A Case Study of the Implementation of Restorative Justice in a Middle School

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Abstract

Restorative justice is an alternative disciplinary approach to the traditional, punitive approach to discipline. This case study focused on exploring the implementation of restorative justice discipline practices within a middle school. Participants included students, teachers, and an administrator. Five themes emerged from the data: (a) different approach, (b) restorative justice activities, (c) relationships, (d) meaningful consequences, and (e) expectations. The researchers also discuss the implications and recommendations for future research.

Keywords: restorative justice, discipline, middle school, case study

Current Disciplinary Practices

School systems have traditionally used a prescriptive and, oftentimes, punitive framework to address misbehavior. Otherwise known as zero tolerance policies, these frameworks include exclusionary practices (i.e., office referral, suspension, expulsion) that involve the removal of the offender from the context of the incident and isolating the student from others involved and their school community. Zero tolerance policies, introduced in the 1990s, intensified these exclusionary practices in an attempt to maintain order within schools (Welch & Payne, 2012).

Researchers who have examined zero tolerance policies have reported their ineffectiveness, harmful influence, and exacerbation of unequal treatment (see, e.g., American Psychological Association [APA] Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). The negative effects of these pejorative techniques include an increased likelihood of grade retention, dropout, and future delinquency, all of which are associated with the school-to-prison pipeline (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Noltemeyer, Ward, & McLoughlin, 2015). Additionally, harsh exclusionary discipline is disproportionately provided to students of Color, particularly Black students (Welch & Payne, 2010) and to students in large urban schools with high rates of poverty (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). In response to these findings, schools may implement alternative disciplinary approaches such as restorative justice (RJ) to replace punitive practices.

Delineating the RJ Discipline Approach

Individuals may consider the RJ approach to discipline as the philosophical antithesis of zero
tolerance policies. Zero tolerance endorses exclusion and isolation with no exceptions, whereas RJ promotes inclusion of all parties affected by wrongdoing and integration of an “it depends” or particularity model (Hosteter-Mullet, 2014). RJ emphasizes the relationships between individuals and their environment and the effects on these relationships when wrongdoings occur. The “social discipline window” (Wachtel & McCold, 2001) is a framework to simplify the relationship between these discipline practices.

The framework includes two comprehensive continuums: control and support. Control is the influence over an individual or situation, while support is the provisions offered to help individuals reach their greatest potential. For the purposes of this delineation, we will focus on the top quadrants: punitive and restorative. The top-left quadrant (high control, low support) describes educators who are authoritarian and provide little support; exclusionary, punitive practices, or zero tolerance policies, fit within this quadrant. The shift from punitive to restorative occurs when support is added to the act of responding with discipline (Wachtel & McCold, 2001). The top right quadrant (high control, high support) describes educators who sustain a high level of control with added levels of support. The difference in these levels of control is that restorative discipline is conducted with students instead of to students, thus creating an environment of inclusion (McCluskey et al., 2008). Hence, both educators and students possess control in the situation, with the shift from third party disciplinary decision-making (i.e., code of conduct, administrator) to first-party, as student(s) and educator(s) must engage to determine the resolution. RJ calls for a paradigmatic shift from a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline to collective problem solving and reparation.

Researchers have identified benefits of using school RJ practices, such as fewer discipline referrals (Schiff, 2013) and a reduction in the school-to-prison pipeline (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, 2016; Payne & Welch, 2018). RJ schools also increasingly use student suspensions and expulsions (McCluskey et al., 2008; Schiff, 2013), and students often increase their academic achievement and decrease absenteeism (Rideout, Karen, Salinitri, & Marc, 2010). Schools using RJ practices can also address discipline disproportionality (Payne & Welch, 2015) existent within exclusionary, zero tolerance policies. Furthermore, the framework strengthens relationships between students and teachers (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016).

