

The Impact of Restorative Circles on School Connectedness: A Student Perspective

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Abstract

The COVID-19 school shutdown took students out of the school building and into the virtual classroom. With this, students lost opportunities to connect with their peers and school members. With students reentering the schools, there is a great need for structures built within the school day for community building. Restorative circles are safe spaces created to help students connect with their peers and build community with the guidance of a facilitator. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the impact that restorative circles have on school connectedness at the high school level.

Introduction

With The NYS Senate currently drafting Bill 1040, where the use of restorative practices will be encouraged, understanding this process and its purpose is pointed for this time in education. This practice can also be used for academic and personal reflection, with the students looking within themselves or with a healing circle group to address personal decisions and trauma (Wachtel et al., 2010). School connectedness is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, cared for, close to, and supported by others in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993). Libbey (2007) defined the terms as a combination of feeling a part of school, feeling safe, and feeling that teachers and staff members care for their well-being and success. Implementing social-emotional literacy skills and relationship-building, on top of academic structure, can develop school connectedness for students.

Theoretical Framework

This study focused on critical theory (Freire, 2000/2014), the culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2012), and the whole-child approach to navigate narrative research. These frameworks examined how the application of restorative practices, both in school and other organizations in education, challenged the punitive structures that exist systemically. Each frame-

work addressed the needs of students and how they can be implemented to make them feel safe and connected to their school community.

Critical Theory

Freire (2000/2014) looked at education critically, wanting to take it from being "an act of depositing ... [where] the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p. 72). Freire saw the traditional education system at the time, where students were given information by a teacher to memorize, as educational oppression, thus failing to have students learn how to think for themselves. Forcing people to have secondary roles regarding their own learning and self-development was considered dehumanizing. Students are considered objects meant to be taught how to exist in an oppressive system rather than be participants in change. This state of fully realized "humanness" existed in dialectical opposition to the education system set up that Freire (2000/2014) considered atemporal and ahistorical (Blackburn, 2000). (Freire 2000/2014) believed in having students challenge the status quo in the educational structures presented and think critically about their own education. Restorative justice is based on the same foundations, having students guide their learning, both in the classroom and on a social/emotional level. By focusing on restorative circles, students get to look at their school community and how they influence school culture.

Culture of Care Theory

Cavanagh et al. (2012), just as Freire, (2000/2014), looked at Indigenous cultures, the traditional education system, and humanity when creating a "culture of care." Cavanagh et al. created this theory after spending time in New Zealand to learn about the Māori culture, the use of restorative practices to create community change, and looking at connections between their national curriculum and the Te Kotahitanga, a project that is used to create educational reform with the Māori school system. Cavanagh et al.

created a research and professional development project, aiming to engage at-risk students in learning, thus retaining them in school.

Whole Child Approach

All aspects of the child are to be considered when making decisions, with the hope that each student reaches their own goals, which are created and set by them. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2007) took a stance on the need for this mindset in education, asking:

If decisions about education policy and practice started by asking what works for the child, how would resources - time, space, and humans - be arrayed to ensure each child's success? If the student were truly at the center of the system, what could we achieve? (p. 4)

When looking at making an education approach focused on school connectedness rather than an academic focus, looking at a holistic evaluation of students is necessary.

Historical Context

Restorative justice has no one definition or origin. Restorative justice was a program, but many societies used it to resolve conflicts. Weitekamp and Kerner (2003), citing Zehr (1990), described First Nations' restorative practices as a thread in their life. Restorative justice emphasizes how community members are interconnected and must take their social roles seriously. Pranis et al. (2003) examined the Indigenous community's cooperative attitude.

The first case of restorative justice in North America is noted to have been when Mark Yantzi and his colleague, Dave Worth introduced two young men who had vandalized a neighborhood to meet their victims (Johnstone, 2007). Their alternative approach led to a change in these men's lives and the way that they addressed conflict.

Methodology and Research Question

Restorative circles confront restrictive language and culture - how humans interact and fit into the world (Parker & Bickmore, 2020). Properly run restorative circles provide a safe area for stakeholders to examine their role and influence. A narrative study allows the researcher to explore each participant's experience due to the intimate aspect of this examination, especially when looking at kids' school connections. The study aims to explore "How can restorative circles affect student views of school connectedness?"

The Setting

This study included a deliberately selected setting to conduct a narrative study of a newly implemented restorative circle program with ninth-grade students. A purposeful sample is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Both the program and the researcher specifically targeted ninth-grade students because the ninth grade is a transitional year and considered a "make or break year" for completing high school for the first time, which means students must earn passing grades in core courses (Fulk, 2003).

Participants

The participants for this study included nine ninth grade students from a suburban New York public high school who were currently taking part in year one of the school's Restorative Circle Program (RCP). The sample was made up of seven females and two males. Teachers and administrators created this curriculum based on the training provided by Restorative Justice Education. This study used purposeful sampling to select the students who participated in the narrative study. Purposeful sampling gives the researcher a choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling allows the highest amount of variation and best captures the diversity of a sample (Creswell et al., 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The sampling techniques were used to gain maximal variation to develop perspectives about the restorative justice program, its implementation, and its effect on school connectedness. Criterion-based sampling was utilized with qualifying samples if the student was willing and able to participate in the study.

