of my counseling program, I attended a presentation on restorative practices where I learned how peace circles and other restorative interventions were being used in schools to promote a sense of community, decrease school violence, and help students become more accountable for their actions. I was inspired by what I learned in the presentation and was curious to understand what was preventing additional schools from adopting restorative programs in their communities.

In pursuit of answers to this question and the lack of research in this area, I decided to explore this topic more closely. Through this research my hope was to assess teachers' views about using restorative practices to help identify possible limitations that have prevent schools from implementing restorative based programs.

Review of Literature

Although research related to restorative practices in schools is limited, there is sufficient evidence indicating that restorative interventions have a positive impact on youth. Many schools that have implemented restorative interventions have seen encouraging changes in their school climate and in the way students and school staff members interact. Additionally findings show that school based restorative programs help to decrease negative behaviors and school violence, and increase student emotional intelligence.

Impact on School Climate

Findings confirm that restorative programs and restorative interventions vastly impact school climate. In a study conducted in several public schools in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Grossi and Santos (2012) found that there was great improvement in the school climate and student behavior as a result of the reparative dialogue established through restorative practices. Grossi and Santos also found that students demonstrated increased respect for other students and showed different, more positive modes of interaction (2012). Additionally, restorative practices played a primary role in helping to resolve conflicts in school.

In another study conducted in Midway High School in New Zealand, researchers found similar results. Kaveney and Drewery (2011) reported that teachers using restorative practices felt closer to and developed better relationships with their students and noticed an improvement in student awareness of the impact they have on other people. Teachers conveyed that restorative practices positively changed teacher and student relationships and the way each school functions (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). Teachers also noted that school climate improved with students being more caring, respectful, and considerate toward other students (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). Furthermore, the views of staff and students reflected positive changes in student relationships and conflict resolution skills (McCluskey, 2008).

Additionally, McCluskey (2008), reported positive results from a two-year pilot project to investigate the effect of restorative practices in eighteen schools in Scotland. Findings from this research showed improvement in school culture and decreased discipline referrals (McCluskey, 2008). In Lonsdale Heights Primary School in Adelaide Australia, in response to increasing violence within the school and community, administrators also implemented a

restorative program. Lane (2005) reported that along with improvement in school climate, parents were more supportive of restorative based processes than other disciplinary methods.

Impact on Student Behavior

Research also indicates that the feelings of remorse created through restorative programs also lead to changes in student behavior. Morrison (2006) found that school based restorative justice programs are effective in decreasing bullying and other harmful behavior (Morrison, 2006). Restorative practices turned negative incidents into constructive events reducing the likelihood of the negative incidents occurring in the future (Wachtel, 2003). Moreover, they gave students more control over their decisions and place a greater responsibility on individuals for finding their own solutions to conflict (Zaslow, 2009). This allowed students to repair the harm caused by their misbehavior, negotiate a resolution with those who have been affected, and learn from their mistakes.

In Minnesota, state and federal money was used to create the Minnesota Restorative Justice Project to help school districts implement effective violence prevention programs (Karp, 2001). Preliminary findings from this program suggested a 27 % reduction in suspensions and expulsions in schools that implemented the program. Furthermore, referrals for violent behaviors decreased by half (Karp, 2001). Additionally, Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg (2006), found that in one Minnesota school district, behavior referrals for physical aggression in one elementary school were reduced from 773 to 153, suspensions in the junior high school reduced from 110-55, and in senior high school suspensions dropped from 132 to 95.

John Boulton, the principal of Bessels Leigh School for boys in the United Kingdom conveyed that implementing a restorative based program such as Safer Saner School has had a very real and positive impact on the students and staff of his school (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006).

In a study by Boulton and Mirsky (2006), preliminary data from the recording of student behavior indicated negative behaviors and incidents decreased by half once restorative practices were in place. Additionally, there was a significant reduction in property damage (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006).

The results of these studies reveal that restorative programs can effectively support students towards successful outcomes. Additionally, they demonstrate that restorative practice based interventions can help students find alternatives to violence and prevent students from using negative behaviors as a way to resolve conflicts.

