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The purpose of this study was to examine how Pleasant Academy (a pseudonym), implemented and experienced Restorative Practices. This approach represents an alternative to traditional, punitive disciplinary actions, such as suspension or expulsion. Mansfield et al. (2018) maintained that Restorative Practices did not have a single definition but rather represented “a multitude of positive behavioral support approaches in a school that foster communication, mutual respect and understanding between people” (p. 306). Restorative Practices is a term that embraces an emergent movement to address school discipline in a non-punitive, relationship-focused, and collaborative approach (Losen, 2014). Restorative Practices focuses on building healthy communities, increasing social capital, decreasing anti-social behavior, and repairing harm to restore relationships (Wachtel, 2016). My overall goal in the study was to examine and describe new practices utilized by educators within Pleasant Academy and compare these new practices with methods the school previously used (e.g., out-of-school suspension). I am the principal of this school, so the methodology I used was qualitative inquiry with a focus on practitioner inquiry, where I was not only a researcher but also a participant. I interviewed staff and coded their interviews to identify themes. I also analyzed out-of-school suspension data and the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey before, during, and after the implementation of Restorative Practices.

As a result of my study, I found that participants described several elements and practices that were critical to the success of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. All participants recognized that Restorative Circles are the most powerful component of the Restorative Process in that they develop relationships between students and staff and reactively respond to

wrongdoing, problems, and conflicts. Every participant also recognized relationship-building as a critical component of the Restorative Process. In addition, most of the participants cited the school's positive culture and climate for the successful implementation of Restorative Practices, and many of the staff indicated in their interviews how their attitudes towards Restorative Practices changed after implementation. I also discovered that Pleasant Academy's out-of-school suspension rate dropped 73% in the first year of implementation of Restorative Practices.

School districts with high out-of-school suspension rates may benefit from Restorative Practices if they have staff buy-in and maintain consistent practices throughout the school setting. Also, implementing Restorative Practices involves changing years of traditional mindsets. 100% buy-in will not occur, but once staff members see successes like they did at Pleasant Academy, more will likely join the process.

RESTORATIVE DISCIPLINE PRACTICES
IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

by

Michael Daniel Bayless

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Dr. Craig Peck
Committee Chair

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Sandra Bayless. She has always been a rock in my life and forced me to never give up. When I went away to college, she said, “You can be anything you want, except a schoolteacher.” We know how that worked out. Thanks, Mom, for your never-ending support

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Michael Daniel Bayless has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair

Dr. Craig Peck

Committee Members

Dr. Katherine Cumings Mansfield

Dr. Darrell Thomas

August 31, 2022

Date of Acceptance by Committee

August 31, 2022

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This school year is my 25th year as an educator. I began my teaching career in 1997 as a fourth-grade teacher in Lexington, Kentucky. After that first year of teaching elementary students, I realized working with little people was not for me. I moved to the high school level in 1998 as a special education teacher. I remained there as a special education teacher until I became an Assistant Principal of a middle school in 2006. Both the middle school at which I was the Assistant Principal and the high school where I had taught were Title 1 schools that included a high number of at-risk students. With these experiences, working with at-risk students became not just my “way of life”—it became my passion.

Throughout my time as a classroom teacher and school administrator, classroom management and school discipline have always been at the top of everyone’s list of most-needed improvements in schools. Teachers are upset with administrators when they feel appropriate consequences are not administered, and administrators are upset with teachers’ repeatedly sending students to the office for the same (mis)behaviors. It seems like an endless cycle of frustrations and complaints about disciplinary issues that produces no positive answers or outcomes. There must be a way to find some happy medium for everyone.

During my studies at UNCG, I read an article by the University of North Carolina Greensboro’s own Dr. Katherine Mansfield in which she discusses the inequitable disciplinary practices for African American students and students with disabilities. They experience far higher numbers of suspensions than White students and non-disabled students. She points out in her article that these punitive actions put these students at higher risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system. Dr. Mansfield and her colleagues go on to talk about the lack of positive

benefits of punitive actions with students (Mansfield et al., 2018). I know from personal experience that district school boards expect administrators to adhere to a Student Code of Conduct, which prescribes the imposition of punitive actions against students who violate those codes. We continuously impose punitive actions against students, repeatedly imposing the same disciplinary actions, and then we are satisfied with ourselves that we are doing our jobs as administrators. This, in my opinion, is a problem.

I think another problem we face when attempting to change the way we manage our classroom and school discipline is the need to change adult behaviors, including the behavior of teachers, staff, and administrators. If I have heard it once, I have heard it a million times: “Well, it’s the way we have always done it.” My usual response is, “Well, how is that working out for you?” I usually get a blank stare in return. We are back to that endless cycle of frustration and complaint. We must change the mindsets of the adults at the school and district level. Failing to do so, we will continue to face those same disciplinary issues while making no improvements, finding no positive answers or outcomes.

Research has demonstrated time and again that poor student behavior addressed by punitive measures does not improve their behavior; they in fact worsen students’ attitudes toward school, resulting in higher suspension rates, and ultimately, higher dropout rates (Mansfield et al., 2018). We talk about needing to change the way we do things to help our children, yet when we repeatedly see that punitive actions only put students more at risk, why do we continue those practices? I have chosen to research Restorative Disciplinary Practices because I want to bring positive change to my staff’s outlook and behaviors, my students’ outlook and behaviors, and possibly my own. I wanted research Restorative Practices to see if these practices really do make a positive difference not only in the behavior and attitudes of at-risk students, but also in the

behavior and attitudes of all students. I work in a school where we manage behaviors—and, in my opinion, manage them well—because we build relationships with students; however, I think by purposefully and consistently adding Restorative Practice approaches, we can meet the needs of these students so they can move forward with new skills and attitudes to face and conquer academic and life challenges that await them.

Problem Statement

Restorative Justice is a broad term used to describe a growing movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches to discipline. Such approaches have been shown to address physical and emotional behavioral issues while avoiding physical and emotional harm, all this accomplished by collectively solving problems (Mansfield et al., 2018). Restorative Justice has been used in the penal system as a program for already convicted offenders supervised by/in the adult or juvenile justice system; it has also been used in school settings to divert youth placement from the traditional justice system (Mansfield et al., 2018).

In the school setting, Restorative Justice is used as an alternative to traditional, punitive disciplinary actions, such as suspension or expulsion (Mansfield et al., 2018). Most recently, schools have turned to Restorative Practices because of the harmful consequences that punitive disciplinary actions may cause, such as increased dropout rates and students' losing interest in school completely (Losen, 2014). Many schools currently use Restorative Justice or Restorative Disciplinary Practices as a preventive intervention (Brown, 2017). In many cases, these Restorative Practices have been added to existing methodologies or united with other disciplinary approaches, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

There is no one systematic approach to implementing Restorative Justice or Restorative Disciplinary practices in schools; consequently, developing a clear definition/understanding for

what constitutes Restorative Practices can be difficult. Mansfield et al. (2018) stated that Restorative Practices do not have a single definition, but rather represent “a multitude of positive behavioral support approaches in a school that fosters communication, mutual respect and understanding between people” (p. 306). What can be clearly determined in a Restorative approach in schools is a paradigm shift from managing behavior to focusing on building, repairing, and nurturing relationships among students, teachers, staff, and administrators (Hopkins, 2003).

No matter how Restorative Justice in schools is defined and implemented, there are several reasons why schools are turning away from traditional disciplinary approaches. Schools have learned that zero-tolerance policies have substantially compounded the number of students suspended or expelled, with little evidence these suspensions or expulsions have had a positive impact on school safety. Research does, however, link suspension and other school discipline to failure to graduate (Losen, 2014). Racial and ethnic disparities among students who receive school punishments, and the severity of those punishments, present another important consideration in school discipline (Skiba et al., 2002). Another reason schools are turning away from traditional disciplinary approaches is that more school misbehavior is being handled by law enforcement agencies *within* schools by School Resource Officers (SROs) who are on campus daily. In other words, some schools are pressing criminal charges against students’ infractions instead of getting to the root cause of their misbehavior. This is leading to more students being involved with the legal system and contributing to the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Petrosino et al., 2012). These various reasons have led school districts to seek innovative ways to keep schools and students safe and secure without relying on punitive measures that would increase already at-risk students’ potential chances of dropping out of school and winding up in prison.

The philosophy that led to the development of Restorative Processes in the United States in the 1970s was a grass roots movement to address minor legal infractions for those who felt disenfranchised by the criminal justice system (Gavrielides & Artinopoulou, 2014). The literature I reviewed has been consistent in identifying the origin of Restorative Practices as dating back to native cultures of the South Pacific and Americas. These cultures emphasized the offenders' accountability for harm they had caused, along with a proposal for repairing that harm (Vaandering, 2010). Vaandering (2010) describes many frameworks, but conceivably the most significant one is known as "reintegrative shaming theory" (Braithwaite, 2004). Reintegrative shaming acknowledges both the offender and the one(s) harmed. The reintegrative shaming may take the form of requiring a student to publicly apologize for the harm caused. In contrast to negative shaming, reintegrative shaming leads to resolution or compromise that will allow the offender to be reintegrated into the community/school rather than being isolated, suspended, or expelled.

It was not until the mid-1990s that a movement to introduce Restorative Practices into the educational system gained momentum (Gavrielides & Artinopoulou, 2014). In schools, this process of regenerative shaming is usually completed in a Restorative Peacemaking Circle (Coates et al., 2003). In Native American cultures, the Circles were conducted as a community. In schools, the process is meant to bring together all participants, resolve issues, and build relationships rather than impose punitive measures (González, 2012). According to Coates et al. (2003), the Circling Process is the key element in the Restorative Process. In order for it to be effective, participants must keep an open mind, be respectful listeners, and feel comfortable sharing their feelings, all while feeling safe doing so.

These Circles are considered one of the most powerful components of the Restorative Process. Coates et al. (2003) discuss how the Peacemaking Circles encourage the local community to participate. In the school setting, however, the Circle would be limited to those involved *within the school setting*. Brathwaite (2004) notes, “Given that there is now strong evidence that Restorative Practices are perceived to be fairer by those involved and strong evidence that perceived procedural justice improves compliance with the law, it follows as a prediction that Restorative Processes will improve compliance with the law” (p. 48). By substituting compliance with school codes of conduct for compliance with the law, we can see how Restorative Practices can improve the school experience. Tyler (2006) argues that by giving students a voice in the decision-making and procedural process, they will view institutional power, *i.e.*, school power, as fairer and more legitimate. He also goes on to state that empowering youth may lead to better self-regulation without the need for formal disciplinary actions (Tyler, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

School and district leaders struggle with the high number of discipline referrals and high suspension rates, and the effects both have on student achievement. As a result, many schools across the United States have begun to implement some form of Restorative Discipline Practices with a goal of decreasing the frequency of student office referrals and suspensions as well as increasing academic achievement (Steinberg et al., 2013). The purpose of my study was to examine how my school, which I will refer to as Pleasant Academy (a pseudonym), implemented and experienced Restorative Practices. In conducting this research, my overall goal was to examine and describe the practices utilized by Pleasant Academy and compare these new practices with methods we previously used (e.g., out-of-school suspension).

Research Questions

1. What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy?
2. What is the nature of the system for Restorative Practices used at Pleasant Academy?
3. What are faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with Restorative Practices?
4. What changes, if any, have occurred in data and the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of Restorative Practices?

My goal in this research was to explore how staff participated in and perceived Restorative Practices as they were implemented at Pleasant Academy. I documented the experiences of staff in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the structure of Restorative Circles, the key component of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy.

Background

Throughout the country, educators have been responding to student misbehaviors with zero tolerance policies. Those policies have included punitive consequences that have created a discipline gap, resulting in racial disparities when it comes to the delivery of those consequences. Ethnic minorities frequently are given more severe consequences than White students are given. An alternative to these punitive consequences is the implementation of Restorative Disciplinary Practices. The goal of these practices is to cultivate respect and empathy for all involved, as well as responsibility for one's own behavior and choices.

Since the mid-1970's, the roots of punitive discipline grew from what sociologist David Garland (2001) refers to as a "culture of control." Since then, we have seen the decreased number of rehabilitative programs and increased number of punitive laws, not only in society but

also in our schools. During that same period, we have seen an historically high rate of imprisonment in the United States (Garland, 2001). These shifts have resulted in a disproportionately negative effect on people of color and those who live in poverty. Michelle Alexander (2007), a highly acclaimed civil rights lawyer, has said that mass incarceration generates a racial caste system whereby the White majority subjugates people of color. In the United States, one out of 15 African American males and one out of 36 Hispanic males over the age of 18 are incarcerated; in contrast, this is true for only one out of 106 White males over the age of 18 (as cited in Austin et al., 2007). The punitive discipline practices and consequences found in the U.S. penal system can also be found in the U.S. education system when punitive school discipline negatively affects students from various ethnic and racial backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, but it especially affects students of color (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). This trend occurs despite the fact that students of color do not exhibit higher rates of misconduct in comparison to White students (Skiba et al., 2011).

The impact of zero tolerance policies is far-reaching, putting already at-risk students further at risk. The most commonly mandated consequence for zero tolerance policies is out-of-school suspension: remove the wrongdoer and restore classroom/school order and safety. It has been assumed that sending students home to contemplate their misbehavior will result in fewer further transgressions. In fact, punitive disciplinary actions have failed to reduce the frequency of misbehavior and have failed to increase school safety (Steinberg et al., 2013). When students are suspended, they often develop resentment against the staff who turned in a disciplinary referral as well as the administrator who imposed the resulting suspension. Consequently, they become withdrawn and suffer reduced self-esteem (Quin & Hemphill, 2014). When suspended students return to school, they are more likely to exhibit more behavior problems as they continue in

school (Christle et al., 2005). To further complicate matters, students are also affected academically while serving out-of-school suspensions. When students are not in school, they are not receiving instruction and thus they are falling further behind, making them even more vulnerable to dropping out of school and plunging further into the school-to-prison pipeline.

In reaction to this situation, many districts have implemented—or at the very least explored—Restorative Discipline Practices as an alternative to traditional punitive discipline. Restorative Practices challenge traditional practices by focusing on the wrong behavior as opposed to focusing on a law or, in the case of schools, a code-of-conduct violation. Restorative Practices engage directly with the person who committed the offense in to get them to understand how their actions have affected others. By acknowledging and understanding the effects of their behavior, they can begin to repair the impaired relationships with their teachers and peers to prevent a recurrence of the negative behavior. Restorative Practices foster Restorative Justice when these practices are habitually utilized in school communities, and they are most effective when implemented with a multi-tiered system of support (Morrison et al., 2005). Thus, Restorative Circles, problem-solving circles, Restorative conversations, and peer mediations all become vital components of Restorative Practices. These Restorative conversations are centered around the principle of assuring a voice for all those involved: the wrongdoer, his/her peers, the teacher, the staff, and the administration. This is accomplished by the speaker's having a "talking piece," any kind of (safe) object that designates that the holder of the talking piece is the only person who can speak. The others must listen respectfully to that person's voice. This is considered one of the most powerful components of the Restorative Process (Lang et al., 2016).

Schools across the country have demonstrated positive results from incorporating Restorative Justice (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2009). These results have been measured through the school's discipline data. Cole Middle School in Oakland, CA, for example, had both suspension and expulsion rates higher than the district average. After Restorative Practices were implemented, their suspensions decreased by 87% and expulsions decreased by 100% (Sumner et al., 2010). Other schools have reported reductions in the overall number and intensity of disciplinary referrals, violent acts, police tickets, and bullying incidents (Mirsky, 2007). Some schools have reported an increase in students' academic achievement and standardized test scores after implementation of Restorative Practices (Kidde & Alfred, 2011). According to Kidde and Alfred (2011), attendance rates have also remained stable *or* increased after the implementation of Restorative Practices.

Brief Description of Methods

After reviewing literature on my topic, I determined the most appropriate research methodology was qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), with a particular focus on practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). Through practitioner inquiry, I was not only a researcher, but also a research participant. This type of inquiry includes interviewing, surveying, and considering my own thoughts as documented with a reflexivity journal. Reflexivity occurs when a researcher reflects on their own "experiences and backgrounds," which can have an impact on the research (Creswell, 2016, p. 190). I also collected document-based data related to student discipline and teacher working conditions. While I did want to touch on the impacts Restorative Practices have had on Pleasant Academy's out-of-school suspension numbers, my main focus was on seeking to understand how people in my school interpreted their experiences, specifically in regard to the use of the Restorative Circles, and the

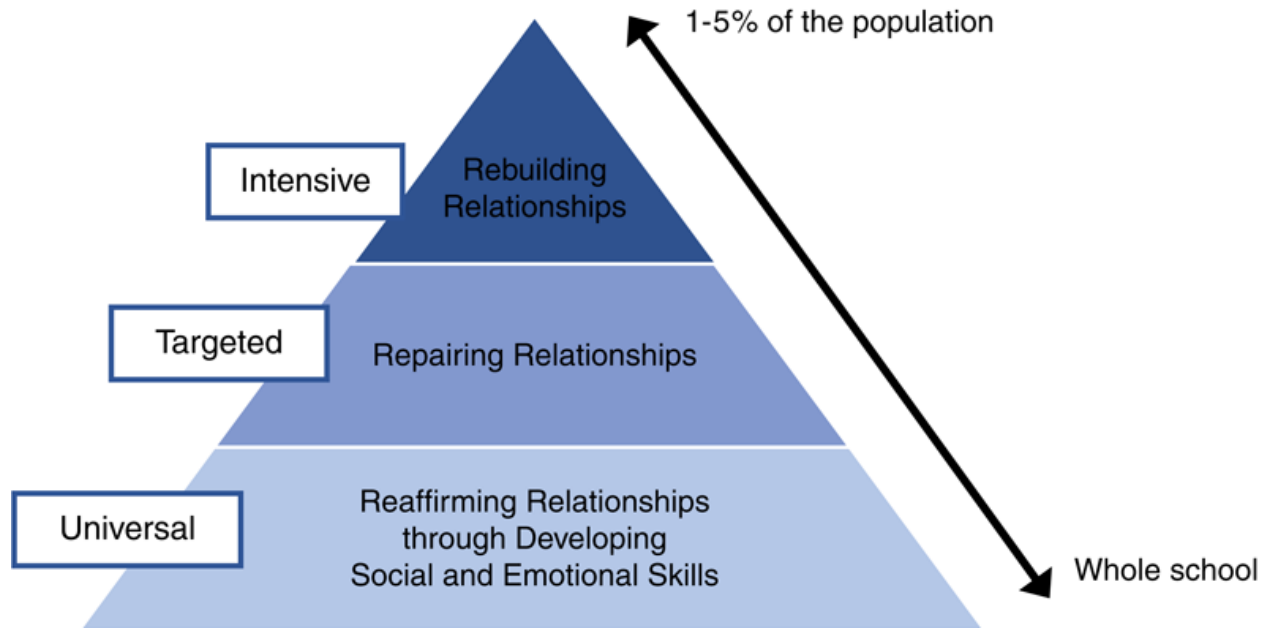
role that Restorative Circles played in the Restorative Practices process. My goal in the study was to explore how students and staff participated in Restorative Practices in order to have a more in-depth understanding of Restorative Justice and what it did/did not accomplish.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework is based on the work of Mansfield et al. (2018), who developed a three-tier model for the “hierarchy of restorative responses” (p. 311). I present these three tiers in Figure 1. The first tier is modeled by everyone within the school, all the time. This is the relationship building tier that includes developing social and emotional skills (Mansfield et al., 2018). This is also the tier where the Restorative Processes are designed with student input. The second tier is the intervention stage, where the aim is to repair relationships through the use of Restorative Circles that are *targeted* to particular groups in particular settings (Mansfield et al., 2018). The third tier is the most *intensive* and is usually experienced by a small percentage of students in the school. This tier is invoked in the event of a serious infraction, such as a fight. These *intensive* Restorative Circles are conducted in an effort to make amends for the infraction, repair the relationship between/among those involved, and reintroduce the wrongdoer back into the school community (Mansfield et al., 2018).

I used the conceptual model developed by Mansfield et al. (2018) to inform how I conceptualized my study and to aid in my analysis of the data I collected. The implementation of Restorative Practices, specifically Restorative Circles, at Pleasant Academy, correlates with these tiers.

Figure 1. Hierarchy of Restorative Responses



Note. Source: Mansfield et al. (2018).

Researcher Experience

I am the principal of Pleasant Academy. At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, I introduced Restorative Practices; after studying materials about Restorative Practices, we decided to implement them. For this study, the participants were the staff from Pleasant Academy. I focused on nine staff members who participated in interviews I conducted after several months of implementation. I also reviewed various documents related to disciplinary data and detailed my use of a reflexivity journal to document how my beliefs and attitudes contributed to the research.