The current study employed a case study design to explore secondary and tertiary levels of RJ disciplinary interventions in a middle level school setting. The case study involved multiple levels of stakeholders, including an administrator, teachers, and students. We sought to examine RJ as a disciplinary approach using multiple means of data collection, including interviews, observations, and a review of documents. We explored the following research question: What are the experiences of middle school students and staff who engage in RJ discipline practices?

Method
We used a qualitative case study design to explore the use of RJ as a discipline practice in the school because we sought to explore a real-life case(s) during an extended time period (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, we used an intrinsic case study for this project, as our focus was on the case itself (Stake, 1995), exploring the use of RJ as a form of discipline in a school. We bounded the case by collecting data about the implementation of RJ as a disciplinary practice within a five-month period during the 2018–2019 school year.

Setting
Smithville Middle School (pseudonym) is located in a city in the southeastern United States. At the time of the study, the school served approximately 1,000 students in grades six through eight, representing about 15% of middle school students in the school district. Nearly 60% of the students identified themselves as members of a minority group, which was similar to percentages for middle grades students at the district and state levels. Additionally, approximately 65% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, which was approximately 10% less than the district percentage for all middle grades students, but consistent with the state for students across all grade levels (percentages not available at the state level for only middle grades). In the area of discipline, the school had nearly 20% of the out-of-school suspensions for middle schools in the district. Regarding instructional staff, there were approximately 60 teachers at the school across all three grade levels.
Data Sources
We collected data using three methods: (a) interviews, (b) observations, and (c) review of documents. First, we conducted interviews with multiple stakeholders in the school. We interviewed three teachers that incorporated RJ practices in their classes. The teachers taught different subject areas including math, physical education, and social studies. We also interviewed one administrator who had previous experience using RJ practices in the classroom and was currently using them in the role of an administrator working with students who had received disciplinary referrals. Finally, we interviewed six students enrolled in classes where teachers were using RJ practices for discipline.

The second source of data collection was observations. Both researchers conducted observations in the school during different time periods throughout the day across multiple days. Observations occurred within the classroom, as well as within the common areas throughout the school. We also observed a presentation about RJ discipline practice presented during a faculty meeting by a few teachers using the approach. During the observations, we took notes and had opportunities to ask teachers questions following the observations.

The final source of data focused on reviewing three types of documents involving the use of the RJ practices. This included reviewing respect agreements/contracts created as a class and displayed within the classroom. We also reviewed letters students had written to the teacher or their peers focused on restoring the relationship. Finally, we reviewed the book, Discipline that Restores (Claassen & Claassen, 2008), as this was what the staff used in learning RJ principles to integrate within the classroom as discipline practices.

Data Analysis
Due to the large amount of data in a case study, data management is important; thus, researchers need to first organize their data (Merriam, 2009). We analyzed the data after the interviews were transcribed and the data were organized. This process involved first coding the data individually, using open coding, and then analytic coding to combine similar codes into categories or themes (Merriam, 2009). The triangulation of data sources uses multiple perceptions to clarify meaning (Stake, 1995). Thus, we triangulated the interviews, observations, and documents to support these emergent themes with more than one single source of evidence (Yin, 2003). Finally, we met to discuss the emerging themes and reach consensus about them.

Trustworthiness
To ensure trustworthiness, initially, we met to discuss our beliefs and assumption about the phenomenon of RJ as a discipline practice and we also engaged in peer debriefing throughout the research process. Regarding positionality, one researcher was a counselor educator at a university and the other researcher was a counselor education doctoral student. Both researchers had counseling experience with youth in juvenile justice facilities and valued the use of RJ practices. Additionally, the doctoral student had specialized training in the application of RJ practices. Another method we used to ensure trustworthiness was the triangulation of the three sources of data (interviews, observations, and documents). Finally, after initially analyzing the data individually, we met together to reach consensus about the themes.