Most psychologists contend that school discipline is not about getting students to behave but rather getting them to want to behave (Henderson & Buchanan, 2013). In this same manner, restorative discipline shifts the focus from punishment to reestablishing relationships, supporting positive school behavior, and establishing a positive school climate (Henderson & Buchanan, 2013).

Impact on Social/Emotional Intelligence

The encouraging outcomes from restorative practices also include increased empathy and emotional intelligence in students. While the affective aspects of restorative processes are hard to evaluate, it is evident from the findings that students involved in restorative programs gain understanding and empathy through connecting emotionally with other students and hearing other points of view. What is most instrumental in preventing recidivism is the ability of offenders to understand what the victims went through and listen to the victims accounts of the situation (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011).

A study conducted in a Victim Offender Mediation program indicated that both offenders and victims viewed the experience as a learning opportunity to see the different perspectives of

the other people involved (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011). The student offenders showed remorse and understanding for the victim's feelings and felt good about being able to repair the relationship or situation (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011). These findings also indicated that individuals were able to see the effect of their behavior, were empathetic with the victims and offenders, and felt remorseful for their actions (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011).

Morrison and Vaandering (2012) found that restorative programs increase positive emotions such as empathy and interest while diminishing negative affect such as anger, humiliation, and fear. Restorative practices also increase student values such as caring, respect, remorse, trust and forgiveness (Morrison, 2006). Hargreaves (1997) proposed that emotions, feelings, relationships, and human interactions all influence learning. In this same way restorative practices facilitate growth by allowing students to understand other points of view. Often the simple process of conversation can create psychological change with the individual (Wilson, 2010). Students who participate in restorative circles form a different kind of relationship with each other that is based on inclusiveness, empathy, equality, connectedness, and respect (Boyes-Watson, 2005).

In contrast to the prevailing cultural values of independence, restorative practices encourage inter-dependence and individuals to gain knowledge of others through empathy (Macready, 2009). Empathy is one of the most powerful elements to healing and reconciliation because it allows those that are involved to become closer through experiencing the feelings of others (Chapman & Harris, 2004). Furthermore the connections formed from these experiences starts the process of forgiveness. Chapman & Harris have indicated that emotions such as remorse, guilt, and shame that emerge from restorative processes make it possible for empathy and forgiveness to take place (2004).

Restorative practices provide a framework within which individuals move from having an “I-It” relationship to an “I-Thou” relationship where they can give up their own position and see how the world looks from someone other than themselves (Macready, 2009). When offenders are exposed to other people’s feelings and discover how victims and others have been affected by their behavior, they feel remorse and empathy for others (Wachtel, 2003). In small group restorative circles, students learn to express their feelings and respect those of others (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006).

Maxwell and Morris (2002) also noted that the most important element in invoking remorse among offenders is the empathy learned from understanding the effects of the offence on victims. A significant component to restorative practices is the emotional engagement that occurs between students creating positive affect such as empathy, interest, and caring (Morrison, 2012).

Limitations of Restorative Programs and Research

Although most studies that evaluate restorative practices denote positive outcomes, there are limitations to the research and to the programs themselves. Limitations in the research are due to the novelty of school based restorative programs and the lack of research that has been conducted on this topic. Since restorative practices have not been widely implemented in schools, there are currently few quantitative studies that specifically measure the effects of restorative practices on emotional intelligence and empathy.

Furthermore, additional research needs to be conducted to help understand the effects on bullying, suicidality, and violence. Moreover, few studies have been conducted that specifically address the effect of restorative processes on victim and offender experiences and the effect of restorative processes on relationships. As a result, there is a great need for more process-

oriented research that can critically assess the impact of restorative justice practices in schools and other real-world contexts.