We saw an astonishing impact on our suspension numbers prior to school's closing on March 13, 2020. I have kept track of suspension data since I became principal in 2014. On March 13, 2019, 452 suspension days had been issued for the 2018-2019 school year. On March 13, 2020, prior to school closing, we had issued 121 suspension days. I regret that, due to the

Covid pandemic, we were unable to finish the school year in the traditional face-to-face sense because I wanted to see the results of our efforts for a full school year. Pleasant Academy underwent a major paradigm shift when it comes to dealing with behaviors. Prior to implementation, it was not uncommon for the principal's office to receive five or more discipline referrals *in one day*. After implementation, we might have received one or two disciplinary referrals *per week*.

Significance of Study

When schools began to address the achievement gap and disproportionalities in discipline, Restorative Practices emerged as a promising possibility in reforming school culture and climate as it pertains to the disciplinary structure. This is a complete paradigm shift from punitive consequences to Restorative Practices. According to Schiff (2013), by implementing Restorative Practices, the school-to-prison pipeline can be disrupted while also addressing the national crisis of high suspension and expulsion rates in our schools. My study adds to the growing research regarding the effects of Restorative Practices.

Zero-tolerance policies have proven to be ineffective in punitive discipline models (Skiba, 2013). As a result, educators' use of Restorative Discipline Practices continues to grow. Through Restorative Practices, schools are transitioning away from an emphasis on zero-tolerance infractions/violations of the school's Code of Conduct to eliminate their impact on repeated disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions, particularly with at-risk students. School discipline is perpetually evolving, but for this study, it is important to examine the correlation between the ongoing trend of high out-of-school suspension rates and low graduation rates.

When interviewing, my goal was to examine the implementation of Restorative Circle practices at Pleasant Academy. I wanted to fully understand the specific experiences and perceptions of student and staff participants in Restorative Circles. In using practitioner inquiry, I had the means for studying the multifaceted phenomena of these Circles in my school. According to Adams and Hills (2007), “This approach to research supports the development of knowledge contextualized within specific contexts of practice and is especially suited to work-based learning” (p. 1). Adams and Hills (2007) also conclude that practitioner inquiry within one’s own workspace focuses on “bridging the divide between academia and the employer” (p. 1). This is especially true for my study as I was both researcher and participant. As a researcher and participant, I was able to better understand Restorative Circles through the experiences of the participants and the contexts in which they occurred.

I also wanted to focus on assessing the fidelity of implementation of Restorative Practices and thereby determining whether Restorative Practices encouraged a transformation away from punitive discipline. Restorative Practices are associated with the reduction in discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions (Mansfield et al., 2018). With my study, I hoped to shed some light on teachers’ perceptions and how they incorporated Restorative Practices into their daily classroom routines. I also wanted to gain insight into if and why they thought Circles were so important in bringing about the school climate change I anticipated.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter I began with an introduction of myself and my interest in the topic of Restorative Practices. In Chapter I, I also discussed the problems of zero-tolerance policies and the effect they have had not only on education, but also on the juvenile justice system. Additionally, I

discussed my research questions and my goal for collecting data through qualitative inquiry with a focus on practitioner inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In Chapter II, I review existing research literature regarding Restorative Practices to help give a contextual background. I delve deeper into zero-tolerance policies and how they were instrumental in the development of Restorative Disciplinary Practices. In addition, I explore the school-to-prison pipeline and tie that to zero-tolerance policies and racial disparities. I also consider Restorative Circles, which I believe will emerge as the most effective component of Restorative Practices.

In Chapter III on methodology, I begin by discussing my preliminary investigation of Restorative Discipline Practices. I discuss my pilot study, including my pilot interview. I next presented the methods I used to conduct my research at Pleasant Academy. I describe qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a focus on practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006) and discuss the advantages of using that inquiry approach at Pleasant Academy.

In Chapter IV, I present my findings. I interviewed nine participants who gave their accounts and perspectives on the implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. From those interviews, four prominent themes emerge. In this chapter, I also describe my findings from examining data, including detailing the dramatic decline in out-of-school suspensions that directly resulted from the implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy.

Finally, in Chapter V, I answer each research question with my findings. To deepen my analysis, I connect my findings to existing research. I then discuss the implications of my study's findings regarding implementing Restorative Practices, which focus on building positive relationships, reaffirming relationships through developing social and emotional skills, repairing

harm, and rebuilding relationships. I wrap up Chapter V with my recommendations for future research and my final thoughts on this research experience.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, I will review existing literature regarding current disciplinary practices and Restorative Practices in schools. First, I will give background information on school disciplinary procedures, old and new. I will discuss zero-tolerance policies, trends in disciplinary data, and how zero-tolerance policies have fueled the school-to-prison pipeline. I will examine the history of the school-to-prison pipeline and contributing factors, as well as disciplinary data as it relates to drop-out rates. Another theme that will reappear throughout the chapter is racial disparities: in examining existing research, I found that minority students are suspended at a much higher rate than are White students. I will discuss the impact Restorative Practices have had on racial disparities in discipline.

In the second part of the chapter, I will define Restorative Practices and in so doing, I will discuss the concept of Restorative Circles that will be prevalent throughout this entire dissertation. Throughout my research, Restorative Circles have emerged as the most critical component of Restorative Practices. The Circles are designed to help students deepen their trust and build meaningful relationships with not only other students, but also with faculty and staff. This process puts the victim(s) and offender in direct and open conversation with others who may have been impacted by the offense. In reviewing the literature, I discovered that for Restorative Practices to be successful, there must be buy-in from everyone involved. Hantzopoulos (2013) indicates it is vital to build a positive support system where Restorative Practices can be implemented, and this can only be done if everyone is involved in implementation.

Existing Disciplinary Practices

In this section, I describe the events that eventually led to the development of the concept of Restorative Practices. I explain how zero-tolerance policies were originally intended to target violent actions, but later were expanded to cover other actions of lesser violence, thus unintentionally creating the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2019). I go on to tie discipline data and dropout rates directly to exclusionary disciplinary practices currently used in schools (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Zero-Tolerance Policies

The inception of zero-tolerance policies came about in the early 1980s as a response to violence in schools and the failed war on drugs. These policies targeted violent actions, such as possession of a weapon or drugs on a school campus (Stahl, 2016). The term “zero-tolerance” received national recognition after San Diego Attorney Peter Nunez developed a program with the title of “Zero Tolerance” in 1986. It called for the impounding of sea vessels for drug offenses (Skiba, 2004). The term was then applied to many problems, such as environmental pollution and racial intolerance (Skiba, 2004). By 1989, school districts across the country began implementing their own versions of zero-tolerance policies, specifically targeting drugs and weapons on school property (Skiba, 2004). Later in 1993, in an attempt to eliminate violence in schools, some school districts expanded these zero-tolerance policies to include school disruptions (Skiba, 2004). In another important development, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1993 was signed into law, which required that schools implement a rule that a student be expelled from school for at least a year if he or she brought a gun, knife, or other weapon to school. Schools were then required to report the incident to the criminal or juvenile justice system in order to keep federal funding (Stahl, 2016). Schools obviously did not want to lose federal

funding for not adhering to the new law, so they rushed to create zero-tolerance policies by October 1995 (Stahl, 2016).

The Columbine High School shootings in 1999 became a specific event that altered the practice of zero-tolerance policies and further restricted student rights in United States's school systems (Stahl, 2016). Glenn W. Muschert, an associate professor at Miami University who studies crime and social problems, credits the Columbine shootings with the widespread shift to zero tolerance policies (Muschert, 2019). He mentions that Columbine was not only the event that generated the policy shift, but it was also the peak event in school violence that occurred during the 1990s (Muschert, 2019). The shootings at Columbine caused an increase in school districts' implementation of anti-violence policies that went beyond their original intent (Muschert, 2019). Muschert goes on to say the Columbine shootings inspired many schools to increase their use of security measures such as metal detectors and security cameras. Muschert maintains that the negative effects zero-tolerance policies have had on students and school environments are not conducive to creating positive learning environments.

The tough-on-crime policies of the 1990s and President Clinton's 1994 Crime Bill were also contributing factors to today's mass incarceration crisis (Stahl, 2016). By 1999, schools slowly started adding insubordination, disrespect, profanity, sharing of over-the-counter drugs, and dress code violations under the zero-tolerance policies (Stahl, 2016). Gust (2009) conducted a study where he focused on twelve Blue Ribbon Schools (schools deemed exceptional according to the Department of Education). He was looking at patterns regarding school safety. What he found was that the schools added new infractions to their codes of conduct—including bullying, cyber-bullying, harassment, hate violence, hazing—but in preparation for these potential infractions, they also added language dealing with lockdown procedures (Gust, 2009).

As a result, zero-tolerance policies have led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions. When these exclusionary disciplinary actions led to students not being permitted to attend school, there was an inevitable decline in student achievement and a notable rise in numbers of students falling into the juvenile justice quagmire. Researchers reviewing data in Florida discovered students suspended just one time were twice as likely to drop out of school and twice more likely to be arrested than students who had not been suspended (Balfanz et al., 2015). In schools where Black and Hispanic students were disproportionately represented in suspensions and expulsions, this contributed to a Black-White achievement gap noted in research conducted by Morris and Perry (2016).

According to Stahl (2016), there is no concrete evidence that school safety and behavior have improved due to zero-tolerance policies. Stahl (2016) says, “The only evidence that could potentially support the effectiveness of these policies is the increase in the numbers of students who have been suspended from school” (p. 21). Stahl (2016) also points out that large numbers of suspensions have demonstrated no benefits for the student or schools; perhaps more significantly, there has been no evidence that suspensions changed the behaviors of students. Stahl maintains those suspended or expelled have also been denied the opportunity to receive an education, and those who return to school often display the same behaviors that led to their suspension, resulting in additional suspension days.

Zero tolerance policies typically mandate a prescribed disciplinary action that most often results in an out-of-school suspension. Restorative Practices do not seek to diminish the harm caused by the behaviors that led to disciplinary action, but rather bring the harmed and offender together to talk about the harm and what can be done to repair that harm while restoring the offender to the classroom (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). This highlights the fact that

exclusionary disciplinary practices may give the victim an instant resolution to the harm, but ultimately fails to bring resolution to the situation that brought about the harm. Restorative Practices can open the lines of communication and resolution as well as build positive relationships among students and staff involved in those practices.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Dr. Lisa Cole, sociologist, and journalist, defines the school-to-prison-pipeline as “a process through which students are pushed out of schools and into prisons” (Cole, 2019, p. 1). It is also known as a process of criminalizing youth through disciplinary policies and practices in schools in conjunction with law enforcement (Cole, 2019). Prior to 1975, the incarceration rate in the United States was near 0.1% of the population. This number began to spike with the introduction of zero-tolerance policies (Cole, 2019).

Funding for prisons and incarcerations have doubled since 2007. Evidence shows that Black students are often captured by the school-to-prison pipeline, which also mirrors the over-representation of African Americans in the jails in the United States (Cole, 2019). According to Mansfield et al. (2018), research studies from the past two decades have shown a clear connection between African Americans’ over-representation in jails and significant inequities revealed in out-of-school suspension data. In fact, African American students *and* students with disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than White students (Mansfield et al., 2018).

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander’s investigation exposes disconcerting resemblances among the racial class systems of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, Jim Crow laws, and today’s mass incarceration of Black males in the United States (Alexander, 2010). She writes that although Jim Crow laws are now “off the books,” millions of Black males are arrested for minor crimes, marginalized,

disenfranchised, and trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons, thus denying them basic rights and opportunities that would allow them to become productive, law-abiding citizens (Alexander, 2010). This argument mirrors Dr. Cole's in that zero tolerance policies in schools and their mandates for harsh penalties have contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline (Cole, 2019). Dr. Cole emphasizes that funding for prisons and incarcerations doubled since 2007, and evidence shows that Black students are captured by the school-to-prison pipeline, both mirroring the over-representation of Black males in jails and prisons in the United States that Alexander discussed in her book (Cole, 2019).

A study by criminologist Emily G. Owens (2017) discovered that with the additions of School Resource Officers (SROs), students have contact with law enforcement at an earlier age. They will often be charged for minor offenses that in the past were handled by school officials in conjunction with the school's code of conduct. This study reviewed evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline and substantiates the claim that zero-tolerance policies and increased police presence in schools have exponentially increased arrests and referrals of Blacks to the juvenile justice system (Owens, 2017). Furthermore, a report by Gregory et al. (2016) found that Black students were 26.2% more likely to receive out-of-school suspension for their first offense than White students were. According to Losen (2014), other studies have also indicated a disproportionality in disciplinary actions between White and Black students.

There have been several studies that have shown how the use of zero-tolerance policies have also created hostile learning environments for students and have led to a rise in dropout rates, causing the phenomenon we know as the school-to-prison pipeline (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Losen, 2014). Thus, the school-to-prison pipeline has been an unintended result of zero-tolerance policies in schools. The twin evils of zero-tolerance

policies and the hostile environments they foster have become major contributing factors in the high numbers of minority students disciplined with suspensions and expulsions.

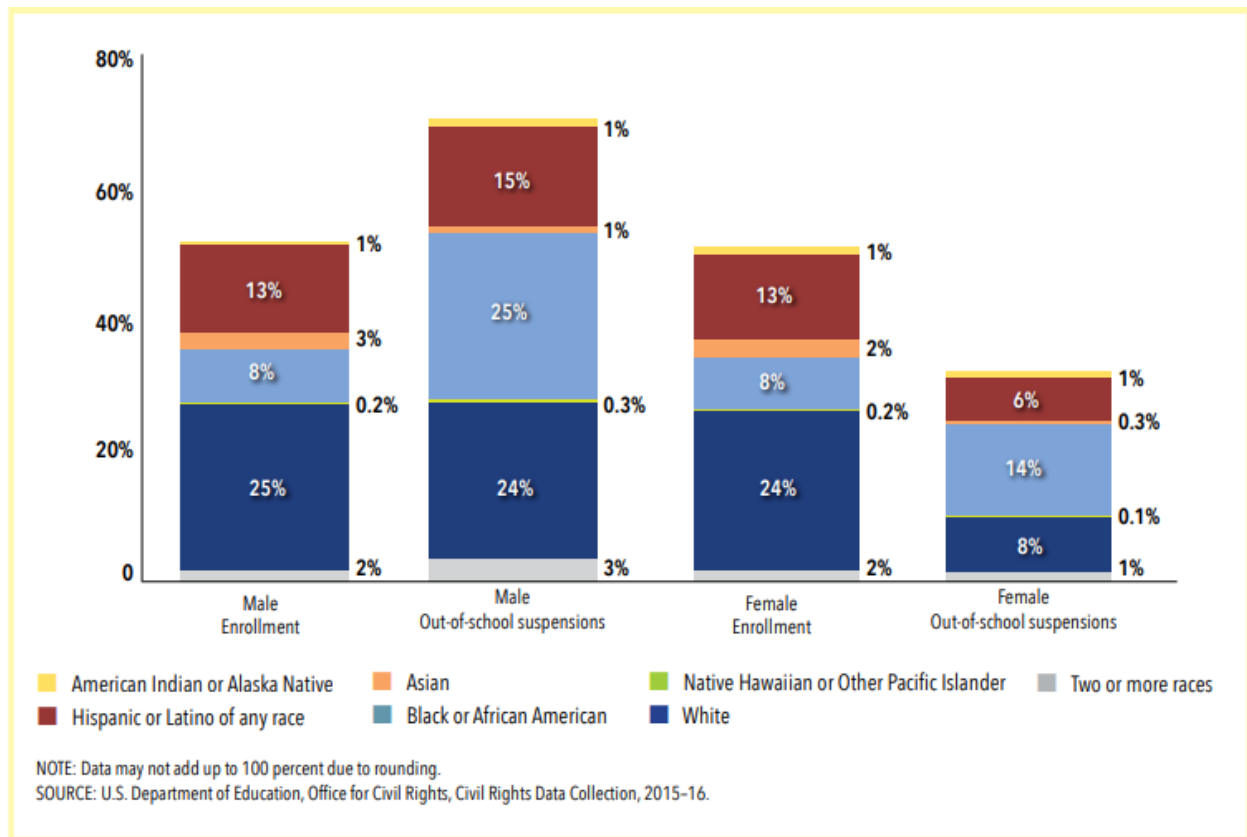
Disciplinary Data and Dropout Rates

The Council of State Governments Justice Center produced a report in 2011 that evaluated disciplinary referral data for 3,900 middle and high schools. The study determined that 59.6% of students had at some point been suspended. It found that 31% of students with one suspension or expulsion repeated a grade level, while 59% of students with multiple offenses did not graduate high school (Fabelo et al., 2011). The report also indicates that 59% of students who had been given out-of-school suspension for disciplinary actions had also been involved with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). Over an 8-year period, the racial disparity trends have not changed. In an article published by Travis Riddle and Stacy Sinclair in 2019, we find the same disparities found in the 2011 report. They emphasize that Black students in the United States are subject to disciplinary action at rates much higher than their White counterparts (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights found a highly disproportionate suspension/expulsion rate for minority students and students identified as having a disability. Figure 2 below is taken from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection (2015-2016). It shows African American males received more out-of-school suspensions than any other group. When referencing out-of-school suspension, I am referring to an instance when a student is temporarily removed from their regular school for a prescribed number of days. Figure 2 also shows the percentage distribution of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions by sex; as indicated by the figure, more males are suspended than females. In this report by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil

Rights, Black male students represented eight percent of enrolled students and accounted for 25% of students who received an out-of-school suspension (2015-2016). These staggering numbers are the reasons many school districts are looking for alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, such as Restorative Practices. In the following sections of this chapter, I outline Restorative Practices and their role in the public education system.

Figure 2. Distribution of Students Receiving One or More Out-of-School Suspensions by Sex



Note. Source: U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2018).

Restorative Disciplinary Practices

Overview

Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices is a broad term that embraces an emergent movement to address school discipline in a non-punitive, relationship-focused, and collaborative

approach. It serves as an alternative to out-of-school suspension or expulsion (Losen, 2014). This approach is often coupled with other non-punitive discipline approaches, such as Social and Emotional Learning, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Throughout my study, I will be referring to some key terms. The terms below are cited from the 2016 article, “Defining Restorative,” written by Ted Wachtel, the founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices in Pennsylvania.

1. **Restorative Practices:** An emerging field of study that evolved from Restorative Justice and offers a common thread to tie together theory, research, and practice in fields of education, counseling, criminal justice, and social work. Restorative Practices focuses on building healthy communities, increasing social capital, decreasing anti-social behavior, and repairing harm to restore relationships. It includes the use of informal and formal processes that precede wrongdoing and [that] proactively build relationships and communities to prevent conflict and wrongdoing (Wachtel, 2016).
2. **Restorative Justice:** A social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making. It consists of informal and formal approaches that respond to wrongdoing after it occurs (Wachtel, 2016).
3. **Restorative Circles:** A practice used proactively to build relationships and communities through dialogue and discussions. Circle activities give participants an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in a safe space that is regulated by certain values and guidelines or agreements. The symbolism of sitting in a circle implies community, connection, inclusion, fairness, equality, and wholeness

(Wachtel, 2016). Participants will have a talking piece, which can be any kind of [common and safe] physical object. The idea behind the talking piece is to give everyone the opportunity to be heard. During a circle, the only person who can speak is the person holding the talking piece (Wachtel, 2016).

Restorative Justice and Racial Disparities

The research conducted by Losen (2014) indicates punitive disciplinary measures have an effect of driving minority and poor students out of school completely, resulting in the “school-to-prison” pipeline that I discussed previously. Research has found that minority students are suspended three times more often than White students (Losen, 2014). Balfanz et al. (2015) suggest a possible explanation for the disparity is a move toward more surveillance equipment/procedures and law enforcement personnel directly in the schools, including security cameras, metal detectors, and random locker searches. These procedures result in students’ perceiving their schools as prisons and themselves as suspected criminals. In addition, zero-tolerance policies leave administrators with very little discretion when imposing disciplinary actions. With that said, it *might* be assumed the disparities arise because minority students are engaging in more serious misbehaviors than White students, thereby warranting a harsher disciplinary action (Morris & Perry, 2016), when in fact Skiba et al. (2002) suggest that students of color may not be committing more serious offenses but are instead receiving out-of-school suspensions for ambiguously defined offenses like “disruption” or “disrespect.” According to Mansfield et al. (2018), imposing school exclusionary actions starts a chain reaction of events that puts students at higher risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, which supports the school-to-prison pipeline argument.

Skiba et al. (2002) discussed staff biases, specifically implicit bias, which may be a leading factor in racial disparity in disciplinary actions. One study on implicit bias in schools determined that teachers viewed Black females differently than other female students (Capatosto et al., 2016). The same study found that Black girls were three times more likely to receive office referrals for similar disciplinary infractions than White girls received (Capatosto et al., 2016). The findings of the study showed that teachers rated incidents as more troubling and warranting of discipline if the student were a Black female or a student who had misbehaved multiple times (Capatosto et al., 2016). Additionally, teachers were more likely to attribute behaviors to a larger pattern and more likely to predict future suspensions if the students involved in these behaviors, were Black females.