Results
We identified five overarching themes with multiple subthemes. The first theme, different approach, depicts the idea of integrating RJ, a new approach, in the classroom. RJ activities, the second theme, have two subthemes: (a) respect agreement and (b) letter writing. The third theme, relationships, includes two subthemes: (a) “we” mind-set and (b) peer accountability. Meaningful consequences, the fourth theme, focus on sanctions within the RJ framework. Finally, the expectations theme refers to setting standards and goals with students.

Different Approach
Teachers and administrators discussed their concerns with the current, traditional discipline approach and the need to try something different. Ms. Long stated, “Traditional discipline just wasn’t working anymore. Kids just don’t care if they get sent to the dean or lunch detention or whatever. They just didn’t care about the consequences of their actions, so I wanted to try something different.” Administration echoed this perspective. Mr. Knight commented:

It’s so ingrained in them to be combative . . . give me the consequence whatever and that becomes kind of just a cycle of okay action, consequence, action, consequence . . . it’s almost like a tit-for-tat . . . instead of restoring, repairing, or just initially building the relationship.
Other teachers appeared interested in learning about RJ as an alternative disciplinary practice during our observation of an RJ presentation at a faculty meeting. The presentation included an overview of RJ principles, examples of RJ classroom interventions, and resources. Teachers not using RJ actively engaged in the discussion to learn more about the approach, and many reported their intention to “try out” RJ disciplinary practices in their classrooms.

**RJ Practices**

The second theme focused on the specific interventions used by teachers and administration. These interventions included a respect agreement and letter writing. Participants discussed the implementation and effects of using both of these practices.

**Respect Agreement.** At Smithville Middle School, students and teachers create a respect agreement at the beginning of the year to define respect and to illustrate how each member of the class can exhibit respect to one another and their environment. Ms. Jones described the process in this way:

> In the beginning of the year, [as a class, we] talk about respect . . . We define respect . . . and then come up with four categories: student respecting student, the student respecting the facilities . . . the teacher respecting the student, and the student respecting the teacher. . . . We have this respect agreement and they each sign it . . . they felt like they have some input in the classroom. It’s not just my room. This is our room.

The collaboration in creating this agreement allows for students and the teacher to share their ideas in an environment of mutual respect and inclusion. Anthony stated, “We have like our ideas and her [teacher] ideas but we respect both of them . . . equally . . . respect for everyone for what they are and who they are.”

During our observations, Ms. Jones pointed to the agreement when a student engaged in behavior violating the agreement. Students would either stop the behavior or approach the teacher to inquire about this reference to the agreement. The teacher welcomed questions from students and used these interactions as an opportunity to teach students to question or disagree respectfully.

The students commented on the accessibility of the agreement. Samantha stated, “The teacher can refer back to it a lot . . . They don’t have to like log in and get stuff out. It’s more direct and easy to get to.”

Additionally, some students reported that they used the agreement beyond the classroom. Trevor commented, “I’ll walk by it and feel . . . all these kids signed this in order to respect the school, and others, and the teachers . . . It reminds me that some things I do in life aren’t that respectful; I should change that.”

**Letter Writing.** Teachers introduced the letter writing practice for students as a means of apology and retribution. Ms. Williams shared an instance of two students who repeatedly spoke harshly to one another. She reported discussing with them how to make amends to each other after a verbal outburst, and they agreed on writing apology letters. After deciding to write the letters, she gave the students the following instructions:

> Write a letter saying, you know, this is what you’ve done to me. This is what you said to me; this is how it hurts. Then, apologize for the things you’ve done, you know, the things that you’ve said . . . [I] had them hand it [letter] to each other and read it, and then [I] had them shake hands and it really did alleviate [tension].

During interviews, students expressed appreciation for the letter writing process, as it gave them an opportunity to examine their actions and to be intentional with their response. Trevor stated,

> I think more people should use the letter process because sometimes when people get in like an argument or like a fight, maybe they normally don’t know the words to say because they’re just like caught up in the moment . . . when you write a letter you kind of realize in your head like, oh I should have [said or done] this . . . gives you time to think about it, reflect on it.