Limitations also exist in implementing restorative programs. It is important to note that restorative methods may not always work in challenging contexts. Restorative practices require individual training for teachers and school personnel that can be costly and time-consuming for many school districts (McCluskey, 2008). Furthermore, restorative practices require a whole-school approach, which is often challenging because it requires schools to adopt and enforce clear and specific standards that meet the goals of the program (McCluskey, 2008).

Critics of restorative justice processes also argue that this approach takes too much time and money to implement and requires the entire school to commit to creating change (McCluskey, 2008). Conversely, some believe that it does not take extra time to speak differently to students but requires a desire to change old patterns (McCluskey, 2008).

These findings have various implications for future research and additional questions need to be asked. If findings suggest that restorative practice based school programs have a positive impact on student success and school climate, why are schools hesitant to implement restorative programs? What is keeping schools from using restorative practices? What specific limitations are getting in the way?

To look more closely at these questions, it is necessary to evaluate the thoughts and ideas of the different stakeholders involved in implementing these programs. Thus examining teachers' perceptions would give us a glimpse into what may be hindering schools from using and implementing restorative programs. The purpose of this study therefore, is to evaluate teacher's perceptions about restorative programs so that we can better understand what is impacting the use of restorative programs in schools.

Method

Research Design

A grounded theory approach was used to evaluate teachers' perceptions of adopting restorative practice based programs in schools. In grounded theory, data is analyzed and coded to find commonalities that may explain a phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Hays and Wood (2011) explained that "the purpose of grounded theory is to generate data that is based or grounded in participant experiences and perspectives with the ultimate goal of theory development" (p. 288). Similarly, in this study, a constant comparative method was used to assess similarities and differences between teachers' experiences and to further develop an overarching theory.

Setting

The study was conducted in a suburban elementary school in the northeastern United States. The school is a Title 1 public school with over 1000 students in Pre-K to 6th grade. The student body is made up of 6 ethnicities: 93% Caucasian, 2.8% Latino, 2.6% Mixed Ethnicity, 0.8% Asian, 0.8% African American, and 0.1% Native American with 14% of the students eligible for free lunch and 9% eligible for reduced lunch.

Participants

Participants consisted of 10 elementary school teachers from a faculty of approximately 100 teachers. Teachers of any level of experience or seniority who were teaching at least one class during the current school year were invited to participate. Teachers were recruited via interoffice mail and email and were not rewarded for their voluntary participation. Demographic information of the participants was not collected to preserve participant anonymity.

Materials

The study was based on a four-question survey developed by the researcher to measure participant opinions about using restorative practice based programs in schools. Participants were also provided with an information packet that included a program overview taken from the Safer Saner Schools website (a whole school change initiative based on restorative practices). Additionally, participants were invited to explore three websites which further explained restorative practices and how they are used in schools. The survey questions were created by the researcher and were not pilot tested prior to being administered. Moreover, the survey was not standardized and there is no validity and reliability information available. Please see Appendix A for the list of survey questions, information packet, and websites provided to participants of this study.

Procedure

Participants were contacted and recruited via email and inter-office mail notifying them of the study and asking for their voluntary participation. Faculty of any level of experience or seniority who were teaching at least one class this school year were invited to participate. An information packet was delivered via inter-office mail to all the teacher's mailboxes within the school. The packet provided participants with information about restorative practices and why this topic was being explored. The packet also included information on how restorative practices have been used in schools, how the programs are implemented, what research has shown about using restorative practices with youth, and lastly three websites that had supplemental information about the topic. Participant responses were formulated based on key ideas presented in the restorative practice brochure and websites including:

- Relationship building

- Restoring community and school spirit
- Conflict prevention
- Restorative language and inquiry
- Restorative conversations
- Mediation
- Problem-solving circles
- Restorative meetings and conferences
- Teacher, parent, student and staff involvement

The packet included a four-question survey for participants to complete after reading the enclosed information and visiting the websites. Participants were informed that they were to read the information and visit the websites before completing the survey. Participants were also notified that their responses were completely anonymous and were provided a return envelope to enclose their finished surveys.