Restorative Practices may address disproportionality in disciplinary actions for students of color (Gregory et al., 2016). Restorative Practices can create positive student-teacher interactions by increasing mutual respect, thus creating fewer office referrals for misbehavior. In fact, staff who implemented Restorative Practices consistently had better relationships with their students, and students felt staff respected their opinions and views (Gregory et al., 2016). This is the strength of the Restorative approach. Restorative Practices are built upon empowering students to have their voices heard.

Implementing a Restorative Model and Challenges to Sustainability

Restorative Justice is a term often used interchangeably with Restorative Practices. It is a principle-based method of responding to crime and wrongful occurrences. The focus is to repair harm by requiring the victim(s) and offender(s) to come together in a respectful forum to heal what occurred. The approach seeks a balance among the needs of the victim(s), wrongdoers, and community through processes that preserve the safety and dignity of all (Boyes-Watson, 2014).

When schools move away from the use of zero-tolerance policies, many of them use Restorative Practices as the alternative. The ideologies of Restorative Practices are sometimes compatible with existing school programs that provide behavioral support and teach students coping skills (Schiff, 2013). Ted Wachtel (2016) views Restorative Practices as a reactive tactic that is used only after a violation has been committed, but he also believes that the implementation of Restorative Practices has led to both a significant reduction in youth offenses and an improved attitude among youths involved (Wachtel, 2016).

According to Mansfield et al. (2018), there are some challenges to sustaining a Restorative program. Teacher turnover, for example, can present a serious impediment to the sustainability of a Restorative program (Mansfield et al., 2018). When a school has a high teacher turnover, building capacity in new staff each school year is difficult (Mansfield et al., 2018). Schools can also have a turnover of administrators, which can significantly affect the sustainability of Restorative Processes if the new administration has a different vision. Mansfield et al. (2018) also discuss the fact that funding (or lack thereof) can challenge the implementation and sustainability of maintaining a successful Restorative program.

Restorative Values, Cultures, and Practice

In order to implement Restorative Practices in a school, the mindset of the adults and the overall culture of the school have to change as well (Hantzopoulos, 2013). It is vital to build positive support systems that will enable Restorative Practices to be successful (Hantzopoulos, 2013). It is also important to have respect for humanity, diversity, and truth, as well as a commitment to peace among all involved in the process (Losen, 2014).

In New York City, a study was conducted at an urban school about their Restorative program. They designed their program to be a collaborative, where everyone had a voice. As a

staff, they articulated their core values for their Restorative program. They identified their core values as respect for humanity, diversity, truth, and intellect, with a commitment to democracy, peace, and justice (Hantzopoulos, 2013). They chose to immediately implement Restorative Circles. Before each Circle started, the facilitator reminded the participants of the school's core values as they pertained to their Restorative program. Recognizing that Restorative programs that have been successful have done so by building positive relationships with students (Hantzopoulos, 2013), and recognizing that building positive relationships is a significant element that is necessary for students to have accountability and take responsibility for their own actions, the staff worked to build such relationships both within the Restorative Circles and in their day-to-day interactions with students. Building those positive relationships also meant they had built trust, another factor that makes the Restorative Circles more meaningful and successful (Hantzopoulos, 2013). This school saw a significant decrease in out-of-school suspensions after implementation of their Restorative program (Hantzopoulos, 2013).

Restorative Practices work best when they can be integrated with the school's existing philosophy (Ashley & Burke, 2010). Otherwise, there can be challenges to implementing a Restorative program. In some schools where implementation has not been successful, there has not been buy-in from staff. Some perceive Restorative Practices as being "too soft" on student offenders (Evans & Lester, 2013). Evans and Lester (2013) state that even with staff buy-in, it could take up to 3 years to make a shift so significant to create a "Restorative-oriented" school that changed the culture and climate of the whole school.

Strong professional development for staff is also key for the successful launch of Restorative Practices in schools. Liberman and Katz (2017) note from their research that an approximately 3-week training allowed staff to adequately learn approaches, practice those

approaches, and execute them. Vaandering (2010) recommends educators “live” Restorative Practices by participating in Circles and peace-building activities where they can create a trusting, caring climate. Vaandering (2010) also notes that having staff become active participants increases the effectiveness of Restorative Practices in the school setting.

Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles can be one of the most powerful elements of Restorative Practices in schools. These Circles can be both *preemptive* and *restorative* in terms of healing. They are designed to help students and staff deepen their trust in and relationships with one another. The Circles allow all involved (offender and harmed) to come together to determine an appropriate Restorative sanction as opposed to a punitive disciplinary action. Such sanctions could include community service, apologies, or agreements to change specific behaviors (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). When conducting these Circles, it is important to keep in mind that cultural experiences/differences may dictate how comfortable others may feel when participating, and that appropriate proximity should be considered (Brown, 2017). Brown (2017) goes on to discuss the importance of being culturally skilled as a Restorative practitioner, having the awareness of and sensitivity to the differences in the various cultures involved in the Circle.

Coates et al. (2003) discuss how Peacemaking Circles encourage the local community to participate. Peacemaking Circles are traced back to Native American cultures where the Circles were conducted as a community. In the school setting, however, the Circle would be composed only of those involved or victimized by the offender. According to Coates et al. (2003), the Circling Process is the key element in the Restorative Process. In order for it to be effective, participants must keep an open mind, be respectful listeners, and feel safe and comfortable

sharing their feelings. The process is not meant to impose punitive measures but is rather meant to bring together all participants, resolve issues, and build relationships (González, 2012).

Social Implications

Mansfield et al. (2018) concluded that over a 5-year span, in the schools she researched that implemented Restorative Practices, discipline gaps across race/ethnicity, gender, and special education status shrunk significantly. In their study, they point to some evidence of teacher resistance, which can negatively affect the successful implementation of Restorative Practices (Mansfield et al., 2018). They write, “And while there are still unanswered questions, it is still without hesitation that we encourage school administrators, regardless of their settings, to interrogate and ameliorate exclusionary and inequitable discipline by harnessing the potential of Restorative Practices” (p. 316).

Their recommendation ties into what Tyler (2006) suggests about the use of Restorative Circles. Tyler (2006) argues that by giving students a voice in the decision-making and procedural process, they will view institutional power as fairer and more legitimate. He also goes on to state that empowering youth may lead to better self-regulation without the need for formal disciplinary actions (Tyler, 2006). Brathwaite (2004) notes,

Given that there is now strong evidence that Restorative Practices are perceived to be fairer by those involved and strong evidence that perceived procedural justice improves compliance with the law, it follows as a prediction that Restorative Processes will improve compliance with the law. (p. 48)

Thus, it is possible that Restorative Circles will have consequences beyond the school walls.

Conclusion

Restorative Practices can be a powerful mechanism to build new relationships, repair existing relationships, and make students feel comfortable sharing feelings to get to the root cause of behaviors or incidents. From the research I presented here, it is apparent that Restorative Practices have the potential to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Restorative Practices can provide academic safety for students with failing grades (by avoiding suspensions) and show them an alternative way to deal with conflict. The literature I reviewed has shown even the worst of enemies can become peaceful collaborators after they participate in the Restorative Circle process. By engaging students with their teachers and peers in a meaningful and respectful way, the Restorative Process gives power back to the students, allowing them to settle differences without resorting to violent altercations and disagreements.

As a practitioner of Restorative Practices in my own school, I have a deep interest in Restorative Discipline to create meaningful and equitable change in our school system. The literature on Restorative Practices underscores its potential for revolutionizing and restructuring punitive school disciplinary approaches, thus making the school climate more inviting to everyone. While students come to school to gain academic knowledge, they also need to be socially and civically engaged while growing academically. In my own experience, I have seen first-hand how daily school experiences have an impact on students' identity and sense of community within their school. Coupled with a better understanding of the importance of students' daily school experiences, school personnel can use Restorative Practices and approaches as instruments to address violations and the harm the violations have caused, as well as addressing ongoing disciplinary issues with students (Ashley & Burke, 2010).

CHAPTER III: METHODS

In this study, I conducted qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), specifically in the form of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006). I examined the implementation of Restorative Practices in my school, which I refer to as Pleasant Academy. The participants in this study are staff from Pleasant Academy. I conducted interviews with the staff and examined various documents. I reviewed the interview data, then coded and categorized the data into themes (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). There are several issues related to trustworthiness and ethics I considered since I am the supervisor of all the participants in this study. In this chapter, I detail how I addressed these considerations. I also detail my use of a reflexivity journal to document how my values, beliefs, and attitudes have contributed to my research.

My Initial Interest in Restorative Discipline Practices

My interest in Restorative Practices began four years ago when I started at UNCG as a student in the Ed.S. program. The early phases involved course study at UNCG, including a class with Dr. Mansfield who has experience with Restorative Practices. For a class assignment, I analyzed suspension rates, graduation rates, and school climate at Pleasant Academy, the 6-12 school where I am principal. I also attended a workshop focused on Restorative Discipline Practices. As I thought about the practices described, I began to consider how they might impact the discipline procedures, suspension and expulsion rates, and graduation rates at my school. I also thought about positive changes in all of those, and how they would affect school climate for teachers and staff. After the workshop, I began investigating Restorative Discipline Practices

online and reading articles (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2018) about the process and its implementation in prisons, schools, and rehabilitation facilities across the country.

Eventually I considered the possibility of implementing Restorative Discipline at my school. I approached the Pleasant Academy staff about the possibility, and found they were open to trying Restorative Circles in their classrooms. When we discussed the possible benefits—fewer suspensions and expulsions, higher graduation rates, and improved school climate—they were eager to implement Restorative Discipline practices at Pleasant Academy.

Description of Pilot Interview

For my pilot interview, I conducted a virtual interview with a person who has been a Restorative Discipline trainer for several years. I began the interview and, because I knew the participant, we chatted a little while before beginning. While I used the twelve questions in my interview protocol, I found that we moved into more of a discussion than an actual interview. She is currently a Restorative Justice trainer, and my questions were geared more towards school level practice, questions about resources, and the training school personnel would need for implementation. I was surprised to discover it is reasonably inexpensive to implement Restorative Practices. During the interview, my interviewee told me that when most schools are going to implement a school-wide Restorative Program with her, they start with a two-day training. Teachers are trained in Restorative Circles as well as interventions. She went on to talk about the benefits of Restorative Justice (lower suspensions and improved school culture through relationship building).

This was a “practice run” for me for interviewing via the Zoom platform. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was not able to conduct the interview in person as originally planned. It looked as if Zoom interviews would be the process moving forward. Since that initial interview,

I have become more proficient using Zoom; the record feature proved very beneficial as I reported findings from interviews. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, I had envisioned conducting interviews in person. With the aid of technology and Zoom, I was able to conduct interviews even when we were not in the school building.

Research Questions

After reviewing the literature on Restorative Discipline, and after conducting further consideration into its use in schools, I developed the following four questions to guide my research:

1. What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy?
2. What is the nature of the Restorative Practices used at Pleasant Academy?
3. What are faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with Restorative Practices?
4. What changes, if any, have occurred in data and the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of Restorative Practices?

Through my study, I was able to test my conviction that the implementation of Restorative Discipline Practices, specifically Restorative Circles, at Pleasant Academy would result in lowered referral, suspension, and expulsion rates, perhaps eliminating expulsion proceedings as a disciplinary measure.

Methodology

I chose to conduct qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with a focus on practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006) to investigate and analyze Restorative Disciplinary Practices at Pleasant Academy. After reviewing the literature, it was evident that a

qualitative design with a focus on practitioner inquiry was suitable to examining and explaining implementation of Restorative Practices in the school where I am the principal. When using elements of practitioner inquiry, I conducted both semi-structured interviews and surveys with the staff. I analyzed current and previous suspension data as well as the biannual Teacher Working Conditions survey.

Qualitative methods allowed me to develop a detailed description of how Restorative Practices came into effect at Pleasant Academy and how staff established processes for implementation. By using a qualitative design, I was able to gain insight into the lived experiences of the staff at Pleasant Academy and understand their perspectives concerning Restorative Practices. To do so, I relied on practitioner inquiry, which, according to Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006), “refers to the array of educational research genres where the practitioner is the researcher, the professional context is the research site, and the practice itself is the focus of the study” (p. 1). In focusing on practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006), I told the story of my experiences and the experiences of my staff regarding Restorative Practices, while also analyzing those practices throughout the study. I was the researcher in my own environment as I collected and examined various data sets and various documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, I explored why my school chose to adopt Restorative Discipline Practices and examined the challenges of moving from a traditional consequence-based model of discipline to a Restorative one. Existing research suggests that Restorative Practices can encourage student participation and individual responsibility through the building of strong relationships among faculty, staff, and students. These strengthened relationships allow participants to address the harm caused to individuals, rather than focusing on the policies or

rules broken (Lang et al., 2016). In this study, I examined the implementation process of Restorative Practices in my school with a focus on interventions used at the school level, specifically Restorative Circles. I focused on how participants experienced and made meaning of the Circles while also focusing on the Circles' impact on the Restorative Process. Finally, I analyzed the data and noted the impact of Restorative Discipline Practices on the frequency of disciplinary referrals, the number of suspensions, and changes in graduation rates at Pleasant Academy.

Setting

The research setting was my own school, which I refer to as Pleasant Academy to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Pleasant Academy is an alternative learning program located in a school district in North Carolina that has 36 schools, including six middle schools and six high schools. I provide a more extensive description of the school in Chapter IV.

Sample Population/Unit of Analysis

The participants for this study are the staff at Pleasant Academy. I surveyed a sampling of staff members. I interviewed 10 teachers, six high school and four middle school. A third-party colleague who has been approved through the IRB process, but who was not affiliated with my school, reached out to each participant I had selected to gain their written permission to participate. This is due to the fact I am their supervisor and I wanted to maintain their comfort as participants. I also interviewed the assistant principal, the school counselor, the school social worker, the clinical therapist, and one of the behavior support assistants. I am a participant in this study as well, but I collected data about myself through my reflexivity journal.

Data Collection Methods

I used three data collection methods at Pleasant Academy. I conducted interviews with staff, conducted document analysis, and collected data about myself through my reflexivity journal.

Interviews

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, I interviewed staff using a Zoom platform, which allowed me to record the interview. This method assisted with transcribing the interviews and then coding them as I looked for common themes and practices throughout the interviews. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), “The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest” (p. 123). As a practitioner in the same school, I have an established supervisory relationship with everyone I interviewed. Although I serve as the supervisor to all participants, the culture, climate, and relationships I have established with staff allow staff to feel very much at ease discussing issues with me. I correctly anticipated that ease would transfer into the interview process. I interviewed staff to help me understand Restorative Practices and the meaning of their experiences with the practices, from their point of view (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

In accordance with UNCG guidelines, each participant received a consent form from a colleague not affiliated with my school before they were interviewed. I used an interview protocol for each participant; each group, however, had a different protocol with interview questions relative to their position (see Appendix A and B). I recorded the interviews by using both a digital device and the Zoom video record function. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. I transcribed the interviews immediately following each interview using an application called Otter A. I.

Documents

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “Documents and artifacts are, in fact, a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator” (p. 162). They indicate that “documents include a broad range of material available to the researcher who is creative in seeking them out” (p. 174). For this study, documents encompassed a wide range of artifacts including written materials, publications, reports, letters, figures, and tables (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell go on to say that finding “relevant materials” (p. 175) is the beginning of the process, followed by a systematic approach to analyzing those materials that the researcher develops. With this in mind, I compared data from both before and after the implementation of Restorative Discipline practices for various disciplinary actions, most notably out-of-school suspensions. These data included discipline referral data *prior to* Restorative Practices implementation and discipline referral data *after* Restorative Practices implementation. In reviewing literature, a common theme emerged: African American males were suspended at a much higher rates than other students were (Austin et al., 2007); therefore, these data from Pleasant Academy were reviewed as well.

Reflexivity Journal

Throughout this study I kept a reflexivity journal to allow me to reflect on my positionality to ensure it did not improperly influence my interview response data. During this process, I learned staff gained as much from the Restorative Circles we conducted in staff meetings as the students did when they participated in Circles in the classroom. I made anecdotal notes in my journal that helped keep me focused on student and staff experience. This journal also helped keep me focused on transcribing and reporting the interviews; the journal helped me remove background knowledge of staff members from my reporting to limit bias.

The reflexivity journal also helped me to identify my own predetermined assumptions about what I thought participants' responses would be; consequently, I was surprised by some of them. I used the information collected from this journal to enlighten my exploration and understanding of my staff perceptions of the Restorative Process. I also used this journal to document my own growth throughout this process.

Data Analysis Strategies

In this section, I describe how I made sense out of the data I collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used the data to attempt to answer my research questions. I looked for emerging themes by coding interview transcripts.

Interview Analysis

Pleasant Academy is a small school. As I stated earlier, I interviewed a sampling of the staff. Savin-Badin and Major (2013) recommend the interview be transcribed "verbatim," meaning to express or "characterize the data" (p. 419) using the same words originally used. When I analyzed interview transcripts, I followed the steps (code and convert into themes) laid out by Savin-Badin and Major (2013). When reviewing the data, I noticed the behaviors, patterns, relationships, and interactions that stood out. Savin-Badin and Major (2013) refer to this as "coding" (p. 421). Coding occurs when you assign a descriptive label that depicts the meaning of each data segment (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). Through coding, common topics, terms, and ideas emerged. My coding was analytical, meaning I derived codes based on what I believed was occurring (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). Savin-Badin and Major (2013) suggest asking the following questions about the data when engaged in analytical coding: "What is going on? What are people doing? What is the person saying? What do these actions and statements take for

granted? How do structure and context serve to support, maintain, impede or change these actions and statements?” (p. 422).

Once I had completed coding, I identified main themes from the interview portion of my study. Savin-Badin and Major (2013) noted, “a theme is a unifying or dominant idea in the data and finding themes is the heart of the data analysis process” (p. 427). Once the themes were identified, I was able to present the themes, which constituted findings from my study.

Document Analysis

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “The term *documents* is used broadly to refer to printed and other materials relevant to a study, including public records, personal documents, popular culture and popular media, visual documents, and physical artifacts” (p. 106). For this study, I reviewed the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey of Pleasant Academy, which is a bi-annual report generated by the Department of Public Instruction for every public school in North Carolina. The report already presents comparisons between Pleasant Academy and other schools in the district, as well as comparisons between Pleasant Academy and other schools in the state. We use this data to help us understand teacher retention through the working conditions of the school as well as the culture and climate of the school. I chose to analyze this document because by initially looking at the document, Pleasant Academy has far better numbers overall than the district, and in some instances, the state.

I looked for differences in those data in respect to the components associated with teacher working conditions. The TWC Survey measures professional development, school leadership, facilities and resources, teacher empowerment, management of student behavior, instructional support, and community support and involvement. For the purpose of my analysis, I focused on what our teachers reported in regard to their opinions about teacher empowerment and

management of student behavior. The data analysis of the Teacher Working Conditions Survey included identifying patterns and making a connection between student-teacher relationships when it comes to establishing a positive culture and climate at Pleasant Academy. I sorted the Teacher Working Conditions Survey for teachers who completed it for the 2018 and 2020 surveys.

I also analyzed student discipline data, with a focus on out-of-school suspensions. As I mentioned in my literature review, exclusionary disciplinary practices are disproportionately applied to a particular group of students, such as racial/ethnic minorities (Mansfield et al., 2018). I looked at suspension data up to three years prior to Restorative Discipline Practices being implemented and suspension data after Restorative Practices were introduced to see if suspension numbers went down. At Pleasant Academy, there was a significant drop in out-of-school suspensions in the 2019-2020 implementation year when compared to previous years. I compared those data and trends to data and trends that occurred after Restorative Practices were implemented at Pleasant Academy to determine if the implementation of the Restorative Practices correlated with the significant drop in out-of-school suspensions.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

I studied my own school, which resulted in ethical considerations since I am the supervisor of all the participants. It was important to establish trustworthiness through openness, acting with respect and establishing integrity about how I would gain information from the participants who were also my subordinates. All aspects of the study (including the focus of the research, analysis of the interviews, survey and documents, and the conclusions drawn from that analysis) were oriented toward uncovering and revealing what is known and can be known about Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) point out that an

important feature “shared by many forms of practitioner inquiry is that notions of validity and generalizability are legitimately established in ways that differ from traditional criteria of transferability and application of findings (often, the identification of causes and effects) to other populations and contexts” (p. 510). Cochran-Smith and Donnell (2006) proceed to state that “with some forms of practitioner inquiry, notions of validity are similar to the idea of trustworthiness, which has been forwarded as a way to evaluate the results of qualitative research” (p. 510). The participants all know me, so dialogue played an important part in establishing trustworthiness. Living in a research space of dialogue meant that I was asserting ideas and reflecting on them, inviting alternative interpretations, and seeking multiple perspectives (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2006).