The parent/guardian allowed the student to participate in the study. Each participant was from a different facilitator group. Due to the nature of each restorative circle group, the researcher wanted to measure the program's impact, not a specific facilitator's impact, so there was a need to select students from various facilitator groups.

Data Collection Methods

This research covered the 2021-22 academic year. This research used narrative and semi-structured interviews. Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016) claimed narrative interviews may help researchers comprehend people's experiences and actions and better convey their context and integrity than quantitative methods. The 45-minute virtual interview was audio-recorded. Nine ninth graders were interviewed after the second semester of restorative circles. Interviews comprised three sections (sub-sessions). The listener asked one introductory narrative question in the first sub-session. The interview used biographic narrative interpretive techniques.

The Program

Contributors designed a restorative circle program utilizing the Restorative Justice Education Program and Circle Forward: Building a Restorative Community by Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015). Staff employees learned how to turn-key the software last year. Facilitator-trainers then devised a monthly schedule, routine, and script for circles. Each facilitator's goal, materials, flow, and closure were written to simplify and organize each circle.

Data Analysis Approach

This study employed coding to thoroughly analyze and understand interview data. Korsgaard (2019) states that coding allows the researcher to select relevant parts for the reader. Interpretation will always be part of the researcher's job. Each interview was coded for meaning and data inventory. Kim (2016) advises researchers first to find a word or phrase that can be an attribute for a portion of their data, then find relationships between these codes to create a category. This "identifies emerging patterns within the data" (Kim, 2016, p. 4). The researcher personally searched for narrative analysis patterns three times. Deductive coding and codebook codes were utilized.

Results

Four themes emerged from the restorative circle program's influence on students' school connections. The first theme highlighted that restorative circles allowed students to find common ground with their peers beyond what they experienced in traditional academic settings. Collaborating on shared experiences helped them reflect on their engagement in school and develop a sense of community. The second theme revealed that restorative circles facilitated discussions about postsecondary ambitions, encouraging students to set goals for their future. The program provided inspiration and collaboration among peers, shifting mindsets and emphasizing the academic aspect of school. The third theme indicated that students enjoyed restorative circles when they felt a genuine investment from their circle coordinators. Personal connections with facilitators fostered a sense of comfort and encouraged participation, leading to increased school connectedness. The fourth theme emphasized the importance of emotional connections between students. Peer-to-peer interactions provided a space for social and emotional growth, allowing students to support each other and develop a stronger sense of school community.

Restorative circles enabled students to understand the commonalities they shared with their peers, fostering a sense of community beyond the traditional class-

room environment. One learner spoke about how the restorative circle program catalyzed goal-setting for her. She stated:

This one time we were talking about goals and how it's important to set goals and I feel like it really inspired me hearing everyone else's goals and how they wanted to achieve it. Even though they knew [that] maybe they weren't the best academically, they knew eventually, "I'm going to work harder to get where I want to be."

This aligns with critical theory, which emphasizes the need to break down oppressive educational systems and promote critical thinking. Students also engaged in dialogue and reflection about their postsecondary goals, benefiting from the opportunity to self-reflect and plan for their future. This aligns with the concept of self-reflection as a catalyst for academic achievement. One learner, who transferred from another school, had prior experience with restorative circles before. He stated, however, that they focused on speaking to students about rules and behavioral concerns, and not social/emotional growth and understanding. He further clarified that the circles focused on peer-to-peer interactions and understandings. He stated that he wanted to be around his peers in his circle because he connected with their positive mindsets.

The role of restorative circle facilitators was found to be crucial for students' school connectedness. Students who felt connected to their facilitators experienced a more positive engagement with the program and greater overall school connectedness. This aligns with the whole-child approach, which recognizes the importance of holistic support and care in fostering positive relationships between students and teachers.

Furthermore, peer-to-peer interaction emerged as a significant factor in shaping the student experience and promoting school connectedness. Students valued the opportunity to connect with their peers, sharing positive mindsets and supporting each other's social and emotional growth. This aligns with critical theory, the culture of care theory, and the whole child approach, all of which emphasize the importance of relationships within the school community.

Overall, the findings suggest that the restorative circle program can effectively enhance students' school connection by promoting shared experiences, goal setting, positive relationships with facilitators, and peer-to-peer interactions. These findings contribute to the growing body of research on restorative practices and highlight their potential to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness among students in schools.

Conclusions

From the reflections of the Maori people to Freire's work on systemic oppression in schools, restorative practices have proven to support student learning and growth when it comes to community building and understanding. Having students understand each other's histories, insights, feelings, and stories can have a positive impact on their development. This impact can be both academic and social/emotional. This research aimed to look at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. Based on the qualitative analysis of the researcher, the sample researched at a New York high school started to experience a shift in mindset, reflection, and learning because of the restorative circles that were implemented during their ninth-grade year. Students felt more connected to their community, school, and peers, with those who transferred from an urban school experiencing the greatest impact. The sample also reflected and shared that more time, space, and training of the restorative circle facilitator would only further the success of the program.

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