Respondents were asked to insert their survey, seal the envelope, and sign across the seal. Participants were asked to return their surveys to the researcher via inter-office mail in a provided envelope within 3 weeks of receiving the survey. Surveys did not include any identifying information or demographic information so that confidentiality could be maintained and participants would not be linked to their surveys.

After the 3 weeks period, surveys were collected and data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Data and transcribed notes were kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Only the primary investigator had access to corresponding materials. Data and transcribed notes were destroyed when the research was accepted and approved.

Data analysis

This article draws on the findings from the teacher surveys to provide insight into the challenges of school discipline methods and the effect restorative interventions have on this process. Data was gathered to compare teacher perceptions of restorative based interventions and to identify individual experiences and interpretations of possible outcomes or restorative programs. Data was interpreted by evaluating participant responses looking for common themes and then comparing these to other responses. Surveys were first numbered randomly and participants were identified. Second, using an open coding process, main ideas or key points were highlighted within each participant response and extracted from the text to form a series of codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using a constant comparative method codes were then grouped in a series of similar concepts, charted, and further grouped in common categories or themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Memo writing was used throughout to compare data, demonstrate relationships between concepts, create meaning, and identifying main categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lastly, using selective coding main themes were identified that characterized the experience of the teachers and a hypothesis was developed to create an overarching theory (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, 2008).

Results

Teacher responses were evaluated within three main categories: (a) strengths, (b) limitations, and (c) overall teacher perceptions of restorative based programs. Several themes emerged within each category and are presented in this section along with teacher direct responses.

Category 1: Strengths

- Teach empathy, expressing feelings, and communication

- Fairer process
- Student centered
- Uses positive peer pressure
- Students learn life long skills
- Impacts school climate which is important for student success
- Makes school a safer place
- Creates connections between staff, students, families, and administration
- Takes into account the whole person
- Involves entire school community and makes all stakeholders accountable
- Proactive
- Addresses conflict resolution
- Has a set of common procedures allowing stakeholders to know what to do and to expect

Category 2: Limitations

- Requires a lot of time, resources, training
- Similar to PBIS which is already in place in most schools
- Some teachers unfamiliar with restorative practices and programs
- Teacher, staff and family buy-in may be difficult
- Requires a “mindset shift”
- Costly
- Difficult to hold staff accountable

Category 3: Overall teacher perceptions

- Teachers identified mostly positive aspects
- Teachers are in favor of using restorative practice based programs

- Teachers see restorative programs as an additional tool to help students
- Teachers want limitations to be addressed
- Teachers want restorative programs to be supplementary to what is already in place

Although it is too early to generalize about teacher opinions, it is evident from preliminary findings that teachers find mostly encouraging aspects to restorative based interventions.

Teachers identify similar positive features including:

- Relationship building
- Positive modeling by teachers and staff
- Improved language, communication and interactions
- Increased social skills
- Prevention of conflict
- Increased empathy

According to teacher participants, whole school commitment was one of the most important features of restorative based programs. One teacher stated that she appreciated that it has a “family component” and “builds from individual to small group to whole community involvement.” Another teacher responded that having “family and entire school community involvement and accountability” is strength of the program.

Participant 9 expanded on this idea stating: “Discipline often falls on the teacher only without much input or support from administration, counseling, and especially parents. This program would place responsibility on more than just one teacher.”

Many of the teachers also recognized that RP programs could change school climate and the overall experience of student and faculty in their schools. One teacher remarked: “any program that targets making our school a safer place is something that interests me.” Several other

teachers noted that a strength of the RP programs is the “student centered approach” that focuses on “conflict resolutions skills and communication between students and school staff”.

Participants 7 conveyed that “the communication between staff and administration is important” and that “the program is beneficial because it encourages communication skills.” Another teacher stated that it “seems like a pro-active approach to conflict resolution” and liked the idea of having “ student, staff, administration, and community involvement that engages students in decision making.”