I utilized a reflexivity journal in contemplating how my background, values, beliefs, and attitudes may have played a part in my research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016), refer to the researcher-participant as “the hyphen,” and explain that “‘working the hyphen’ refers to studying the Self-Other conjunction—in essence, the researcher-participant relationship and how one affects the other in the research process.” (p. 63). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) go on to discuss how as a researcher and participant, the researcher will have to “grapple” (p. 63) with issues and take into consideration if/how being both a researcher and a participant will affect the research process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend using a reflexivity journal to create self-awareness of the “influence” the researcher may have on the research process. As a result, I used this reflexivity journal to write down my thoughts and attach them to the research. As I mentioned before, this journal helped keep me focused on the interviews and helped me recognize I was interjecting my own background knowledge of the participants into my reporting, and that I needed to mention in those sections how, as their supervisor, I had this

knowledge. It was my goal in using the reflexivity journal to acknowledge and address the presence of subjectivity in my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

My goal with this research was to make generalized conclusions about Restorative Practices in my school, but I took into consideration the confidentiality to the interviewees (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Those I interviewed and surveyed have entrusted me with sensitive information. Careful consideration to prevent any type of harm was certainly a priority. I took every precaution not to inadvertently cause harm through my questioning. I took every precaution to protect the identities of all participants. I ensured that real names of subjects are not part of any data I collected.

Limitations

The Covid-19 Pandemic has proven to be challenging for the entire world. In part because I could not travel to other schools and institutions to study their use of Restorative Practices, I did a study of my own school, which creates the limitation of a small sample size. Students at Pleasant Academy are transient, with the majority attending Pleasant Academy for only one semester. This limits the amount of academic data that may relate to Restorative Practices; it also limits how much any improvements in academic success can be attributed to Restorative Practices. In this study, I am not trying to assert that Restorative Discipline Practices would work for all situations or that everyone should adopt them, but rather I am trying to demonstrate the efficacy of implementing them at Pleasant Academy.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the methods I used to conduct my study. In Chapter IV, I present my findings. I revisit my research questions and briefly answer each question in Chapter

V. I also connect my findings to existing research and suggest/contemplate further research into the continued use of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Since the mid-1970s, Americans have seen an increase in punitive laws, not only in society, but in schools. In education, these are a result of zero-tolerance policies that lead directly to the most often mandated disciplinary consequence: out-of-school suspension. These zero-tolerance policies have failed to reduce occurrences of student misbehaviors and have failed to increase school safety (Steinberg et al., 2013). Punitive measures do not address the physical and emotional behavioral issues many misbehaving students display; rather, the punitive actions temporarily (or permanently) remove them from the educational environment (Mansfield et al., 2018). Restorative Justice or Restorative Practices is an approach that addresses physical and emotional behavioral issues while avoiding physical and emotional harm (Mansfield et al., 2018). This approach provides an alternative to the traditional punitive actions taken for misbehavior while also allowing students to solve their own behavioral problems. A Restorative approach is certainly a paradigm shift from managing students' behaviors to building and repairing relationships among all involved (Hopkins, 2003).

The purpose of my study was to examine how my school, Pleasant Academy, implemented and experienced Restorative Practices as a means of addressing student misconduct in a more positive, non-punitive way. My research questions were:

1. What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy?
2. What is the nature of the Restorative Practices used at Pleasant Academy?
3. What are faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with Restorative Practices?

4. What changes, if any, have occurred in data and in the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of Restorative Practices?

In this chapter, I share the findings from my study. First, I describe Pleasant Academy and provide brief profiles of each of the participants. I then explain how and why our school implemented Restorative Practices before describing themes from my interviews and results of my document analysis.

Setting and Participants

Pleasant Academy is an alternative learning program located in a school district in North Carolina that has 36 schools, including six middle schools and six high schools. Pleasant Academy serves grades 6-12, drawing students from all 12 secondary schools in the district. There are essentially three programs running at the same time at Pleasant Academy: the Therapeutic Program; the Alternative-to-Suspension Program; and the Behavioral Intervention Program, which is the largest program. The Behavioral Intervention Program is the general population, identified as students who have behavioral issues that impede their learning and/or the learning of others. This population makes up thirteen classrooms. There are two Therapeutic classrooms, one middle school and one high school. For students to be eligible for these two classrooms, they must be identified as Exceptional Children (special education) and have a mental health diagnosis. These two classrooms each have a teacher and two behavior support specialists; all students in these two classrooms have access to a full time Therapeutic Counselor. The Alternative-to-Suspension Program serves students throughout the district, grades 6-12, who have been suspended from their schools for 3–10 days. This program is grant-funded through the Department of Juvenile Justice. Entrance priority is given to those students who are involved in the Juvenile Court System. The students in this program are transient: they are only at Pleasant

Academy for 3–10 school days and, as such, they are not a part of the student body of Pleasant Academy. This program was not part of the study since Restorative Practices have not yet been implemented with the students in this program.

There are four ways by which a student may be admitted into Pleasant Academy. An application process must be completed by the sending school. An independent committee at the district office reviews the applications. This committee determines whether the student is appropriate for and in need of the services provided by Pleasant Academy. The second way a student may become enrolled at Pleasant Academy is by the Superintendent's assigning them to the school. Students may be placed by the Superintendent for various reasons, but most students placed by the Superintendent are placed for disciplinary reasons. The third path to being enrolled at Pleasant Academy is through receiving a long-term suspension, which could range from 11 to 365 days, at the discretion of the superintendent or the Board of Education. Students who come to Pleasant Academy due to a long-term suspension have violated one or more of the district's Student Code of Conduct rules. The length of placement is typically based on the severity of the code of conduct violation. Finally, the fourth way for students to be placed at Pleasant Academy is through the Exceptional Children's Department (special education). This department only determines placement for the two therapeutic classrooms, the middle school, and the high school. Again, for students to qualify, they must be identified as having a disability, or they are in the process of being identified as having a disability. These students have a mental health diagnosis, and a full time Clinical Counselor works with each student in these classrooms.

Pleasant Academy employs 33 staff. The student support team is comprised of two administrators (Principal and Assistant Principal), school counselor, school social worker, clinical therapist, and three behavior support assistants. Pleasant Academy has three high school

exceptional children (EC) teachers: one is the teacher for the therapeutic classroom, one teaches the occupational course of study courses (for students with a low IQ who cannot successfully access the general curriculum), and one provides EC services to students enrolled in the general curriculum courses. The middle grades have two EC teachers, one of whom teaches the middle school therapeutic classroom while the other one provides EC services in an inclusion setting. Both middle and high schools have one English, Social Studies, Math, and Science teacher; in addition, we have three elective teachers—health and physical education, career and technical education, and our newest addition, art—who all serve both middle and high school students.

The faculty and staff at Pleasant Academy are comprised of 33 adults, including 18 teachers, one counselor, one clinical therapist, one social worker, and five paraprofessionals. Four of the 18 teachers have been teaching for less than 5 years, and six started their careers at Pleasant Academy. Two veteran teachers requested a transfer here from another middle school in the district. While much of the student population is transient, the majority of faculty and staff have been at the school for 9 years or more. On several occasions, they have proven willing to innovate and adapt practices to ensure positive outcomes for our students. When I approached them about implementing Restorative Discipline Practices, they were very willing to give the practices a chance.

Pleasant Academy piloted Restorative Discipline Practices during the 2019-2020 school year and saw significant changes in the number of out-of-school suspensions. At the time schools closed due to Covid-19 in March 2020, we served 154 students. Of the 154 students who attended Pleasant Academy, 49% of them were assigned to Pleasant Academy because they had been recommended for Long-Term Suspension from their home schools. The demographics during that school year: 50% African American, 42% White, and 8% Hispanic.

Participant Profiles

Mr. Avery: Mr. Avery is a member of the student support team as the school social worker. He is African American, and he plays a vital role in the success of Pleasant Academy, working with students and families to ensure their basic needs are met. He has facilitated many Restorative Circles. Mr. Avery has been at Pleasant Academy for 5 years.

Mr. Avery seeks to involve staff in various situations within the school. He is now a cheerleader for Restorative Practices, especially Restorative Circles. He said, “Restorative Practices are just another way to kind of help strengthen the relationships that teachers have tried to build with our students.” Mr. Avery is also the intake coordinator, meaning he is the first person families meet when they bring their students to enroll at Pleasant Academy, and he is proud to broadcast what we have done with Restorative Practices.

Mr. Bixby: Mr. Bixby is the classroom teacher for our therapeutic middle school classroom. He is a White male and has extensive experience working with students with mental health diagnoses. Mr. Bixby was at Pleasant Academy previously for two years, then left to work for another school district, but then returned 3 years ago to assume his previous role.

Mr. Bixby admittedly sees the value of Restorative Practices in the therapeutic environment. He said, “I wasn’t sure this was going to work with my kids because, well, you know, they are wired differently and have warped perspectives on school and rules, but I was very surprised to see them acclimate.” He continues to adapt Restorative Circles in various ways, not just for conflict resolution.

Ms. Clark: Ms. Clark is currently one of two high school exceptional children’s teachers. She is a White woman who had previously served as a high school English teacher and art teacher. Ms. Clark left Pleasant Academy after 4 years to teach in another district, but she

returned after only one year away to assume her current role. Ms. Clark, apart from the one year she worked for another district, has been at Pleasant Academy since it began in 2012.

Ms. Clark understands the environments from which our students come. When asked about how we show our students we care, she said,

Meeting basic needs and first understanding students may not have been home, not have slept or eaten. They need their laundry done and may need to bring home canned goods.

We are that support for many of these kids. This is how we show we care.

Mr. Knox: Mr. Knox is a White male high school math teacher. Mr. Knox is the first teacher I hired when I became the principal. He has been teaching at Pleasant Academy for the last 8 years. He was one of the staff members resistant to Restorative Practices at first. He was one of the most frequent writers of office referrals and wanted to know within minutes of turning them in what was going to happen to the student who committed the infraction. He grew tremendously the year we implemented Restorative Practices *once he got on board*. Now he uses Restorative Circles on a regular basis.

Mr. Knox said of relationship building, “I try to create, nourish and foster positive relationships, not only among staff, but also with students.” When Mr. Knox first came to Pleasant Academy, he struggled with building relationships with colleagues and students. Restorative Practices formalized the process and, he admits, helped him in this growth area.

Mr. Leonard: Mr. Leonard is a Hispanic male high school science teacher. He has been at Pleasant Academy for seven years. Since the implementation of Restorative Practices, he has been a leader in the school. I credit him with getting resistant staff on board with Restorative Practices. He demonstrated to others how to effectively lead Restorative Circles; he showed their

efficacy by pointing to the resulting reduction of disruptions in his own classroom. Mr. Leonard was a key component to the staff's full acceptance of Restorative Practices.

Mr. Leonard is probably one of the most involved teachers on staff. He is a member of several committees and often advocates for students in meetings. When asked how he views relationship building, he said, "I think it is simply talking to them, getting to know them and their interests. They can detect when someone is being fake. If they know we really are interested in them and their interests, we have hooked them."

Mr. McDonald: Mr. McDonald is a White male high school English teacher. He has been at Pleasant Academy for the past 3 years. Mr. McDonald is very skilled in building relationships with students who are typically hard to reach. He was on board with Restorative Practices from the beginning. As he saw it enhance relationship building with the students, his reputation for good teacher-student communication grew. Students often requested that he lead their Restorative Circles, even if he was not one of their teachers.

Mr. McDonald said something profound in his interview, and I have used the example many times. He said of our student's parents, "You know, they are sending us their best." This was very thought-provoking for me: the parents of our students are sending us the best they have, and it is our job to do the best with them while they are under our care.

Ms. Parker: Ms. Parker, an African American female, is one of two staff I did not hire at Pleasant Academy. She came from the previous alternative school that was closed by the district and rebranded as Pleasant Academy with an entirely new staff. Ms. Parker has been at Pleasant Academy for ten years but has a total of 23 years of education experience. She is the middle school English teacher and has been a supporter of Restorative Practices from the beginning.

Ms. Parker said of the school culture, “I don’t want this to sound negative because it’s not meant to be negative, but when newer adults coming on board struggle at first because they do not understand the very strong culture established and it takes time. They don’t realize we are not using daily point sheets as a punitive measure, and we don’t use ISS (in-school-suspension) to take a child’s voice away.” Pleasant Academy does have a strong, established, student- focused culture and when new staff join Pleasant Academy, especially veteran staff from other schools, they often struggle as they are accustomed to traditional disciplinary practices.

Ms. Spokane: Ms. Spokane, an African American woman, is the clinical therapist who supports the two therapeutic classrooms at Pleasant Academy. She has been at Pleasant Academy for nine years, but not always in her current role. She was previously Pleasant Academy’s graduation coach. She completed her therapist certification, and when the therapist position opened at Pleasant Academy, she moved into it. Ms. Spokane was the loudest voice of those who were opposed to Restorative Practices. She said numerous times in trainings that the kids need to be held accountable for their actions. Once she saw how the attitudes and behaviors of the students were shifting and saw the dramatic drop in out-of-school suspensions, she came on board with Restorative Practices. Now she uses Restorative Circles more than anyone in the building.

Ms. Spokane was the most outspoken critic of Restorative Practices when it was introduced, and now is probably the staff member who utilizes it the most in her role as the Clinical Therapist. She said, “Well, you know, it was no secret that I said this was not going to work that this was just one more thing we will try for a year, then shelve. I’ll be damned Bayless, it worked.” She and I have laughed many times over her interview, but she tells her colleagues from other schools to come see it to believe it.

Mrs. Spencer: Mrs. Spencer is a White woman who is the former Assistant Principal. She has seventeen years of experience in education. Before becoming the Assistant Principal at Pleasant Academy, she was a third-grade teacher in the district. She was moved by the district to another middle school in the 2021-2022 school year. She had been my Assistant Principal nearly 8 years and was a committed leader in implementation of Restorative Practices. She agreed to be interviewed about her experiences with Restorative Practices even though she was not here for the current school year.

Mrs. Spencer is a strong student advocate who believes in all programs and efforts that help students academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. She said,

One of the most important components we have in place at Pleasant Academy is our mentor program. Kids get very comfortable with their mentors and tell them about any troubles they are having. This allowed us to use Restorative Practices to intervene when we heard of conflicts or potential conflicts.

She is correct. Many Restorative Circles came about in the high school wing as a result of students confiding in their mentors.

Context: Implementing Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy

I became an assistant principal at Pleasant Academy in 2012 under the previous principal. He established the tone of the school by demanding that staff at Pleasant Academy build relationships and genuinely care about the kids. He was at the buses every morning and shook the hand of all students when they got off the bus. He was not just greeting students; he was assessing them, but they were unaware. He knew from that handshake the attitude of each student. If he noticed when something was “off” with a student, then he would alert staff, especially those staff who might have already built a relationship with that student. He set the

expectation for staff to be at their door or in the hall supervising and welcoming each student into the class, all the time assessing them as well. When I became head principal, I continued his expectations and have carefully selected staff who share these values. But even with this warm environment of concern for our students, I knew we could do more to help them grow and improve their lives.

Many schools like Pleasant Academy have come to realize that zero-tolerance policies are not fixing the problem of out-of-school suspensions or other punitive disciplinary actions, let alone addressing student misbehaviors themselves. In recent years, there have been many incidents of students being charged with crimes at school due to School Resource Officers (SROs) being on site, capable of arresting students and thereby contributing to the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Petrosino et al., 2012). While the arrests remove belligerent students from the learning environment, they also increase the likelihood that those students will drop out of school. This prompted my school, Pleasant Academy, to explore options other than punitive disciplinary actions and/or legal procedures to keep students out of the pipeline and decrease the chances of their dropping out of school.

In their article “The Potential of Restorative Practices to Ameliorate Discipline Gaps” (2018), Dr. Katherine Mansfield et al. highlight how punitive actions put African American students and students with disabilities at far greater risk of being involved in the Juvenile Justice system than the remainder of the school population. They also point out that school officials are continuously executing the same punitive disciplinary actions without seeing changes in student behaviors. According to Mansfield, punitive measures do not improve student behavior and in many cases make behaviors and attitudes toward school worse. In fact, in the school-to-prison pipeline continuum, Pleasant Academy is the last stop chance in the educational system before

students are thrown into that pipeline. Many of the high school students who have been assigned to Pleasant Academy are African American, students with disabilities, and students already involved in the Juvenile Justice system. Punitive disciplinary practices were making them vulnerable to becoming dropouts. It must be noted, however, that Pleasant Academy has not disproportionately suspended African American students but has in fact suspended more White students. This has been the case since my first year as principal and it has remained constant throughout the implementation of Restorative Practices.

When students are placed at Pleasant Academy, it is usually due to violating the zero-tolerance policies at their home schools. For example, during the 2021-2022 school year, sixteen students were placed at Pleasant Academy either for being caught with trace amounts of marijuana or for possessing paraphernalia used to smoke it. *All but two were first offenders.* These students are most often charged with drug possession and entered into the penal system, sending them directly into the school-to-prison pipeline. I also mentioned in Chapter II that in 1993, these zero-tolerance policies were expanded to include school disruptions (Skiba, 2004), which are still in place today. Many students who are placed at Pleasant Academy are placed due to various disruptive behaviors, which in many cases are isolated incidents (e.g., first offense fighting). Since over half of Pleasant Academy's students are students of color, their placement confirms the notion of minority students being at high risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline: their home schools have sent them to Pleasant Academy, the last educational stop in the pipeline.

We know from the research I presented in Chapter II that these zero-tolerance policies have led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions (Balfanz et al., 2015). These zero-tolerance policies also led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions at Pleasant Academy prior to the

adoption of Restorative Practices. As mentioned before, these zero-tolerance policies usually mandate a prescribed disciplinary action, which is most always out-of-school suspensions, and the research tells us these punitive measures do not change student behaviors (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

In 2019, after taking a course at the University of North Carolina Greensboro with Dr. Mansfield, and after having attended a workshop on Restorative Practices, I decided to conduct a book study with the staff at Pleasant Academy to initiate conversations about implementing Restorative Practices to address our suspension and drop-out rates. Perhaps because most of the staff at Pleasant Academy are younger and not “set in their ways,” and perhaps because I had hired everyone on staff (except for the receptionist and one teacher), they were willing to try new and innovative ideas to help students. I started noting their responses to the book studies and discussions in a Reflexivity Journal. After the book studies, the staff was clearly interested in Restorative Practices and how it could possibly lead to higher levels of student success; thus, implementation of Restorative Practices began at Pleasant Academy in August 2019.

Through our book studies, we realized that a key component of Restorative Practices was the Restorative Circles. Using Restorative Circles to foster good communication and encourage behavior change was essential to affecting school-wide change. Staff were somewhat nervous about their ability to lead Restorative Circles, so we began using the circles to start each staff meeting, modeling the process among staff to learn how a Circle is structured to help them use the Circles effectively with students. Staff began each meeting by breaking into two smaller groups in a modeled Restorative Circle. We used Circles to continue our book study, having a different group lead the discussion every Tuesday at our Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting. The Circles became a means for them to discuss issues close to their daily lives:

their classrooms and how they managed them. Participating in staff Circles also taught staff how to implement guidelines and conduct Circles with students. After determining that we wanted to pursue Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy, the staff committed to implementation of the practices, particularly Restorative Circles, in their classrooms.

Interviews: Four Key Themes

I interviewed nine staff for this study. I had originally planned to interview ten, but one staff member did not want to be interviewed. All the staff interviewed were eager to schedule a time with me and gave very detailed responses. All were eager to address what they saw as most important to Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy: the essential nature of Restorative Circles and relationship building; the culture and climate of our school when we implemented Restorative Practices; and the importance of sustaining a dedicated staff year on year were voiced by all participants. After addressing those components' importance, I broke this section down into the four main areas that emerged as themes when I coded the transcriptions.

Theme 1

All participants recognized that Restorative Circles are the most powerful component of the Restorative Process in that they develop relationships and proactively respond to wrongdoing, problems, and conflicts.

Students became accustomed to Restorative Circles and eventually came to request them when problems arose instead of attempting to handle conflict on their own through negative means that could cause them to eventually face behavioral consequences. Mr. Avery, our school social worker who often leads Restorative Circle training with the staff, was interviewed first. When I asked, "What does Restorative Justice look like at your school?" he responded,

Currently, it looks like a circle. So, one of the Restorative Activities we have included is the Circle process. We have all involved parties of any kind of situation, harm, or conflict; we have support individuals who provide additional support while in the Circle. We name values of what we want people to adhere to while we're discussing situations and from there, we get an explanation of situations at hand, and then kind of talk through ways that the situation could have been handled differently, but also look at ways that we can work to repair the relationship of the individuals involved. So, once the circle has concluded, everybody is in a better place, and we can do what we try to do here every day and that is start fresh and new relationships are usually built.