From an administrative perspective, Mr. Knight reported: “I’ve had them [students] agree to write apology letters . . . express how they think they made the teacher feel in that situation.” Another type of letter writing endorsed by Smithville teachers is a restitution letter. While reviewing documents, we examined restitution letters written by students that detailed a plan to repair the relationship by addressing the wrongdoing or misbehavior. The letters also included a plan for preventing reoccurrence of the incident in the future.
**Relationships**

The teachers and administrator discussed the significant role of relationships within the classroom. Regarding the use of restorative practices, Ms. Williams commented, “There’s a change afterwards . . . it restores the relationship.” Concerning students, Mr. Knight shared:

When you have those relationships much more gets through to the kids. They’re more open to asking questions . . . When they believe that you actually care about them [they] buy into what you’re teaching . . . [The restorative piece] had a lot of value . . . knowing that the relationship is okay and they can come back in and learn and everything’s good. We’re moving forward [with] no grudges being held, and other kids see that. I think that’s a piece that they respect you for, and they feel respected as well . . . Relationships are reciprocal.

**“We” Mind-Set.** Participants conveyed the collective mentality of RJ in the classroom. Ms. Jones shared, “A community works how we make it work. We’re all in this together . . . how do we make this work and be productive on all ends?” Ms. Long shared, “It’s the idea that you’re a team; you work together . . . It’s not just you are affecting you, it’s you’re now affecting peers.”

**Peer Accountability.** The teachers described how students held their peers accountable for their actions when using RJ in the classroom. Ms. Long commented:

Kids see other kids mess up and they see that the consequences are real . . . It’s in front of you and they know that they’re held accountable. They end up looking to each other; they end up redirecting each other.

Ms. Jones discussed a peer meditation between two students: “It has gotten kids to understand each other [more] . . . a child was cutting because [what a] boy was saying . . . [both were] put in peer mediation . . . he was devastated, was in tears . . . never knew [his] words could hurt that badly.”

**Meaningful Consequences**

Participants discussed the types of consequences used in RJ discipline practices. When asked about prior discipline approaches, Ms. Williams commented:

It was more written consequences. [Now it focuses on] doing the right thing . . . It resonates with kids more because it’s actually a consequence that means something . . . you could write an after-school detention . . . but what does he learn from it?

In another example, Ms. Jones explained:

It’s that natural consequence . . . if it’s skipping, you’re coming in on a Saturday . . . Seeing the same kids in trouble . . . teach them your behavior has consequences outside of just what you’re seeing immediate[ly] . . . for them to get a bigger picture of life . . . we don’t want them to be lost in the system . . . [become a] statistic.

Students echoed the ineffectiveness of a traditional office referral, and the effect of restorative disciplinary practices. Regarding letter writing, Julie shared:

When they send you to the office, they don’t really do much. They are going to have a talk with you and send you back . . . If you go to the office you get to be out of class. [With the letter,] you want to play outside after you finish your homework, [but] you have to go write a letter to your teacher.

During one of our observations, a teacher monitoring the outside route to class noticed a student throwing a candy wrapper on the ground. She told the student to come over and pick it up. This prompted a discussion on the importance of respecting the school grounds and the responsibility of every member of the school community to keep the school clean. As a consequence, the teacher asked if the student would help keep the school clean by picking up litter he saw on his way to class. The student apologized and agreed to pick up the trash.

**Expectations**

Teachers stated the importance of expectations when establishing the classroom environment. Ms. Williams commented, “I’m really a big advocate for establishing the environment in the beginning.” Mr. Knight described his practice of goal-setting at the beginning of the school year. He shared, “We always designated a goal for the class right up front. From the very beginning of the year, we had the conversations about respect and caring, and our overall goal, and how we can achieve that.” Mr. Knight added, “I attempted to flip the classroom . . . we’re all here for one reason . . . We’re here to learn . . . [Do] we want to get smarter or . . . stay the same? We are all here for the same goal to get smarter and to learn.”
Discussion

Limited research exists for using RJ as a discipline practice in school settings. The current study employed a case study design to examine a secondary and tertiary implementation of the practice in a middle school setting. We found five themes and four subthemes, which we discuss below in the context of extant literature.