Moreover, teacher respondents felt that restorative practices could improve student attitudes and behaviors. One participant acknowledged that the “positive peer pressure” is beneficial to students because it “ teaches kids how to monitor themselves.” Another participant concluded that the “development of empathy for one another is a strength of these program [since] these skills are not being taught prior to entering school.” Furthermore this respondent stated: “these are life long skills that transfer beyond the school setting” helping to build “responsible, caring people.”

Participant 3 expanded on this idea saying, “It’s a fairer process. I feel it is better for students. It creates a welcoming feeling where students want to come. It creates a less stressful place for students who deal with a lot [and] gives students a chance to have a conversation in small group and one to one to express feelings and concerns” Another participant similarly found RP to be a “fair and non-judgmental process.”

Several teachers also concluded that RP programs build on to the methods that are already in place and are compatible with the PBIS program that has similar aims. Participant 2 explained that RP programs seem to “align with the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports model that most schools are moving towards.” Participant 7 also noted “adopting our current PBIS

model to include students would be an awesome first step.” This teacher specified that they liked “the different elements and how they are broken up and easy to understand” and that “being proactive but having a reactive element is very important.”

Another area teachers focused on in their responses was professional development. One teacher indicated that “the professional development that teachers receive is a huge benefit to this program”. Furthermore, the teacher stated that “it is important that all staff is trained and informed [and] have a set of guidelines to follow to influence student behavior and steps to follow when a student misbehaves.” Another teacher also commented stating that a strength of RP programs is that there is “lots of teacher training and participation” and “students and staff know what to expect and are held accountable for following through.”

Teacher responses also suggest that teachers are concerned about the limitations. While there was mostly positive feedback, some resistance was noted in regards to time, training, and overall funding for implementation of an RP program. Participant 1 indicated that a limitation is “time and the number of meetings” explaining that “adults need to consistently meet with students and family commitment is a struggle.” Participant 2 was concerned about teacher and staff participation indicating “staff buy-in is difficult because not all staff will agree upon the approach.”

Participant 6 was also concerned that “not all staff would be equally committed to the program” and questioned, “how they would be held accountable.” Another teacher was not sure if it would be “realistic at least not in a short time frame” because “it seems to require a lot of time, resources, and training.” Participant 8 felt that “people’s initial reaction could be “just one more thing.” and concluded that “it requires a mindset shift and people can be resistant to that.”

Another limitation that teachers were concerned about is adequate time for implementation and training. Participant 5 noted that there might not be enough “time for the series of conferences and circles” and that “additional staffing would be needed to monitor circles/conferences throughout the day.” Another teacher expressed that “it seems very time and staff heavy and the ideas of including all staff might be difficult.”

A final limitation was that RP is new concept in schools and many of the teacher participants had not heard of restorative based school programs. Participant 5 and 6 stated that prior to this survey they “had never heard of restorative practice based programs.” Participant 7 similarly acknowledged being unfamiliar with RP and programs stating: “I honestly don’t know too much about them at this time.”

Overall findings from the teacher responses suggest that teachers are in favor of in using RP based programs in schools. Teacher responses also suggest that restorative practices could be beneficial and have a fundamental impact on the students and staff of their school. One teacher affirmed her overall view of RP programs by stating, “Yes, the school could benefit from restorative practices. There are so many kids in need and not enough support to go around.” Another teacher explained: “These programs make sense in schools. It seems to have a relevant place in schools since school culture and climate are key to student success in all domains of education. I think adding some of the circles/conferences into the plan we currently have could act as an additional tool when handling student behavior.” Participant 6 expressed that “it would be a great program, however it does seem to be a very large commitment and time consuming.” Moreover, another teacher conveyed his/her views saying: “Yes, our school could benefit. I feel that our staff and students feel forever stressed from the pressure and rigor of expectations these days and this would help to refocus schools on what is important.”

The cumulative teacher responses suggest a possible overarching theory: Teachers are willing to adopt restorative interventions as long as they are used in conjunction to the student supports that are already in place and if limitations such as time, training, and funding are addressed.