Mr. Avery makes an important point: "everyone is heard and respected." This ensures the students feel heard, valued, and part of the learning community. This is part of the democratic process mentioned in Chapter II in which having all voices heard and respected helps to create a safe place to take responsibility, and spills over into addressing discipline at other times (Braithwaite, 2004). Mr. Avery's assertions resonate with the importance of establishing values such as respect and trust; thus, every Restorative Circle at Pleasant Academy starts with establishing values (Hauntzopoulos, 2013). These values support the process of building relationships and the students' buy-in to the Restorative Process, and over time reinforce the idea that Restorative Circles are a safe place.

Mr. McDonald told me during his interview that he did not have a lot of administrative support at the larger school where he taught before coming to Pleasant Academy, so he learned to "build relationships and leverage relationships so that could encourage students to exhibit the proper behaviors." When asked what Restorative Justice looks like in the school, he responded:

I think one of the best parts of Restorative Justice at Pleasant Academy is that it loses and blends and fills and spills into a lot of different parts of our school day. It may not be a formal full Circle, with full rotations and a committed time, but Restorative Justice looks like greetings in the morning, our staff genuinely excited and enthusiastic to see students in the morning asking about how is your family doing? How was that job going? How was that issue you told me about on Monday going? All these things solidify the relationships with the students.

Mr. McDonald does a very good job with building relationships with students, and he prides himself with leading Restorative Circles. He was one of the staff members slow to embrace Restorative Practices at first, but with implementation, he became a building leader. When I asked him to describe his role with the Restorative Program, he was very excited and animated while answering. His response to the question, “Can you describe your role within the Restorative program?”:

Absolutely. I think one of the best parts of Restorative Practices is that it levels the playing field and can help break down a teacher-student dynamic. It puts everyone in the same Circle on kind of the same page. So, it has been a blast for me to facilitate Circles, I've had a lot of fun with very fun kind of goofy Circles with friends and students just to break the ice and get folks to open up. And then I've also had a lot of success facilitating and leading Circles where very, serious, heavy, sentimental conversations took place.

Mr. Bixby teaches one of our two therapeutic classrooms. He has a rich background of working with exceptional children, especially students with mental health challenges. Prior to the interview, I was curious to hear his perceptions of Restorative Practices since all his students have a mental health diagnosis and often process situations differently than other students. We

specifically discussed challenges with implementing Restorative Circles with his class. He said the Circles were surprisingly successful with his students. When asked what the process has been like for him, he responded,

Um, I mean, it's just been another tool that we can use. I don't feel like it's been difficult. ... You might have a little uncomfortable, uneasy feeling when you first do it, but I don't feel like it's been any kind of trouble. I feel like it goes well. I feel like our students, once they know what to expect, they kind of enjoy it, they realize that they're going to gain something from it, especially those that have some buy in. My kids will now ask for a Circle if there's any kind of conflict.

Once the interview was over and I stopped recording, Mr. Bixby shared that he was very surprised his students adapted to Restorative Circles as well as they did. He noted that his students typically have a difficult time adapting to changes in their regular routine, but he also shared that once he saw how well they were working with his students, he made Restorative Circles a part of his regular, consistent routine for both behavior and academic purposes.

Ms. Clark is a high school special education teacher. I asked her to describe her initial thoughts and perceptions about Restorative Circles and her role in implementing them at Pleasant Academy. She responded,

in my preconceived notion of Restorative Justice Circles, was that it was just sort of getting to know you, relationship building, surface level stuff. I didn't know how much more deeply it could be applied and how meaningful and deep they could be until you implemented it at Pleasant Academy. ... As far as my role, I think it does redefine it as not being as much of the teacher in the traditional sense, but the head of the classroom, someone the kids feel comfortable sharing deep things with and it's all because of the

trust we have built through these Circles and the guidelines and parameters set from the beginning. When you see students sharing and it's deep and it's honest and it's like, wow. It's, it's like I'm almost honored. That's so valuable, I think.

Ms. Clark describes the process of moving from her traditional role as an authority figure overseeing the classroom to taking a more democratic, interactive role. She was initially concerned with appearing to be their "equal" and "vulnerable," but she talked about it being the contrary as it gave her more access to the students through the trust-building that occurs in Restorative Circles. I went on to discuss trust building and asked her why she thinks it sometimes takes a while to build that trust. She explained,

Well, you have to take time to learn who they are. You must get to know one another, and they have to feel safe in their environment ... I have also learned to be patient because everyone comes from various backgrounds and their demeanor may come off as rude or disrespectful when in their mind, that is how they communicate.

Ms. Clark confirms how trust-building within Circles is a measured process, reinforced by the Restorative Circle guidelines set forth at the beginning. Despite small hiccups at the beginning of the Circle process with students, Ms. Clark maintained the Circles were very powerful, and she works overtime to develop the trust and relationships necessary to the Restorative Process.

Mrs. Spokane is the clinical therapist on staff. She has been in education for twelve years, with nine of those years spent at Pleasant Academy. She began the same day I began working at Pleasant Academy. She has witnessed many changes at the school during my time as the principal, so I was looking forward to hearing her views. I wanted to know her perspective on

our shifting from a punitive model to a more Restorative one, then moving into Restorative Circles. She explained,

... I think what we do here is make our students know that no matter the mistake, you always have an opportunity to come back and be a part of this community, you're still going to be valued, you're still going to be respected. ... even though you're making mistakes, you can learn from those mistakes, and you can grow from them without having to be discarded from the community like they have been in other situations.

Mrs. Spokane discussed that over the years at Pleasant Academy, we have changed the mindset of how we approach situations with students. We as a staff came to realize traditional approaches were not working. Specifically, zero-tolerance punitive models did nothing to help these students learn and grow from their mistakes. Mrs. Spokane would be the first to tell you she does not like change. I knew she was going to be reluctant to implement Restorative Practices since it took her out of her comfort zone. She said during her interview, "I did not like change. I am always going to be resistant to it at first, but once I have, you know, wrapped my head around it and decide that I'm going to be all in, then I'm all in." She went on to say the Restorative Circles were another tool to add to her toolbox for therapy. When asked about her initial thoughts or feelings about Restorative Circles, she responded,

So initially, honestly, I kind of was like, what's the point or I was a little unclear on how it was supposed to work. As a therapist, I was really not sure how this was going to work in certain situations, like our therapeutic classrooms. You know, those students perceive and process situations much differently than say our population that has not been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. I was actually shocked to see they not only handled them well, but they also often ask to have them.

Mrs. Spokane was really excited to be interviewed and speak about the Restorative Process; she had become a staunch believer even though she was the one staff member who initially resisted even trying the Restorative model. During the interview, she went on to talk about how the Restorative Circles were not only powerful for the student, but also for the staff. I asked her to describe a time when a circle stood out to her. She recalled,

... one of my favorite ones honestly was at the beginning of this school year. In the Circle that we led, we talked about those things, and we brought them to the table. It was really comforting to hear from my peers, you know, that they were experiencing the same apprehension that I was experiencing, and that everyone was experiencing in that Circle. ... I just think it really made us a lot more compassionate to one another and made us even [think] this is what the purpose of a Circle is, like, the feeling that I got from that moment was like, this is why we do this and so, that one really stands out to me.

In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned that I never anticipated the impact the Restorative Circles had on the staff until I conducted these interviews for my study. My intention in conducting a Circle at every staff meeting was to model them and to keep that fresh on their minds. It never occurred to me they would benefit from using the Circles as well. As a result, I have made sure we begin every staff meeting with a Circle.

The last person I interviewed was my former assistant principal, Mrs. Spencer. Mrs. Spencer played a critical role in training the staff on Restorative Practices. I sent her to various trainings, and she led many of our trainings on using Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. Mrs. Spencer is in her eighth year as an assistant principal. I hired her in her first administrator role when I began my tenure as the principal. She was my right arm until the district moved her to another middle school site where they needed a strong assistant principal.

I was very curious about how Mrs. Spencer was going to answer the questions about her initial thoughts and perceptions about Restorative Circles. Although she did an amazing job training the staff, she had never voiced to me how she felt about Circles.

My initial thought, I was pretty interested in it and of course in my mind, I mean, I was wondering how this was going to look in our school, an alternative school. How are we going to implement this? What are we going to do? So, just a lot of questions. ... I was concerned that many were not going to get on board with it ... see it as something else we are throwing at them, but they didn't do that at all. I was very surprised at how well and fast they took off with it ... the more we modeled Circles before each staff meeting, everyone was doing them spot on, then we began to see a very dramatic shift in the number of discipline referrals we were getting and even a bigger shift in our out-of-school suspension numbers. I couldn't believe it. Kids were requesting Circles when issues were coming up. The Restorative Processes had a bigger impact than ever anticipated.

I looked back at my reflexivity journal, and I too expressed the same concerns Mrs. Spencer expressed: we were not sure how we were going to implement Restorative Practices, how it would look in the alternative setting, and whether the staff would buy in. She and I visited schools where Restorative Practices were being implemented before we implemented them at Pleasant Academy, but none of the schools we visited was an alternative school. In fact, we were unable to find any other alternative school that was implementing Restorative Practices, which I now find to be unbelievable after seeing how well it worked for Pleasant Academy.

Theme 2

Every participant recognized relationship building as a critical component of the Restorative Process.

The second theme that clearly emerged through coding the interviews is that relationship building is a critical component of the Restorative Process. Pleasant Academy has traditionally done a great job with relationship building, but many referenced in their interviews that Restorative Practices made it a more formal process, causing the staff to be more consistent in using their relationship building skills. I asked the same interview questions of everyone. I will begin this section with my interview with Mr. Avery, the school social worker. He was asked about the kinds of relationships that are encouraged between the staff and students at Pleasant Academy.

Definitely positive and supportive ones and we don't want students to feel like they're not appreciated or valued in the building. One of the things we pride ourselves in doing is assigning students to particular teachers, who might be able to reach them in a way that other staff could not. We even ask if students have someone in the building that they can mention by name so that way, if there's ever a situation where they could be of benefit, we can already try and use them. The staff meet often to discuss student issues and they talk about which staff member may have a better relationship with certain students. The staff really works as a family at Pleasant Academy. Yeah, just like a family we have disagreements, but at the end of the day we are going to do what's right for our kids.

Pleasant Academy is a unique environment in that the staff meet and discuss student issues on a regular basis. They do not meet to complain, but rather to problem-solve. As the school social worker, Mr. Avery is privy to many situations going on in students' homes that

spill over into the school setting. He can relay some of that information to the teachers, which gives them a better understanding of why some students are exhibiting the behaviors teachers are seeing.

I was trying to get deeper into the relationship building piece from his interview because he is an educator who goes out of his way to know all the kids and the issues they are facing. I asked him how he thinks caring for students is modeled at Pleasant Academy. Mr. Avery noted,

It could be as simple as greeting them when they show up in the morning. We are a uniform school, so if students are not in the proper dress code, we try to get them items that will make it easier for them to get to class faster. If a student looks as though they're having a hard time, we tried to give them breaks or pull them separately to give them a minute to kind of gather themselves or talk with them just to check in, being additional support, when they're having struggles as it relates to academics. I'm just honestly interacting and engaging them as much as possible to get their day going on a positive note as soon as possible.

Mr. Avery is the point person at Pleasant Academy who sees to the physical needs of the students. When families cannot afford the school uniform, we supply them with one. Mr. Avery sees to that. He is the lead contact for the student support services team at Pleasant Academy. When he is leading professional development sessions for the staff, he always ties everything we do to building those positive relationships with our students. Mr. Avery discussed how a Circle can be used in a way to address harm or conflict. He shared how the Circle Process sometimes leads to positive relationships being made among students or between students and staff. This role of relationship building in Circles emerged throughout the interviews as a prevalent concept, which is evident in my findings.

Student participation in these circles has exceeded expectations. With the initial implementation I was not sure students would participate, but we quickly found they wanted to talk, and they wanted someone to listen. Now they finally had a forum in which to accomplish those goals. It took staff a while to get used to my not immediately assigning traditional punitive actions for infractions *if/when* students participated in a Circle. Yes, we have the ideal culture and climate and open-minded staff to implement this, but some were puzzled that the administration was not delivering consequences like in the past. Students are still given consequences for misbehaviors, but those consequences look much different now. For example, I had a student this year who had a verbal altercation with another student in the classroom, which caused a disruption of learning for the entire class. I told the student I was going to assign her three days of in-school suspension, with the option of my dropping two of those days if she would participate in a Restorative Circle with the class she disrupted. She opted to participate in the Restorative Circle; thereafter, if any kind of conflict arose with this student, she has been quick to say, “let’s circle up.” “Circle up!” has become common language at Pleasant Academy!

Mrs. Spokane is the therapist for the two therapeutic classrooms. I asked her about what Restorative Justice looks like in our school.

... to me, it looks like a lot of collaboration. And so, discipline and just a Restorative Process is not a top-down thing. We’re all equal members of the team. And so, each staff member gets a say, kind of on how they think things should be handled through, you know, administration, and there’s a respect that’s there for that person’s opinion. That doesn’t mean it always goes, you know, the way that that teacher or staff member wants it, but it is a collaborative process. And there’s a lot of discussion on how things should be handled. It’s not just one or two people deciding how one situation is

going to be handled, especially when that person who decides wasn't even involved in the incident. So, I just think of collaboration when I think about Restorative Justice here.

Mrs. Spokane painted a clear picture of how many processes are done at Pleasant Academy which also gives some insight into the school's culture and climate. Most every major initiative at Pleasant Academy is approached collaboratively and with discussion. She mentions that staff expect someone (an administrator) to decide about something when they were not involved in the incident, but Restorative Practices, by the very nature of its process, forces the people involved to collaborate to find a solution.

I posed the same questions to Mrs. Clark about the relationships that are encouraged among everyone at Pleasant Academy. Mrs. Clark is a veteran member of the staff and has seen the school evolve into what it is today. Her response was:

I think with your colleagues, between staff, I think we try our best to be open and honest. We try to not let conflicts fester amongst ourselves. We do a good job communicating with each other when something is bothering us. I inherited the role of one of the other teachers who went on to be an assistant principal at another school to be sort of the mouthpiece for high school whenever I can. So yeah, we stick up for each other. We communicate as openly as we can, when there's a problem, we do what we can to address it. With students, we start over every day. We do our best for the next day to not start off on a bad foot as a carry-over from the previous day. Our students know we do not hold grudges and tomorrow is a new day, but yeah ... our staff is just open, empathetic, respectful, like just fundamentally respectful, but also with the expectation that respect will be earned in both directions.

Mrs. Clark took on the unofficial role as the teacher representative of the high school after the teacher who formerly had the role took an assistant principal job in another school. She usually keeps me abreast of the metaphorical temperature of the building in the high school wing. The other teachers feel comfortable sharing concerns with her to bring to me. Mrs. Clark is one of the teachers who consistently models relationship building; when asked about what Restorative Justice looks like in our school in terms of relationship building, she explained:

Restorative justice for us looks like, I mean, on the most basic level, getting to know the students and having them get to know each other and know us to just be proactive and better build relationships. If we have conflict, if we have any incidents, if anything needs to be worked through, the student or students who are involved in whatever took place and any staff who might be related, we are better equipped to have a Circle because we have taken the time to build those relationships and their trust. I have seen students several times have conflict that I honestly didn't think they would resolve it because it was that serious and I really didn't want to conduct a Circle because I thought it would get worse, but because both parties trusted me because of that relationship piece, we were able to have a successful Circle. This process has drastically decreased on-going student issues because it allows us to address it, address it quickly and have a resolution. It works!

Mrs. Clark has become very proficient with leading and conducting Circles. Students having conflict will often approach her to ask if she will circle up with them when she may not even be their teacher. The culture has shifted: students and staff alike are quick to have a Circle. It has become *Standard Operating Procedure* at Pleasant Academy.

Mr. Knox is the high school math teacher. He has been at Pleasant Academy for eight years and has a total of nine years teaching experience. Mr. Knox is a very analytical person. He is always talking sports statistics with colleagues and debating the athletic abilities of various teams. His thought processes are meticulous and methodical, and it translates into his teaching. I was almost certain his interview was going to be somewhat analytical. I began with the same question about the kinds of relationships that are encouraged between all staff at Pleasant Academy. Mr. Knox responded,

Um, I would say flexible, and cooperative is probably the most important thing. Being a small staff, being able to work together, and discuss and finding out ways that work with our students, um, because we do typically have a more difficult clientele as far as students are concerned. So, when we have successes, being able to adopt the successes that other teachers have, and being able to be flexible, and changing up what we're doing, to help others be successful, that outside of the generally, you know, getting along with each other and enjoying each other, but I think as far as professionally, the flexibility and cooperation is the big, big thing that we work towards.

When Mr. Knox was in his first two years of teaching at Pleasant Academy, he sent a lot of discipline referrals on students, many of them for very low-level offenses. Early in his career with us, Mr. Knox struggled to build relationships with his students, and I think that is what led to his having disruptions in his classroom. Now, to hear him speak of being flexible and cooperative, I believe he's finally gotten it. I think the implementation of Restorative Practices, and the formality of having a Restorative Circle to talk about issues in his classroom, have all but put an end to the low-level behavior problems that once were common in his classroom. I pressed him about what relationship building looks like for him now. He explained,

Relationship building for me was tough when I first started here. I had limited success with it my first couple of years. I honestly didn't think I was cut out for the alternative school. I treated classroom discipline like I did when I taught in the regular middle school. You do this infraction; I send a referral and consequences occur. The kid would eventually come back to class and resent me for having sent the referral, then more negative behaviors would ensue. When we began implementing Restorative Practices, it finally clicked with me, um, yeah, I was reluctant to do it because it was way out of my comfort zone, but the entire staff seemed to be into it. I didn't want to be the only one resistant, even though I knew I wasn't comfortable. After I led a few Circles with some minor things happening in my class, I began to see a shift in how my kids treated me. I think they respected me. It forced me to really get to know them and things happening in their lives that I otherwise would never have known. Like, um, some of our kids are really going through some things in their lives and I had no idea, so this experience has opened my eyes and think has made me be not only a better listener, but a better teacher.

Mr. Knox has written many fewer discipline referrals since implementation of Restorative Practices. He reiterated in his interview that Restorative Practices made him reflect on how he conducted his classroom, how he interacted with the students, and how he was finally able to build relationships with students. As many have stated in their interviews, Restorative Practices provided a formal process for building relationships with students. In the case of Mr. Knox, it has helped this very analytical, 'black-and-white' teacher, finally see the gray areas and begin to form meaningful relationships with students.

Mrs. Spokane, the clinical therapist, discussed how we care for the students at Pleasant Academy. She reiterated that we provide everything for the students at Pleasant Academy, so they at least do not have to worry about those outside issues.

So, we provide free breakfast, ... each of our kids has something to eat, even if the bus comes late, or they arrive late, we make sure they're fed, we provide clothes for them if they need to. They don't have to; they don't have to have any sort of materials. We provide all of that for them. And just naturally, our staff gets to know each and every kid that walks in the door. And so, it's very personalized. And we know our students inside and out. We know as soon as they walk off the bus, does it look like a good day? Does it look like a bad day? We're very much in tune with what's going on. And we give them so many opportunities to share with us what they need and how we can support them. So, I just think I would pat ourselves on the back with how much we care for our kids.

Mrs. Spokane and other staff talked with great pride about how we take care of our students' every need, physical and emotional. Mr. Leonard, our high school science teacher, echoed this pride when he talked about the staff's regard for not just the students, but one another. Mr. Leonard is another teacher who has grown tremendously while at Pleasant Academy. He is in his eighth year as a high school science teacher. His only educational experiences have been at our school. He had not planned on being a teacher, but it was something that just "fell in his lap." During his interview he talked about wanting to quit after his first day. He said he had no idea what he was doing. I do remember him coming to my office after that first day to tell me he did not think he was cut out for this job. I remember telling him to give it a few weeks as we had several support systems built in to help him succeed. Eight years later, he is one of the best science teachers in the district. He was a finalist for the district

teacher of the year two years ago. He is now a building leader for Restorative Practices, as well as a model teacher for building relationships with students.

When asked specifically about the relationships that are encouraged at Pleasant Academy, he was eager to respond. He stated,

... having the ability to communicate with each other is definitely encouraged and the staff Circles really help with that ... when we do have these staff Circles, I think it's really reassuring and nice to hear that a lot of the concerns I have, a lot of other staff members are having, you know, some of the same issues. I think that helps because it lets me know I'm not alone in the situation.

While Mr. Leonard took great pride in improved relationships and communication among staff, he also referred to previous practices with students that he no longer considers acceptable since the implementation of Restorative Practices. During our interviews, he explained these practices when I asked him to describe the culture and climate of Pleasant Academy prior to Restorative Practices being implemented.

Yeah, um, I think we always had a good culture and climate. But there's, there's definitely a difference. I think, prior to we were definitely a no tolerance, no nonsense school, where if it was no, there was no exceptions, right? If somebody did something wrong, they would either get ISS or OSS immediately and then would be expected to kind of just go back in the classroom. Um, I do think that teachers have always been supportive and care about the students when they wanted this done, but I think in terms of like, penalizing students have definitely been different. I know, we kind of had the idea of poking the bear to get those disruptive kids to blow up and get them out of class quicker, which is something that we definitely don't do anymore, nor should we do.

Mr. Leonard mentioned the term, “poking the bear.” I had overheard a staff member use this term once prior to Pleasant Academy implementing Restorative Practices. I inquired into its meaning and could immediately tell the staff member was very uncomfortable explaining it to me (as they should have been). “Poking the bear” meant to purposefully escalate a student’s behavior, causing them to lose control and to either walk out of class or necessitate someone coming to escort them from the class. Often students escalated this badly would receive consequences as dictated by the student code of conduct, and staff knew this. I discovered in my reflexivity journal that I had directly addressed “poking the bear” in a Restorative learning session; that plus studying Restorative Practices seemed to cause the staff to question this behavior. When we implemented Restorative Practices, many of the staff realized that when they “poked the bear,” *they* were the cause of the problem.

The staff at Pleasant Academy are a very close group of people. The majority are friends outside work. They have built that camaraderie amongst themselves. This translates into their being comfortable sharing with each other honestly and consistently. The staff works as a cohesive unit this way. When Mr. McDonald answered the question about what kinds of relationships exist at Pleasant Academy, he responded much like Mr. Leonard did about staff interactions:

We are very, very supportive. ... we like to share our strengths and show off our strengths. We’re very very kind about who is great at what, and we try and support each other in areas where we do need a little bit of improvement. ... I like the mix of keeping things positive and supportive are musts, at a school with as many needs as we have and so, that is how I would characterize our relationships.

Mr. McDonald was elected chair of the school improvement team by his peers this year, I think in part due to his passion and ability to work with all the staff. He is not only an advocate for his students, but also for his colleagues. His quote is another example of most all the staff substantiating the supportive culture of the school.

Mrs. Spencer, the former assistant principal at Pleasant Academy, spoke about relationship building at length during her interview.

You know, um, at Pleasant Academy, we have relationship building down to an art. Every student has a mentor, and we carefully match students to a mentor and again, it goes back to that family feeling. The students bind to that too. They feel that it's family, they see how everyone interacts with each other. Um, it's funny to watch when students first begin, and ... They're kind of like "oh, I don't know about this place and these people." They quickly see that it is like a family, and they don't want to leave, and Restorative Practices has helped staff that were not good at building relationships get better with that.

Mrs. Spencer really took off with leading the trainings for Restorative Practices. Over the Summer, she and I looked at materials for staff book studies prior to implementation. She was excited to get started, and her excitement infected the staff. In May 2021, I had written in my reflexivity journal a conversation with Mrs. Spencer that indicated that I was pleased with the progress the staff had made with implementation. It noted that my expectations had been exceeded: we had nearly 100% buy in from staff. I reflected seeing three Circles occurring in one day and speculated that perhaps more had occurred I didn't know about. I stated that staff were implementing Restorative Practices with fidelity, and that our out-of-school suspensions had dropped 75% compared to the school year prior to implementation.

Theme 3

Most participants credited the school's positive culture and climate for the successful implementation of Restorative Practices.

Last April, I wrote in my reflexivity Journal about my end-of-year evaluation for 2018, looking specifically for the culture and climate section and reference to the 2018 Teacher Working Conditions Survey. I also wrote about my end-of-year evaluation meeting with the Superintendent. He had a folder on the table labeled "TWC 2018, PA," which meant, Teacher Working Conditions Survey, Pleasant Academy. The surveys had just been released that day. Since I had not had a chance to view them prior to my evaluation meeting, I had no idea what he was going to address. He began by saying something like, "I have been a superintendent a long time and have overseen many alternative programs, but I have never seen one quite like yours. I have never seen an alternative school's working conditions survey look like this." Remember, at this point I had not seen our working conditions survey and was not sure where he was going with his conversation with me. He continued, and I am paraphrasing at best from my recollection of the meeting, "84% of your teachers indicated the school is a good place to work and learn and that's unheard of for an alternative school where staff turn-over is usually paramount." He went on to ask how I have a low staff turnover rate and low staff absenteeism and I simply said, "It's the culture and climate, and staff enjoy working there." That superintendent retired not long after that, so he was not around to see that 84% satisfaction rate jump to 96% on the 2020 Teacher Working Conditions Survey.

The staff at Pleasant Academy credit the culture and climate of the school for the success of Restorative Practices implementation. Throughout the interviews it was repeatedly cited as the reason many students thrive in this alternative school. Mr. Avery stated, "I do not believe just

any school could have pulled off what we did in such a short amount of time with implementing this and yielding such quick results and it all goes back to the culture and climate here.” Mr. Bixby said, “It’s our relationships here that help us grow and this unbelievable culture and climate was conducive to implementing Restorative Practices with such consistency.” I must agree with their statements. I had written in my reflexivity journal that if we were as consistent in teaching the academic standards as we have been in implementing Restorative Practices, we would have significantly higher test scores.

Mr. Leonard referenced the school’s culture and climate when he was talking about a time when a particular Restorative Circle stood out to him.

I think the staff Circles help me the most. Um, I think when we do have these staff Circles, I think it’s really reassuring and nice to hear that a lot of the concerns I have, a lot of other staff members are having, you know, same things, issues and I know I am not alone. I also think our staff Circles go well because of the culture and climate of the school. We all feel very comfortable sharing any concerns in an open and accepting environment without fear of, well, judgment from others. ... in this environment, we can disagree with each other, and it doesn’t create animosity. Everyone here knows we are here for the kids and um, well, yeah, they are the focus.

Mr. Leonard recently started a chess club after school for any student interested. I was surprised to see eight to ten students stay for chess as they waited on buses. He told me during the interview that they have a great time, and he gets to know other students he doesn’t teach, and they are very competitive. I mention this because it is one example of how teachers at Pleasant Academy take the initiative to engage with students outside of the academic day. The

staff realize this enhances the culture and climate of the school as well as forges their relationships with students.

Mr. McDonald is another teacher who goes out of his way to have conversations with hard-to-reach students or those students who have been given up on by other schools. He started a book club, and he has on average four to five students each day. He talked about things like how the book club and chess club would not be possible for kids like ours at a regular school because they fall through the cracks. He pointed out many of our students are experiencing academic success for the first time, mainly because they have not been suspended and they know they have people who care about them as individuals.

Yeah ... these kids come from broken homes, many of them are on probation for criminal activity in the community, their regular schools have given up on them, so yeah, they have a lot to overcome. They come here expecting more of the same thing when they mess up, but no. Instead of being slapped with In School Suspension or better yet, out-of-school suspension, we circle up. When they are new to us, they are like, "What is this? You mean I'm not going home for a few days?" Sure, the code of conduct says they should go home, but what we have discovered here, that doesn't get to the root of the problem and certainly doesn't help the kid that's already been out of school multiple days for the same dang behaviors. Before now, no one has taken the time with these kids to find out just what in the heck is going on. The caring culture of this place [plus] the addition of Restorative Practices is keeping these kids in the classrooms, learning instead of on the streets. Sorry, I get a little worked up about this, but yeah, we are knocking it out of the park over here with I would say is the lowest suspension rate in the district. At the alternative school!

Mr. McDonald is very passionate about working with at-risk students and does get very animated and worked up when talking about it at times, but he said, “I am very fortunate to be working in a place with a culture and climate that is conducive for these kids.” When conducting the staff interviews, it was reassuring to me that the staff feels we made the right decision when we chose to implement Restorative Practices.

I asked Mr. McDonald the same question about why he thought Pleasant Academy adopted Restorative Practices. He approached the question from a more academic standpoint, noting,

As we all know, not much will get done academically if the student is not behaving and able to be in the right place and stay focused on academic work. And so, dealing with some of the needier students in our district, and with the extensive amount of supports that some of our students need, Restorative Disciplinary Practices were a great opportunity for us to address some of our conflicts and some of our crises on campus with a more Restorative mentality. And so, we were a perfect fit to look at Restorative Practices and I think a lot of the misbehaviors that we saw repeated before we instituted and kind of fostered our Restorative Practices ... may have seemed to be minor instances, that added up to being larger situations. So, lots of disrespect. And lots of apathy ... particularly with some of our students that benefit from such increased support. And I think that when students can work in a Restorative manner, in kind of a Circle, where they're really with their teachers, I think this breaks down the teacher student dynamic that I think can be at the core of a lot of the disrespect, the non-compliance and the resentment of teachers. And so hopefully, some of those misbehaviors can be mitigated

by building relationships with students so that we don't even get to any of the places where we need some of the more punitive punishment.

Mr. McDonald could not have articulated more perfectly how my vision for Restorative Practices has worked at Pleasant Academy. We have always dealt with the most at-risk population in the district. With Restorative Practices, we quickly learned that forging those positive relationships while making the concerted effort to build trust and mutual respect are *both* essential for the success of the Restorative Process, and perhaps more importantly, *for the success of our students*.

Ms. Clark also touched on the school culture and climate being one of the main reasons implementing Restorative Practices has been successful at Pleasant Academy. When asked about her thoughts on the culture and climate, she responded.

Um, I think we've always been very welcoming at Pleasant Academy. We are strict and structured, but we must be, or we would quickly have an anarchy situation. Our strictness and structure have always come from a place of caring, I think. I do think as the year goes by and we get more and more students, it gets harder to manage and the personalities get more conflicting and clashing with each other, but the staff stand together for those challenges. We get tired and burned out and tired of seeing the kids, you know, not in our hearts, just due to our energy level each day. The staff for the most part are always united when it comes to doing what we need to do for the kids.

Ms. Clark mentioned after her interview that she returned to Pleasant Academy because the one year she was away, she realized how much she missed the culture of Pleasant Academy and the support she felt from everyone here.

Mr. Knox, the high school math teacher, has had some struggles over the years with connecting with the students as well as other staff have been able to connect. He talked about that when I asked him his thoughts on the culture and climate. He responded,

You know I have struggled with some of our more difficult students and building those relationships. It hasn't been as easy as it is for other staff and I struggled with that when I taught in a regular setting, but the difference here is, I know I have the support of my colleagues and administration. Everyone here wants to see each other succeed because we all will succeed. So, yeah, the culture and climate at this school has kept me in the education field.

Theme 4

Many of the staff indicated in their interviews how their attitudes towards Restorative Practices changed for the better after implementation.

I asked Mr. Avery to describe his initial thoughts or feelings about Restorative Circles and how his attitude towards them evolved or changed. He responded,

Initially, kind of apprehensive just because in the rollout stage, we had a lot of Circles with staff, um, and like being vulnerable or being open with, with the adults at that time, just, it kind of worried me a little bit. Like, who is going to be willing to share? ... and if we can't model this properly with ourselves, how will we expect our students to be able to do it? So, I would say apprehensive at first, but as we as a staff got more comfortable with the Circles, well, then that's where we saw the shift. The suspension numbers dropped dramatically, and we saw some of our highflier students making it. They were not being sent home or assigned in-school-suspensions at the rate prior to implementation.

When asked about Restorative Circles, Mr. Knox's response was very similar to Mr. Avery's:

Um, I think there was a decent amount of buy in, not as much as we might hope obviously.... The students, well, some days early on, it was hit or miss, but we as a staff were learning too, but overall, I do think Restorative Practices have led to a major positive change at Pleasant Academy. The kids are much more pleasant to us, I think because they feel we care about them, and staff saw how drastic the drop in suspensions were. That was a morale booster for sure and you don't get those very often in the alternative setting.

Ms. Parker, the middle school English teacher, had a rather lengthy response to the questions about how attitudes have changed. She explained,

Well, I am going to be honest because you told us prior to these interviews to come in and tell the truth and you would not be offended. I thought it was another one of those snake oil programs that we paid for, would use it for a year, chuck it and forget it. I was resistant because I didn't want to do something I felt was going to be a waste of time. Yeah, I would do the staff Circles and actually enjoyed them because we were actually having dialogue as a staff about things important to us. I had an ah ha moment during one of our staff Circles. I thought, well if we are enjoying this and it is really impacting how we are as a staff, maybe, just maybe it will work in the classroom. So, I started it with one class, then eventually added another until I finally had them all doing Circles at some point during the class. The kids were getting to know each other, and they were building those relationships. It made it easier when they had a conflict to talk it out in a Circle. I never will forget at our staff meeting before Christmas, you shared out a suspension

comparison graph. It was jaw dropping. I was completely unaware we had significantly reduced out-of-school suspensions. I never really paid attention to our suspension rate really because that was a principal function, but it was a very powerful visual and from that moment on, I was 100% on board.

Ms. Spokane was the most outspoken opponent of implementing Restorative Practices. When I asked her to talk about the attitudes of the staff since adoption, she laughed loudly because she knew how she was about to answer.

... Oh, Bayless ... did you write that question just for me? Well, as you know, I thought it was going to be the dumbest thing we've tried. Getting these kids who have been sent to us for very physically aggressive behavior are going to sit around in a feel-good Circle? No, it won't work, not here. Our students are too wild to handle that. I figured they would be cussing each other out, throwing that talking piece all over the room, hair pulling and chaos would ensue. I started doing some Circles because it was your expectation that we at least give it a try. I remember you telling us in a staff meeting when kids are not in seats, they are not learning, so at least give it a try. Some teachers were uncomfortable trying them on their own at first and I offered to come to help ... I remember one of the first Circles I facilitated, it was with a teacher and student. The student had been very disrespectful to the teacher. You gave the student the option of three days ISS (in-school-suspension) or participate in a Restorative Circle. The student at first wanted ISS, but later changed her mind. She wanted to circle up, especially if it got her out of ISS. I'll be damned if it didn't work. The entire class (approximately seven students) participated, and they each got to say how the interaction between the teacher and the noncompliant student affected them. The noncompliant student realized during

that circle she was not only disrespecting the teacher, but her fellow students. To this day, that student and the teacher have a wonderful relationship and I am certain that would not have happened were it not for that Restorative Circle. I have been calling the Circles, “the grudge ending sessions.”

Ms. Spokane is now one of the trainers in the school when we get new staff. She goes into classrooms and facilitates circles for staff to see how to do it. She said it has really benefitted her with the group therapy sessions as well since she often uses the Restorative Circle format with her therapy students.

Ms. Spencer, the assistant principal, was onboard from the beginning, but when asked the questions about attitudes, she reflected on some of our more resistant staff and how amazing it was to see them get on board. She noted,

I think the students bought in before most of the staff and I think that helped win the resistant staff over in the end. ... The more we did the Circles, the more practice they got, and they saw their colleagues having success and the kids requesting to circle up, they were kind of forced by the students to get with it. It was funny how that worked. I didn't expect that. The kids realized we weren't just going to send them home as they had been used to from their experiences at their home school. We were going to talk things through and get to the root of the problem and solve it. I think the staff realized the impact when you shared the suspension graph. You could see the jaws drop in the room and the school has managed to maintain those low suspension numbers. The process works, but the staff buy in was the key, I think.

Ms. Spencer's role was critical in the success of implementing Restorative Practices. Yes, it was my idea to try this, but she really took the ball and ran with it. She organized all the trainings and held people accountable for attending.

I asked everyone interviewed if they felt as though Restorative Practices have led to a positive change in the overall culture of Pleasant Academy. Mrs. Clark said, "Um, I think we were already pretty close, but it helped us get closer. Our Circles sometimes allow us to voice concerns when there isn't really another time and place to voice."

Mr. Knox had a lengthier response to the question but centered his response around relationships:

I think it just kind of just shows and the relationship students have with each other and with staff members. Um I think there's just there's less negativity. Overall, since we've started doing this ... some staff are more, including myself, are more aware and mindful of how they approach those interactions, relationships with students ... And a lot less like, for lack of a better way to put it [like] poking the bear type of situation, which I know some staff members, including myself have probably been prone to in the past for you know, better or worse, but a lot less of those and more focus on attempting the positive, even if they're not successful.

Notably, we have two therapeutic classrooms at Pleasant Academy. Students who attend these classes must be diagnosed with a mental health disorder. We were not sure how these students were going to react to Restorative Practices, particularly a Restorative Circle, since many of them do not adjust well to change. We found that not only were these Circles effective in this setting, but anytime there is an issue in one of these classes, the students will ask for a circle to problem-solve. We have a therapist on staff who works with these two classes. She was

one of the staff members who resisted the implementation of Restorative Practices, but now she begins each group therapy session with a Circle. Once she saw a dramatic shift in student behaviors school-wide, she became more open to implementing them in her therapeutic setting. She now admits that she was wrong in her initial thoughts about Restorative Practices.

Summary of Themes from Interviews

The first major theme that appeared from the interviews was the use of Restorative Circles as the most important component to the Restorative Process. As mentioned in Chapter I, Restorative Circles are used to preemptively build relationships among all stakeholders. Improved communications with their colleagues and their students were seen as important outcomes of the Circles. All staff interviewed identified Restorative Circles as the *most critical component* of the Restorative Process.

The second theme that surfaced through the coding and analysis process is that of relationship building. Every participant recognized relationship building as a critical component of the Restorative Process. The staff at Pleasant Academy have historically done an exceptional job of building relationships with students prior to the adoption of Restorative Practices; however, a recurring theme that emerged from the interviews is that now we build even stronger relationships. The focus on Restorative Practices enhanced the relationship building that has always been a critical component of Pleasant Academy. Ms. Parker, a teacher on staff, commented during her interview, “We now have a process that influences us to build relationships in a more formal manner and it is successful.” Ms. Parker has been a member of the Pleasant Academy staff since the school opened in 2012; she pointed out in her interview that “we have always done relationship building well here, but now we do it really well and

consistently across the board.” She and others validated this theme over and over during interviews.

The third theme that emerged from the interviews regarded the culture and climate established at the school. Most interviewees indicated that a positive culture and climate had already been established at Pleasant Academy before investigating and implementing Restorative Practices. Even when they honestly alluded to weaknesses in their practices, such as “poking the bear,” they saw that culture and climate was the main underlying reason they were able to successfully implement Restorative Practices. Since the teacher working conditions survey has shown 96% satisfaction with culture and climate during the last two cycles, this came as no surprise to me. All categories of the survey showed that Pleasant Academy is a good place to work and learn. The staff at Pleasant Academy take great pride in the positive culture established at the school, especially since it has only grown stronger with the implementation of Restorative Practices. Ms. Parker said, “The culture and climate you as a leader have established by way of allowing staff the freedom to express themselves, willingness to try new things, and make these decisions as a staff has greatly contributed to the successful implementation of Restorative Practices.” Her statement is consistent with the research: to successfully implement Restorative Practices in a school, the mindset of the adults and the overall culture of the schools must change as well (Hantzopoulos, 2013).

Through our 2018-2019 book studies, we realized that a key component of Restorative Practices was the Restorative Circles. Using Restorative Circles to foster good communication and encourage behavior change was essential to affecting school-wide change. Staff were somewhat nervous about their ability to lead Restorative Circles, so we began using the Circles to start each staff meeting, modeling the process among staff to get staff used to the Circle’s

structure and to help them use the Circles effectively with students. Staff began each meeting by breaking into two smaller groups in a modeled Restorative Circle. We used Circles to continue our book study, having a different group lead the discussion every Tuesday at our Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting. Later, during staff interviews, we learned these Circles were beneficial for staff. They became a means for them to discuss issues close to them in terms of their classroom and classroom management. It was surprising to learn staff gained more from participating in staff Circles than how to implement guidelines and conduct them with students. They became Restorative for them as well. Most important, after implementing Restorative Circles, we began to see the hoped-for changes in our students. Staff became more comfortable leading Restorative Circles in their classrooms and utilized them often. We began to see fewer students being assigned to in-school-suspension; additionally, we noted that very few students were given out-of-school suspensions within those first two months.

The fourth theme that emerged was staff indicating how their attitudes towards Restorative Practices changed for the better after implementation. Throughout the interviews, staff repeatedly mentioned that they were surprised how well Restorative Practices worked and how responsive our students were to Restorative Practices procedures, especially Restorative Circles. Many expressed their initial apprehension, and most indicated the turning point was when I presented the comparison suspension data at a staff meeting. For the first time, they had a visual representation of the results of the implementation of Restorative Practices.