Discussion

Violence, bullying, and behavioral issues are concerns that school employees face on a daily basis. With the increasing demand on schools, the challenging and stressful task of discipline falls not only on administrators but also on teachers and other school staff (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, 2008). Consequently, schools have been compelled to look at these issues more closely in an effort to reduce disruptive behaviors and increase prosocial behaviors in students (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011). Addressing these challenges ultimately involves looking at alternate methods to discipline to replace the ineffective methods that are currently being used. Many traditional approaches to reducing and preventing youth violence have not worked and as a result schools are looking to implement methods that have a greater bearing on student behavior.

Studies have shown mostly positive outcomes from restorative based school interventions including improvement in peer interactions, social climate, and increased empathy in victims and offenders (Zaslow, 2009). Additionally, research has indicated that restorative practices help to create more caring and responsible students (Zaslow, 2009). According to Bitel (2005) "if implemented correctly restorative programs can improve the school environment, enhance learning, and encourage students to be more responsible and empathetic. The positive implications of using restorative programs in schools therefore are much greater than the criticisms (Zaslow, 2009).

Although more conclusive research is needed to understand the reactions of individuals involved in implementing these programs, it is clear from the findings that teachers see the positive implications of using restorative based interventions in their work with students. Participant responses suggest that teachers are willing to try restorative practice based interventions despite the limitations. Teachers felt that RP programs align well with school priorities and with other positive behavioral interventions that are already being used.

Despite preliminary evidence that teachers are willing to try RP programs, it is ultimately up to individual school districts to decide on how they will address discipline and to determine how restorative based practices can be beneficial for their school. In examining the findings it is evident that limitations exist that influence how teachers, staff and communities react to restorative based programs. Like with any new undertaking, in order to have greater support from teachers and staff, limitations need to be addressed. By giving teachers and other stakeholders a voice and role in the process, they will have greater reason to buy in to the program (Mirsky, 2011). Likewise, as staff and teachers become familiar with these processes they will be more willing and prepared to adopt them in their school practices.

Although it is not yet clear what combination of factors play in to reluctance towards using restorative based programs or why additional schools have not implemented these programs, these findings provide us with an initial look into some factors that may contribute to teacher and staff resistance. With pressure from the state, districts, and administrators to prove their competency, it makes sense that teacher responses reflect concerns regarding time management and lack of training. Implementing additional programs may seem like a burden especially without sufficient proof of how they can directly impact teacher experiences.

Consequently, administrators and school counselors need to have both the knowledge and belief that these processes benefit students so that they can promote the advantages to other stakeholders. Moreover they need to believe that student wellness requires more than just physical health and support efforts to promote the remaining dimensions including: intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being (Rodman, 2007). Furthermore they need to be willing to try different approaches that can supplement and improve the programs that are already being used. McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, (2008) found that successful school programs use a blended approach incorporating existing methods that have proven to be effective. In this way restorative based interventions and programs can complement current school practices and diminish teacher concerns over losing the programs that are already in place.

Most importantly restorative based interventions have a cumulative effect when they become part of the everyday life in schools where restorative practices are the norm (Mirsky, 2011). The sharing of emotions through affective statements makes it possible to improve relationships and the overall school climate creating whole school change which is something teachers stressed was important to them (Mirsky, 2011).

Limitations and Implications

Although steps were taken to ensure the quality of research, limitations remain that need to be addressed as part of this study. First, the results may not be generalizable to a larger population due to the small sample size. Saturation of the data was not reached due to the few surveys received and limited participant responses. The sample is not likely a good representation of racial/ethnic diversity since the participant pool was taken from only a small geographic area. Moreover, there was no demographic information to substantiate a diverse demographic of participants. Additionally, the short response time may have been inadequate

not allowing all teachers to have an opportunity to participate. It also may have prevented teachers from elaborating and having more detailed responses

Another limitation of this study was that some teachers had not heard of restorative practices or programs prior to the survey. Teacher lack of knowledge or familiarity with the subject may have produced inaccurate results and skewed participant responses. Furthermore, the information provided to participants via the websites and information packet may have not afforded a sufficient understanding of the topic. Additional exploration of the topic through professional development opportunities and discussions and real world examples, could have provided teachers with a better understanding.