Document Analysis: Findings

North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey

As indicated in Chapter III, I wanted to analyze the Teacher Working Conditions Survey and focus on what teachers reported in terms of teacher empowerment and the management of

student behavior to see if the drastic drop in out-of-school suspensions were reflected in those sections of the survey.

Figure 3 shows the item analyses for Pleasant Academy's Teacher Working Conditions Survey items related to teacher leadership. The top chart shows the biannual results for Pleasant Academy for 2016, 2018 and 2020, while the bottom chart compares results for the state, the district, and Pleasant Academy in 2020. The percentages show totals for those who "agree" or "disagree."

In the top chart showing response percentages for the past three survey cycles for just Pleasant Academy, results for each item have mostly been about 90% since I have been the principal of Pleasant Academy. These are well above the district and state percentages. In the 2020 Survey, Pleasant Academy did decrease 8.33% (from 100% to 91.67%) as compared to 2018 regarding whether teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school (survey statement 3). However, the item remained strong and, as shown in the second chart regarding 2020 comparisons, Pleasant Academy performed 9.36% and 7.51% above the state and the district, respectively. The staff have always indicated they felt they have a voice in the decision making at the school. When the idea of implementing Restorative Practices was broached to the leadership team, they were hesitant, but realized we needed to do something different. It has always been the goal to grow teacher leaders, and those teacher leaders were instrumental in implementing Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy.

Figure 3. North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2020 Regarding Teacher Leadership

2020 NC TWC Survey Individual Item Analysis: Biannual Cycle Comparisons at Pleasant Academy			
Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about teacher leadership in your school.	2020	2018	2016
Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	91.67%	95.83%	92.59%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	87.50%	100.00%	92.86%
Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.	91.67%	100.00%	96.43%
Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	91.67%	95.65%	88.89%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions to solve problems.	83.33%	87.50%	96.30%
In this school we take steps to solve problems.	95.83%	100.00%	100.00%
Teachers are effective leaders in this school.	95.83%	100.00%	96.43%

2020 NC TWC Survey Individual Item Analysis: 2020 Survey Comparisons of State, District, and Pleasant Academy			
Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about teacher leadership in your school.	State	District	School
Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	84.43%	84.22%	91.66%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	84.44%	86.00%	87.50%
Teachers are relied upon to make decisions about educational issues.	82.31%	83.96%	91.67%
Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	91.67%	91.81%	91.67%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions to solve problems.	77.01%	75.94%	83.33%
In this school we take steps to solve problems.	82.90%	82.08%	95.83%
Teachers are effective leaders in this school.	87.70%	86.87%	95.83%

Figure 4 shows the item analyses for Pleasant Academy’s Teacher Working Conditions Survey items related to student behavior. The top chart shows the biannual results for Pleasant Academy for 2016, 2018 and 2020, while the bottom chart compares results for the state, the district, and Pleasant Academy in 2020. As noted previously, the percentages show totals for those who “agree” or “strongly agree.”

Figure 4. North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2020 Regarding Managing Student Conduct

2020 NC TWC Survey Individual Item Analysis: Biannual Cycle Comparisons at Pleasant Academy			
Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about managing student conduct in your school.	2020	2018	2016
Students at this school understand expectations for their conduct.	92.00%	100.00%	96.43%
Students at this school follow rules of conduct.	60.00%	66.67%	59.26%
Policies and procedures about student conduct are clearly understood by the faculty.	92.00%	100.00%	92.86%
School administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	80.00%	87.50%	100.00%
School administrators support teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom.	92.00%	95.83%	100.00%
Teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	88.00%	91.30%	100.00%

2020 NC TWC Survey Individual Item Analysis: 2020 Survey Comparisons of State, District, and Pleasant Academy			
Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about managing student conduct in your school.	State	District	School
Students at this school understand expectations for their conduct.	80.39%	78.72%	92.00%
Students at this school follow rules of conduct.	62.11%	53.92%	60.00%
Policies and procedures about student conduct are clearly understood by the faculty.	78.79%	74.75%	92.00%
School administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	66.42%	65.58%	80.00%
School administrators support teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom.	76.90%	77.80%	92.00%
Teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	75.60%	70.14%	88.00%

Note. Source: North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey 2020.

As demonstrated in the top chart regarding year-to-year comparisons of survey items related to student behavior, one survey area which has steadily declined is “school administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct.” On the 2020 survey, there was a 7.5% drop as compared to the 2018 survey (from 87.5% in 2018 to 80% in 2020). We began implementation of Restorative Practices that year. By their very nature, Restorative Practices *de-emphasize* student conduct zero-tolerance policies and their prescribed punishments. Understandably, many

teachers initially voiced concern that we were not enforcing the code of conduct, but rather allowing students to avoid consequences through the Restorative Process. Where this perception was concerned, mindset change would take some time. Notably, as shown in the bottom chart related to student behavior, Pleasant Academy ranked above the district in all areas of the survey related to student behavior. Additionally, the only area in which the state was higher (by 2%) was in response to the statement, “Students at this school follow rules of conduct.”

For the statement, “Students at this school understand expectations for their conduct,” in 2020, 92% of teachers at Pleasant Academy responded that they “agree” or “strongly agree” on the survey, whereas the district was at 79% and the state at 80%. Part of the programming at Pleasant Academy involves teaching the academic expectations daily. With the implementation of Restorative Practices, behavior expectations are now taught as well. This is accomplished in conjunction with Restorative Circles. During a Restorative Circle, students are made aware which behavioral expectations were violated by misconduct, and how that impacts classroom instruction. Teachers have consistently felt support from school administrators in their efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom. Administrators at Pleasant Academy hold weekly grade level meetings that include discussions about what support teachers may need. These conversations now involve the use of Restorative Practices and what if any supports the teachers and staff need for continued implementation.

The preliminary Teacher Working Conditions results for 2022 have been released. In the areas shown in the Figure 3 charts that regard teacher leadership, there was no significant change in any area from previous years. Regarding the Figure 4 charts on student behavior, the preliminary 2022 TWC results showed a significant drop in whether school administrators consistently enforce rules of student conduct as well as school administrators supporting

teacher's efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom. A drop in these areas was precipitated when the district placed a new assistant principal at Pleasant Academy in August 2021. It has not been a successful placement. As I have mentioned before, I have hired the majority of the staff at Pleasant Academy, and we are careful to screen candidates. District leaders do not know or understand individual school cultures; consequently, when they place personnel in a position that is not the right fit, the placement impacts teacher moral, student discipline, school culture, and district relationships with other school principals. This is an example of how one bad placement can severely handicap a positive school culture. Fortunately, this placement did not adversely affect teachers and staff commitment to the school: Pleasant Academy retained 100% of staff for the upcoming school year (2022-2023).

Out-of-School Suspension Data

I have consistently kept track of the out-of-school suspension data since becoming the principal in 2014. Staff referenced this chart in their interviews as a powerful moment when they realized the implementation of Restorative Practices was successful; thus, I thought it would be beneficial to share the data they saw.

We had some years that were better than others in terms of suspensions, but none better than the year of the implementation of Restorative Practices. I requested from the district the data for out-of-school suspensions presented in the chart below. We closed school on March 13, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic; therefore, the comparisons on the chart below are designated for each year up to March 13 of their respective academic years to give an accurate comparison. I would like to point out that on March 13, 2021, those numbers are not equitable for the comparison as we were using mostly virtual instruction for that school year. I did not feel those numbers would be a valid representation of the effectiveness of Restorative Practices at

Pleasant Academy but felt I should report them for purposes of this study. The chart below has been a point of discussion among district leaders. Many of them have been perplexed at how the alternative school -- the school that should have the highest suspension numbers due to its population -- has the lowest suspension rate in the district.

Figure 5. Out-of-School Suspension Days Issued at Pleasant Academy: Comparison Chart

	3/13/2017	3/13/2018	3/13/2019	Implementation year	3/13/2021	3/13/2022
Race						
Black	210	302	221	54	0	61
White	247	373	283	62	0	63
Hispanic	4	15	12	5	0	0
Other	0	2	0	0	0	0
Total	461	692	516	121	0*	124

Note. Suspension data provided by the school district. * Year mostly virtual

The numbers tell quite a compelling story. For example, Pleasant Academy issued 571 fewer suspension days in its Restorative Practices implementation year (2019-2020) than its highest suspension year (2017-2018). Those are 571 days students were in the classroom learning and not at home on out-of-school suspension. Those were 571 days where we got to the root of the issues, where we, through the Restorative Process, kept these students *in school* and *in class*. This data also shows Pleasant Academy is not the norm for an alternative school in that historically we have not disproportionately suspended more Black students than White students. In fact, we suspend more White students than Black students, and we have sustained this trend throughout the implementation of Restorative Practices.

Summary

In staff interviews, it became clear that buy-in to Restorative Practices went far beyond the impact that implementation had made on the students, particularly in terms of suspensions. The *staff* desired to participate in the process to grow professionally. The staff identified the Restorative Circles as a powerful component of the Restorative Process. They used them for both academic purposes and to heal relationships. Staff recognized the dramatic decrease in the number of in-school suspensions assigned as well as the number of out-of-school suspensions assigned *when presented with the data*. According to their interviews, they felt both the culture and climate and relationship-building had improved. They felt Restorative Practices had provided a formal way for everyone to be consistent with building relationships, which led to a more positive culture and climate.

Teacher Working Conditions Surveys revealed Pleasant Academy is outperforming the district and state in the areas of teacher empowerment and managing student conflict, likely a direct consequence of the successful implementation of Restorative Practices. The 2022 preliminary TWC results continue to support the success of implementation of Restorative Practices. We decreased in some areas in comparison to the school's responses in the previous three cycles, but we did maintain a significant percentage when compared to the district and state. The preliminary 2022 TWC results are statistically the same, indicating that Restorative Practices have had a positive impact.

The suspension data chart paints a true picture of the impact of the implementation of Restorative Practices. The decline in out-of-school suspension days was dramatic. That continues to be the case. When looking at data for March 13, 2022, we issued one hundred twenty-four out-of-school suspension days. In comparison to years past, that is a dramatic change in the way

consequences have been adjudicated at our school. The implementation of Restorative Practices has made a substantial impact on how disciplinary actions are perceived and implemented at Pleasant Academy.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Chapters I and II, I discussed the fact that research had demonstrated time and time again that punitive measures do not improve the behaviors of students, but just temporarily remove them from the setting, resulting in higher suspension rates, and ultimately, higher drop-out-rates (Mansfield et al., 2018). We began the conversation at Pleasant Academy in 2018 about our out-of-school suspension numbers being too high, but we did not have an immediate solution. In March of 2018, 692 out-of-school suspension days had been issued; a year later, 516 suspension days had been issued. These translated into over 1100 learning days missed due to disruptive behaviors.

In the Fall of 2019, we implemented Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. We had most staff buy in, but some staff were initially resistant until they saw the dramatic decrease in out-of-school suspensions after 7 months of implementation of Restorative Practices. We used Restorative Practices as suggested by Mansfield et al. (2018) as an alternative to traditional, punitive disciplinary actions, such as suspension or expulsion. Mansfield et al. (2018) maintained that Restorative Practices did not have a single definition, but rather represented “a multitude of positive behavioral support approaches in a school that foster communication, mutual respect and understanding between people” (p. 306). Since we have always fostered communication and mutual respect at Pleasant Academy, I knew this was not going to be a huge paradigm shift for the staff. Like the research suggested (Brown, 2017), when Pleasant Academy used Restorative Practices as a preventative intervention, it worked.

In this chapter, I answer the research questions and analyze my findings. As I have mentioned before, Pleasant Academy implemented Restorative Practices to reduce our out-of-

school suspensions, to lower the drop-out rate, and, hopefully, to minimize disruptive behaviors. By comparing suspension data pre- and post-implementation of Restorative Practices, I found that the literature was correct: zero-tolerance policies explicit in the student code of conduct did not reduce the number of incidents of disruptive behaviors, but instead led to an increase in out-of-school suspensions (Stahl, 2016). We found these policies also contributed to the drop-out rate, which also was consistent with the literature we read prior to implementation of Restorative Practices (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Another key finding discovered during implementation is that the Restorative Process encourages relationship building between the students and staff, which Wachtel (2016) says proactively builds relationship and prevents conflict. Hantzopoulos (2013) also maintained relationship building was critical to the success of a Restorative program. This was a common theme identified by the staff during the interviews. I will add, the staff at Pleasant Academy has historically been very good at building those relationships. The implementation of Restorative Practices formalized the process.

I discovered through the interviews that staff perceptions about the Restorative Process changed once they saw the dramatic decrease in out-of-school suspensions. A few staff were resistant or skeptical until they saw the results. Staff interviews consistently supported the claims made by Stinchcomb et al. (2006) that Restorative Circles are the most effective component of the Restorative Process. Staff credited Restorative Circles with improved relationships with students, a decrease in the need for suspensions, and an overall improvement in school culture and climate.

Analysis

Research Question 1

In my first research question, I asked, *What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy?*

In my school district, if you examine the student code of conduct, it is centered on zero-tolerance policies, especially in the areas of drugs and weapons, which Skiba (2004) also identified. Skiba (2004) also pointed out that in the early 1990s, in an effort to eliminate violence in schools, many school districts expanded such policies to include school disruptions. My school district had done the same. Morris and Perry (2016) point out that these zero-tolerance policies have led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions, which leads to achievement gaps due to students not being in school. There is no evidence these zero-tolerance policies have improved student behavior; they just remove the students for a period of time (Stahl, 2016). In the case of my school district, these policies led to specific disciplinary actions being imposed if students engaged in behaviors that violated the student code of conduct.

At Pleasant Academy, we recognized that zero-tolerance policies led to disciplinary actions, which often meant out-of-school suspensions. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) maintain that while these exclusionary disciplinary practices give the victim an instant resolution to the harm caused by another student's misbehavior, they fail to bring resolution to the situation. This is exactly what we were experiencing at Pleasant Academy. We had a high number of out-of-school suspensions, mostly involving repeat offenders, but we were not addressing the issue of "why" these students were repeatedly in trouble. Our desire to rectify this repetitive misbehavior-referral-suspension cycle ultimately led to the adoption of Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. As I mentioned Chapter II, Restorative Practices do not seek to devalue the harm

caused by the behaviors; instead, Restorative Practices seek to bring together the parties involved to repair harm and mend relationships (Wachtel, 2016). This piece is missing in traditional punitive actions imposed when policies are violated. At Pleasant Academy, I do not believe we have ended the school-to-prison pipeline with the implementation of Restorative Practices, but the decrease in out-of-school suspensions shown in Figure 5 in Chapter IV shows that we have certainly disrupted it.

Another key factor that led to Pleasant Academy's adoption of Restorative Practices was the drop-out rate. We found that students who historically had a high number of out-of-school suspensions in their disciplinary record were more likely to become dropouts, which is consistent with what The Council of State Governments Justice Center noted in their report (Fabelo et al., 2011). That report also indicated that 59% of students with multiple out-of-school suspensions were involved in the juvenile justice system. This is also consistent with the data from Pleasant Academy. If students are charged with a crime that would be equal to a felony if they were adults, those students are placed by the district at Pleasant Academy. Historically they have a higher number of out-of-school suspensions than students who are not involved in the juvenile justice system.

Research Question 2

In my second research question, I asked, *what is the nature of the system for Restorative Practices used at Pleasant Academy?*

The nature of the system for Restorative Practices used at Pleasant Academy is one of relationship building. This is consistent with what Wachtel (2016) described in her research, in that Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy includes the use of informal and formal processes that precede disruptive behavior and proactively build relationships and communities to prevent

conflict and wrongdoing. At Pleasant Academy, as I previously mentioned, we historically have done a good job building relationships with students, but it has not happened consistently with all staff. Wachtel (2016) maintains that Restorative Practices can formalize how to build relationships with students, which has been very helpful for staff who found this difficult to do. This was confirmed time and again in interviews. At Pleasant Academy, we have always attempted to establish positive relationships with students and meet them ‘where they were.’ One of the key factors that led to the adoption of Restorative Practices were those barriers to learning caused by student misconduct. Restorative Practices have given both staff and students a new set of activities that help them resolve and prevent disruptions to learning. Our approach was consistent with that of Boyes-Watson (2014), in that we sought a balance regarding the needs of the victim(s) and wrongdoer(s). We also wanted to show students there are ways to resolve situations that do not have to end in any kind of verbal or physical altercations, as Mansfield et al. (2018) maintained in her study.

Stinchcomb et al. (2006) talked about the Restorative Circles being one of the most powerful components of Restorative Practices. I had written in my reflexivity journal that I saw Restorative Circles as an opportunity to make a real impact on disruptive student behaviors and student learning in our environment where the culture and climate were conducive to implementing the potentially profound effects of Restorative Practices. My thoughts were consistent with that of Brown (2017) in that the culture and climate are crucial. Like Coates et al. (2003), we found that the Restorative Circles were *the key element* in the Restorative Process. Most of the misbehaviors exhibited at Pleasant Academy were verbal altercations, which frequently involved profanity. They were most often exchanges between students, and sometimes between students and staff. The idea of using Restorative Practices to resolve these

verbal conflicts seemed practical with our small class sizes and our school environment. In using Restorative Circles, we found that many of the conflicts were a result of a misunderstanding. Having a forum in which all participants could express their thoughts and feelings ended many conflicts immediately. Additionally, using Restorative Practices, particularly Restorative Circles, proved consistent with Tyler's (2006) assertions that giving students a voice will make them view institutional power as fairer and more legitimate, ultimately bringing about a positive change in students' attitudes toward school and school authorities. Thus, the "real impact" on student behavior I had anticipated in my reflexivity journal became reality.

Research Question 3

In Question 3, I asked: *what were faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with Restorative Practices?*

When we as a staff at Pleasant Academy in 2019 began the conversation about implementing Restorative Practices, I presented them with the literature I had read and some data. Hantzopoulos (2013) maintained that for Restorative Practices to be successful, there must be buy-in from everyone involved. I asked staff to go into this with an open mind as we needed to do something to reduce the high number of out-of-school suspensions at Pleasant Academy.

We had some staff who were resistant or skeptical about the process at first, but it came out during the interviews that they shifted their mindset when they saw how effectively the Restorative Process was working at Pleasant Academy. Consistent with what Wachtel (2016) deduced in his study, the staff agreed that the Restorative Circle was the most powerful component of the Restorative Practices. Mrs. Spencer, the Assistant Principal, would agree as she said, "We saw a very dramatic shift in the number of discipline referrals we were getting and

even bigger shift in our out-of-school suspension numbers. Kids were requesting circles when issues were coming up.”

Gregory et al. (2016) maintained in their study that Restorative Practices can create positive student-teacher interactions by increasing mutual respect, thus creating fewer misbehaviors and fewer office referrals. This is consistent with what staff said in their interviews. Most of the staff interviewed indicated they had better relationships with their students since implementation of Restorative Practices, and the students felt staff respected their opinions and views, consistent with the findings Gregory et al. (2016) reported in their study.

Mansfield et al. (2018) mentioned in their study that teacher turnover can present a serious impediment to the sustainability of a Restorative Program. I am in my ninth year as the school’s principal and as I have mentioned before, I have hired most of the current staff. Over the past decade, we have had very little staff turnover at Pleasant Academy and in fact, we have zero teacher turnover for the 2022-2023 school year. According to Mansfield et al. (2018), this staffing consistency is directly related to the success of Restorative Practices implementation. In their interviews, the staff recognized that this consistency contributed to the success of our implementation. Additionally, they saw the positive changes induced by the adoption of Restorative Practices as key to maintaining a good environment and dedicated staff.

Research Question 4

In Question 4, I asked: *what changes, if any, have occurred in data and the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of Restorative Practices?*

The common theme of relationship building emerged often during the interviews with staff. For instance, Mr. Knox explained that Restorative Practices “forced me to get to know [students] . . . this experience has opened my eyes and . . . made me not only a better listener, but

a better teacher.” As I mentioned before in Chapter I, by acknowledging and understanding the effects of their behavior, students can begin to repair the impaired relationship with their teachers and peers that will prevent a recurrence of the negative behavior (Morrison et al., 2005). As literature has suggested, we conduct Restorative Circles to make amends for the infraction, to repair the relationship between those involved so the wrongdoer can be readmitted into the school community. But at Pleasant Academy, we found that the Circles also allowed for students and staff to build meaningful relationships (Mansfield et al., 2018). Restorative Circles have become such a common practice at Pleasant Academy, students will often ask to “circle up” when there is a problem or conflict with a peer or staff member.

Hantzopoulos (2013) maintained that building positive relationships is necessary for students to take responsibility for their own actions and be accountable for their behavior. After implementation of Restorative Practices, staff who were resistant realized that building those positive relationships also meant they had built trust, indicated by Hantzopoulos (2013) as an important factor in making the Restorative Circles so meaningful and successful. Like the school Hantzopoulos (2013) studied, Pleasant Academy saw a significant (73%) decrease in out-of-school suspensions after the implementation of the Restorative Practices program. Those staff members who were resistant or skeptical in the beginning indicated this dramatic decrease in out-of-school suspensions changed their mindset about our Restorative program. Moreover, the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey results indicate teachers at Pleasant Academy feel they are valued and take part in the decision-making process, which has directly led to low staff turnover at Pleasant Academy. There are many committed teacher leaders at Pleasant Academy who helped implement and operate Restorative Practices, and that is reflected in the TWC survey.

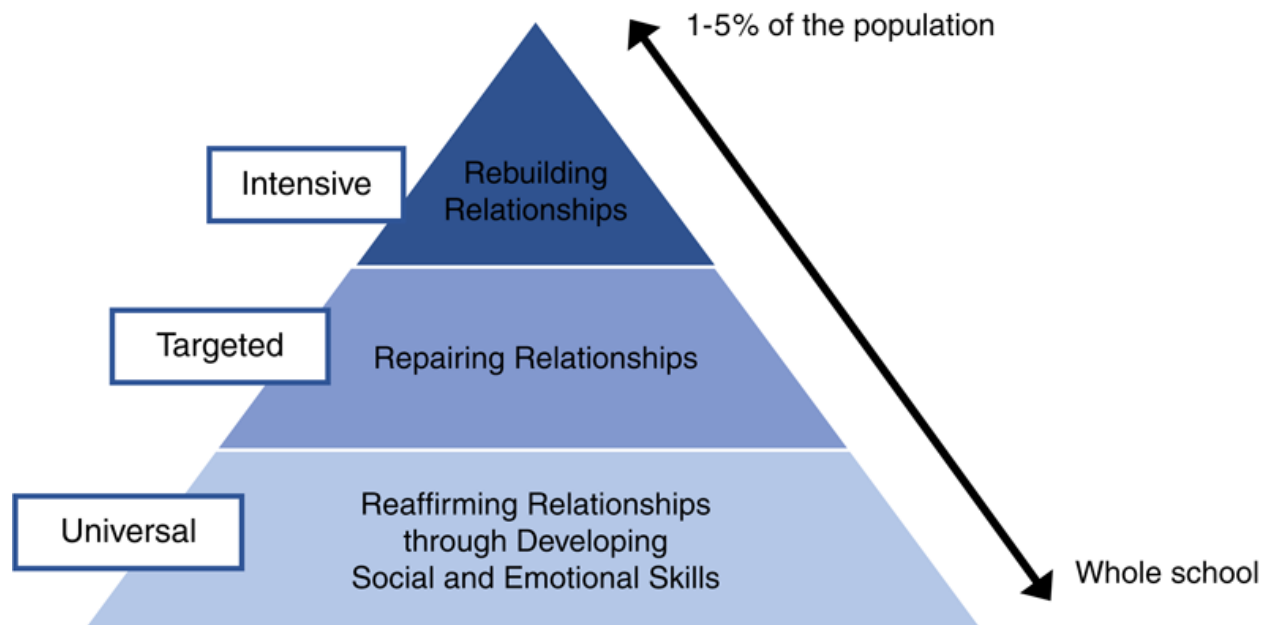
Discussion

In this section, I reengage with existing research to explore two issues in greater depth.

Pleasant Academy and the “Hierarchy of Restorative Responses”

The conceptual hierarchy of Restorative responses developed by Mansfield et al. (2018) (see Figure 6) is the model implemented at Pleasant Academy. The first tier is the building of relationships through Restorative chats and community building Circles that were referenced throughout the interviews. This tier is utilized most in the school not necessarily to repair harm, but to get all students used to the Restorative Process. In this tier, we held smaller Restorative Circles for low level conflict, which would often reduce further escalation. In Tier 1, every participant recognized that relationship building was a critical component of the Restorative Process.

Figure 6. Hierarchy of Restorative Responses



Note. Source: Mansfield et al. (2018).

The second tier of the Mansfield et al. (2018) model is the level at which Restorative Circles and conferences become more intense. Within this tier, Circle members take responsibility for their actions and corrective measures for behavior are planned. It was in this tier that participants recognized that Restorative Circles are the most powerful component of the Restorative Process because it is in Circles that wrongdoing, problems, and conflicts are addressed. This tier is the most utilized at Pleasant Academy and is directly responsible for the significant decrease in out-of-school suspensions.

The third tier of the Mansfield et al. (2018) model is the tier utilized for the most serious incidents (i.e., physical aggression/fighting). When we use utilize this tier, it is to repair the relationships so the students involved can feel safe around one another. It is also in this tier that the aggressor is reintegrated into the school community. With repair and reintegration, potential suspensions were quickly reduced if not eliminated.

Importantly, Restorative Circles emerged as the essential element for Restorative Practices at Pleasant Academy. Research suggests these Circles are considered one of the most powerful components of the Restorative Process (Coates et al., 2003). This student-centered approach is unique in that it emphasizes students being encouraged to take control of a situation, and many times finding their own solutions. Previous research strongly suggests there must be a majority buy-in from stakeholders for Restorative Circles to be effective (Hopkins, 2003). Fortunately, this was the case at Pleasant Academy. Nevertheless, there are some implications to consider in moving forward:

1. There is a continuing need for further training and professional development, especially for new staff.

2. We need to determine a minimum amount of time to spend on the implementation of Restorative Circles and factor that into our planning.
3. We need a means of ensuring the continued culture shift from a punitive to a Restorative model of dealing with student misconduct.

Teachers at Pleasant Academy have found that Restorative Circles seem to foster a safe and supporting environment. Historically, teachers have been managers of behavior and conflicts, which can often lead to power struggles within the classroom. Teachers who have encouraged positive and trusting relationships typically have encountered fewer behavioral issues in the classroom because students feel like their voices are heard. Restorative Circles allow teachers to encourage students to self-regulate their behavior without receiving any formal punitive disciplinary action (Tyler, 2006). Students can build life skills needed to resolve conflict and engage appropriately with others while demonstrating values learned through the Restorative Process.

Restorative Practices and Pleasant Academy's Students of Color

Research has established that Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately represented in suspensions and expulsions, which contributes to achievement gaps among these groups of students of color (Morris & Perry, 2016). Mansfield et al. (2018) also noted that African American students and students with disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than White students. In fact, 41% of the students placed at Pleasant Academy during the 2021-2022 school year are students identified as having a disability.

Importantly, students of color who are referred to Pleasant Academy come to us as a last stop on the school-to-prison pipeline. Cole (2019) describes this as criminalizing youth through disciplinary practices. In her research, Mansfield et al. (2018) showed a connection between the

over-representation of African Americans in the penal systems and inequities revealed in out-of-school suspension data. While students' behaviors have sent them here, Pleasant Academy represents a last opportunity within the school system to divert the student's progression into and through the judicial system.

Historically, we have worked with students of color successfully: they have not experienced high numbers of out-of-school suspensions that would increase their chances of dropping out. With the implementation of Restorative Practices, however, particularly Restorative Circles, these most at-risk students have experienced a new way to reconsider their own (mis)behaviors. They have had a chance to re-envision their relationships to authority, to peers, and to their life experiences within an educational setting. Wachtel (2016) believed the implementation of Restorative Practices would lead to significant reductions of youth offenses and improved attitudes. As Pleasant Academy, with the guidance of caring adults, we have seen what Wachtel (2016) has described. All our students—and particularly our students of color—have had an opportunity to change their attitudes and consequently, to change the course of their lives. Being part of that process is life-affirming and life-changing for all of us.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Principals

School districts that have an unusually high out-of-school suspension rate may benefit from this study. Introducing a school to Restorative Practices alone will not work. I had the right conditions at Pleasant Academy in that I had a staff willing to at least buy into the idea of trying Restorative Practices. I understand from the research that some schools were not as successful with implementation because many of the staff would not buy in. If and when the practices were not consistent across the various school settings, the chance for successful implementation of

Restorative Practices was diminished (Wachtel, 2016). Restorative Practices worked beautifully and continues to work at Pleasant Academy, but it could never have happened had my staff not *completely bought into giving it a try*. The significant reduction in out-of-school suspension numbers was evidence of Restorative Practices implemented with fidelity. When the staff saw those effects of school-wide implementation of Restorative Practices, they were further sold.

As a practitioner and someone who has recently seen success with Restorative Practices, I would recommend that school administrators have discussions with staff about Restorative Practices, presenting them with data from other schools like their own, and having them make the decision *as a whole staff* to adopt Restorative Practices. As mentioned throughout this study, without staff buy-in, it will not be successful. Resistance and skepticism will be normal with any staff. I can guarantee 100% will not be on board initially. In fact, I wasn't sure I would ever get to 100% because naturally staff want consequences for students when they misbehave. It does take a while to change mindsets when it comes to disciplining students. My staff eventually saw a change in students' mindsets once the students felt they had a voice in their own situations. Like I have mentioned many times throughout this study, the Restorative Circles opened the door for the dialogue between students and staff and formalized a process of relationship building. This was an overwhelming theme throughout the staff interviews and one I think would be an overwhelming theme for any school who implemented Restorative Practices. I did not expect our results to be as significant as they were, but it was a pivotal moment for my staff when they saw the data on suspension reductions. At that point, even the most skeptical embraced Restorative Practices wholeheartedly.

Recommendations for Future Research

The use of Restorative Practices in school settings is still new. I had not heard of it until about three years ago while I was enrolled in a class at UNCG. When I bring it up in professional settings among other principals, I find they have not heard of it either. I think further information on schools that have successfully implemented Restorative Practices should be studied. I would like to read some research on whether it is possible to standardize Restorative programs for professional development purposes, but this could be difficult as each community is different.

Restorative Circles and their long-term effects on student behavior should be studied. I would also be curious to know if the skills students have learned through the Circle process have carried on into their adult lives. Research about how a Restorative Circle reduces conflict and improves the climate of the school should be conducted. I touched on it with my school, but I think that should be further explored. I think there is a need for further research in dealing with training, implementing, and sustaining a Restorative Practices program in order to help students succeed in the classroom as well as in the world outside the school's walls.

During interviews with staff, they repeatedly alluded to changes in students' attitudes and behaviors after implementing Restorative Circles. While there is statistical evidence of behavior change—for instance, dramatically fewer incidences of in-school and out-of-school suspensions—most evidence of attitude change is anecdotal: students asking to “Circle Up” along with notably greater levels of respect and consideration for both their peers and adults after participating in Restorative Circles. Methods of measuring/surveying student attitudes toward discipline should be developed that would indicate how students feel about school discipline, relationships among students and with teachers, and perceived fairness of treatment. These measurements could be conducted upon a student's arrival at Pleasant Academy and before their

assigned time ends. Such surveys would indicate the extent to which Restorative Practices (Circles) truly affect changed student attitudes, especially when working with at-risk students who are in danger of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline. Changing students' attitudes toward their teachers, their classmates, and school itself, is a lofty goal. If there is a chance that Restorative Practices make that happen, it should be a recognized, measurable, and provable outcome.

The sustainability of a Restorative Practices program over time needs to be examined, especially if there is a change in administration in a school with an ongoing Restorative program where new administrators' visions may change the mindset of the staff. Mansfield et al. (2018) suggest in their study that a change in administration and high staff turnover would negatively affect the success of implementation of a Restorative program in terms of sustainability. She maintains that when a school has high teacher turnover, building capacity in new staff each year is difficult. Mansfield et al. (2018) mentioned that the lack of funding could negatively impact implementation, but I did not find that to be the case at Pleasant Academy. We incurred very little cost in implementing Restorative Practices. The only cost we incurred was purchasing materials for staff book studies each year. It had minimal impact on our budget.

Continued work with Restorative Justice Practices at Pleasant Academy will require additional training, particularly for new staff who have not experienced implementation. That training will involve some expense: trainer remuneration, paying substitute teachers for staff attending off-campus training sessions, additional materials for discussion. The improved climate and student-staff relationships make every expense worthwhile. Teachers are very pleased with the changing attitudes of students, as evidenced in their interviews. Students' perceptions of their teachers have changed with improved communication; students cannot deny how much the

adults at Pleasant Academy care about them because they interact with them daily, trusting their concern and commitment to their success. We need to develop instruments that adequately measure and reflect changing student attitudes toward school after experiencing Restorative Practices. As shown in the working conditions surveys, teachers are pleased with the climate they have created, particularly as it has been enhanced by Restorative Practices. These factors contribute to consistent staff and few turnovers year on year, a key factor in school improvement.

Final Thoughts

I think what I have learned most from this study is that I completely underestimated the staff at my school. I was not expecting to get the significant result that occurred when we implemented Restorative Practices. Even though we had lower percentages in the TWC, we were still higher than the district and state. I thought we would try to implement Restorative Practices and get enough buy-in to help a good number of students. I underestimated the total commitment from the staff that we ultimately experienced. I am humbled by their faith in me as their leader, their willingness to try to see my vision for Pleasant Academy. While conducting the interviews, many of them have referenced the strong leadership and support they felt. Many of them expressed appreciation for the stability of our environment—because I have been here nearly a decade—and the faith I showed in them by giving them new things to try.

Something that really surprised me was how much the staff enjoyed participating in staff Circles. My intention in doing them was getting them used to conducting Circles and making sure they adhered to the guidelines. I completely missed that they were gaining something from doing them. It was a common theme that came out in the interviews. I remember thinking, after about the fourth of fifth interview where it was mentioned, “How did I miss that?” I think I am pretty in-tune with my staff and that I have my finger on the pulse of the school, but I completely

missed the fact that they enjoyed participating in circles *as a staff*. I assumed they endured them because I said they had to do them. As a result of this new understanding, we begin each staff meeting with a Circle and I allow a staff member to choose the topic. Sometimes the topic is something amusing, sometimes something more serious, but it always seems to be a great bonding experience for them.

I reflect often about this entire experience, and I used the reflexivity journal to write down my thoughts at various times in the process. As I am flipping through it now to finish out this section, a particular entry stood out: “If I had this to do over, I would involve the SRO [School Resource Officer] in this process.” I had forgotten that I had written that. We were assigned a new SRO this past year, but I never included him in any of our Restorative Practices planning or discussions. I am certainly going to invite him to Restorative Circles and the refresher trainings when we return to school in Fall 2022. I think it would be valuable for the students to see him in a different light from strictly law enforcement. Our SRO has always gone out of his way to build relationships with the students, and I completely left him out of this process when his involvement could have proved very beneficial.

I must say, it is bittersweet to be writing these final words on this topic. This study was completed as a requirement for my doctoral degree, but it has turned out to be not only life-changing for many students who had not experienced success before, but also life-changing for me. I see the students at Pleasant Academy with a new appreciation for their enthusiasm and ability to grow and change. I feel a renewed appreciation for the staff who never stops looking for ways to improve our students’ experience while they attend our school.

Formalizing a process by which staff can build relationships proved beneficial for staff who struggled with relationship building. I saw staff open up to students about their own

struggles during Restorative Circles, and I think this made students see their teachers in a different light. They saw their teachers as humans who at times make mistakes too. This was critical with relationship building and implementation of Restorative Circles. Restorative Circles are now common practice at Pleasant Academy. They are used not only for conflict resolution or for proactive measures, but they are also used in the academic setting to discuss academic topics or to introduce new material.

I could not be prouder of the staff at Pleasant Academy. They went into something new with an open mind. Even though we had a few who resisted and eventually came on board, we successfully implemented something that had a huge impact on student learning and the overall culture and climate of the school. I truly believe my work with Restorative Practices does not end with this sentence. Instead, it begins anew.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of restorative practices at Pleasant Academy?

1. Tell me about yourself, your experiences and background.
2. Prior to the adoption of restorative practices, can you describe the culture and climate at Pleasant Academy?
3. Can you explain why you think Pleasant Academy adopted restorative disciplinary practices?
4. What misbehavior comes to your attention that may have led to the adoption of restorative practices?
5. What kinds of relationships are encouraged between all staff at Pleasant Academy?

What is the nature of the restorative practices used at Pleasant Academy?

1. What does restorative justice look like in your school?
2. Can you describe your role within the restorative program?
3. What level of student participation have you seen during the intervention process?
4. What are some of the ways caring for students is modeled at Pleasant Academy?
5. What do you think is the benefit or benefits of restorative practices over a punitive model?

What are faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with restorative practices?

1. Describe your initial thoughts or feelings about restorative circles.
2. Was there a difference between when you led or participated in circles? If so, can you explain more about the differences?
3. Describe a moment in a circle that stands out to you.
4. What has the process been like for you in learning and teaching about circles?
5. In what ways did you not enjoy circles in class?
6. In what ways could they be changed?
7. Describe whether circles have made a difference in your feelings about your role?
8. Describe what (if any) challenges or concerns that arose for you and your role as “Staff” when participating in circles?

What changes, if any, have occurred in data and the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of restorative practices?

1. Describe differences in the students’ attitudes, behaviors or over-all demeanor after the adoption of restorative practices. Did they buy in?
2. Do you feel as though restorative practices have led to a positive change in the overall culture of Pleasant Academy? If so, how?
3. What are your perceptions of the success or lack of success of restorative practices at your school?
4. What changes, if any would you recommend?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR NON-INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

What key contextual factors led to the adoption and implementation of restorative practices at Pleasant Academy?

1. Tell me about yourself, your experiences and background.
2. Prior to the adoption of restorative practices, can you describe the culture and climate at Pleasant Academy?
3. Can you explain why you think Pleasant Academy adopted restorative disciplinary practices?
4. In your role as non-instructional staff, what misbehaviors come to your attention that may have led to the adoption of restorative practices?
5. What kinds of relationships are encouraged among all staff at Pleasant Academy?

What is the nature of the restorative practices used at Pleasant Academy?

1. What is your role with restorative practices in your school?
2. What protocol does your school use to refer a student for a restorative justice intervention and what is your involvement in that process?
3. What level of participation have you seen during the intervention process?
4. In your current role as support staff, how do you support the implementation of restorative practices at Pleasant Academy?
5. What do you think is the benefit or benefits of restorative practices over a punitive model?

What are faculty and staff perceptions of their experiences with restorative practices?

1. Describe your initial thoughts or feelings about restorative circles.
2. Describe your role with restorative circles. Did you lead any circles?
3. What has the restorative circle process been like for you?
4. Have the circles changed the way you think about approaching students? If so, how?
5. Can you describe what (if any) challenges or concerns that arose for you and your role when participating in circles.

What changes, if any, have occurred in data and the attitudes of faculty and staff since the adoption of restorative practices?

1. Do you feel as though restorative practices have led to a positive change in the overall culture of Pleasant Academy? If so, how?
2. What improvements do you think can be made to the restorative justice process at your school?
3. What are your perceptions of the success or lack of success of restorative practices at your school?
4. Do you feel there are any differences in students' attitudes, behaviors, or over-all demeanor after the adoptions of restorative practices? Did they buy into the changes?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO INTERVIEW FORM

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

Project Title: Restorative Discipline Practices in Alternative Education

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Michael D. Bayless, Dr. Craig Peck

Participant's Name: _____

What are some general things you should know about teacher action inquiry projects?

You are being asked to take part in a teacher action inquiry project. Your participation in the project is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the project, for any reason, without penalty. Teacher action inquiry projects are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the project. There also may be risks to being in teacher action inquiry projects. If you choose not to be in the project or leave the project before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this project are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this project. You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this project at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the project about?

This is a teacher action inquiry project. Your participation in this project is voluntary. The purpose of this project is to examine and understand the perceptions and experiences related to the implementation of Restorative Discipline Practices in your school.

Why are you asking me?

You are a staff member who has implemented restorative practices in your classroom.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the project?

If you choose to participate, we will be asked to have an individual interview to discuss your experiences that will take approximately an hour. You will also be asked to take a survey that will explore your attitudes, interests and perceptions of restorative practices. The survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. You be asked to participate in one-one interviews with the primary investigator.

Is there any audio/video recording?

Interviews will be through zoom and recorded. Because your voice and face will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears or sees the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will limit access to the recording to the primary investigator.

What are the risks to me?

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this project poses minimal risk to participants. If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Michael Bayless at 336-516-4686 or Dr. Craig Peck at 336-908-7262. You can also email Michael_Bayless@abss.k12.nc.us. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this project please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this project?

It is my hope that this project gathers information that may lead to improvements in student achievement and the high number of out-of-school suspensions.

Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this project?

There are no direct benefits to participants in this project.

Will I get paid for being in the project? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this project.

How will you keep my information confidential?

Interview information will be stored in Box until the completion of the project and all identifying information will be removed. All information obtained in this project is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

What if I want to leave the project?

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire project has been stopped. Choosing not to participate or withdrawing from the study will not affect your position with the school, nor will it affect your relationship with the researcher.

What about new information/changes in the project?

If significant new information relating to the project becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this project. All of your questions concerning this project have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this project described to you by Michael Bayless.

Signature: _____ Date: _____