Additionally, a more thorough representation of teacher perceptions may have been possible using an interview process rather than a survey. Charmaz (2006) concluded that, “including detailed interviews can provide richer data for analysis.

This study also did not take into account other members of the school staff such as counselors, administrators and psychologists who may have differing opinions of the validity of using restorative based interventions. Future research might want to explore different viewpoints from other stakeholders.

The results of this study have various implications for counselors, school staff, students, and their communities and on future research in this area. First, counselors and administrators can use information from this study to help plan for implementation of programs in their schools and determine how to work with teacher and staff pushback. Offering professional development and training in the restorative justice philosophy to school staff and providing examples of the outcomes of these programs to all stakeholders would be extremely beneficial in getting staff to buy-in and be more willing to implement the program.

Additionally, school counselors and administrators can invite practicing schools and guest speakers to give practical examples of how these processes work in real world contexts. By doing so, teachers and staff can learn firsthand how these processes can benefit their students and their school. Furthermore, having facilitators or other trained individuals available for support during early implementation and throughout the program would be equally important.

Second, developing school and district policies that support the restorative philosophy would unite stakeholders towards common goals. There is a great need for bridging the responsibilities of staff and forming a collaborative environment where everyone knows what is needed to support students. According to Rodman (2007), “the restorative philosophy requires limit-setting, clear expectations, and support from all members of the school community to help students meet these expectations.” Additionally, knowing that the staff is united in a philosophy helps to connect the school community (Rodman, 2007).

The information collect from this study could also be used as additional resource to help counselors and administrators substantiate the benefits of the program to all the stakeholders: teachers, parents, students, staff, administrators, and the community. Moreover, it provides school counselors with support for using programs that align with their counseling philosophy and approach. The results of this study therefore, reinforces school counselors’ mission to create a positive school climate by helping to change how behavior and punishment is handled in schools.

Human beings have an innate need to develop interpersonal relationships, to live in groups, and to form connections with others. Restorative practices facilitate these connections by helping individuals gain a better understanding of how their behaviors affect others and encouraging opportunities for students to take responsibility for their actions. Children

especially benefit from restorative approaches that promote and sustain relationships rather than create separation and isolation with their peers and teachers. This interdependency and community promotes relationships, creates connectedness and forms bonds, which are the necessary protective factors that create resiliency in youth (Rodman, 2007). Schools therefore, should not wait for destructive behaviors to take place before implementing programs that can help increase student likelihood for success. As the teachers reflected in their responses, children with have better school experiences when proactive methods to discipline are used in conjunction with reactive ones.

This study therefore brings new hope to counselors and administrators who are interested in implementing restorative based interventions in schools. It reveals that teachers believe that restorative practice based school programs can benefit the school community and that they are willing to implement restorative practices and methods with students.

My hope is that information from this study and from additional research on this topic will provide administrators and counselors with affirmation of the advantages of using restorative practices and the feasibility of implementing restorative practice based programs in schools. Additionally, I hope that learning about teacher reservations can help school districts identify and work through any barriers to successful implementation of restorative based programs. Lastly, I hope that school counselors will see the benefit of advocating for changes in how discipline is handled in schools, which could greatly impact the future of the students and the families they work with.

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Appendix A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1) What are your initial thoughts about using restorative based programs in schools?
- 2) Please elaborate on what you consider to be the strengths of using restorative practice based programs in schools?
- 3) Please identify any limitations in using restorative practices based programs in schools?
- 4) Do you believe that your school could benefit from a restorative practice based school program? If yes, please elaborate on how it could be beneficial. If no, please explain how it would not be beneficial.

WEBSITES

<http://www.safersanerschools.org>

<http://www.pirirochester.org/about-us/restorative-practices/>

http://www.restorativerochester.org/whats_happening.html

INFORMATION PACKET

<http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/WSC-Overview.pdf>