The first theme, different approach, described the teachers’ past approaches, and their frustration with “traditional” discipline practices. This highlighted the ineffective, cyclical patterns of exclusionary discipline interventions (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Additionally, they described their process in shifting within the social discipline window (Wachtel & McCold, 2001) from punitive to restorative as the support, or relationship building, was absent from past discipline approaches.

The second theme depicted specific RJ classroom interventions. The respect agreement that the students signed was aligned with the RJ framework and affirmed that rules are to protect relationships with people, materials, and the environment (Hosteter-Mullet, 2014). Respect is the fundamental value of RJ practices (Zehr, 2002), which Ms. Jones defined from the beginning in her classroom. The letter writing provided students to reflective opportunity to intentionally craft their apologies. Within the restorative justice framework, apologies consist of three components: (a) acknowledgment, (b) affect, and (c) vulnerability (Van Ness & Heetders-Strong, 2003). With acknowledgment, the offender accepts responsibility for their wrongdoing. Affect includes the emotions involved with the wrongdoing (e.g., shame, guilt). Finally, the vulnerability shifts from victim to offender as the victim decides whether to accept the apology.

In the example provided by Ms. Williams, there was no clear delineation of the offender and victim. The letter writing gave both students an opportunity to apologize in a meaningful capacity while exploring their own emotions being both the offender and victim. Researchers report empathy building as a benefit of using restorative practices in schools (Kehoe, Bourke-Taylor, & Broderick, 2018), as students learn to understand others’ emotions. Through this process, students can reflect on their past words and actions, while planning for their future behavior. The students gain autonomy or control within the “social discipline window” (Wachtel & McCold, 2001) as they decide the words they wish to express and the appropriate next steps to make amends in the situation. Through this process, students become equipped and empowered to take control of their actions while they are held to a high expectation of behavior, both of which essential attributes in educating young adolescents (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2010). Additionally, the letter writing process provides an opportunity for reflective thinking. Researchers have reported that restorative practices allow students to reflect on their past behavior (McCluskey et al., 2008) and, consequently, take responsibility for their actions (Kehoe et al., 2018).

For the third theme, relationships, researchers have suggested nurturing healthy relationships as a core component of school-based RJ (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Within a restorative justice framework, the relationship is central for both the building and repairing process (Zehr, 2002). Previous research has demonstrated students within a RJ classroom perceived a positive relationship with their teachers (Gregory et al., 2016) and improved their relationships with both teachers and peers (Ortega et al., 2016). Through this emphasis on the relationship, students feel safe and comfortable returning and reintegrating to the class after a conflict, which is an objective of restorative practices (Lockhart, Zammit, Charboneau, Owens, & Ross, 2005). In a classroom where RJ is practiced, the teacher models how to welcome back a student after a wrongdoing. Furthermore, the teacher consistently maintains a respectful relationship with the student, thus inherently teaching students the benefits of prosocial behavior consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Teachers using this framework are cognizant of the influence their actions have on their students (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). Additionally, the creation of equitable learning environments is a component of school-based RJ (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Thus, these teachers demonstrate the essential characteristic of creating an equitable environment that is inviting, safe, supportive, and inclusive of all students (AMLE, 2010). These types of teacher–student relationships allow students to engage without fear of reproach from the teacher, possibly helping explain the increase in academic achievement within RJ classrooms (Rideout et al., 2010).
The subthemes of “we mind-set” and peer accountability relate to building community among all members of a classroom, which encourages adherence to the rules and norms to sustain these valued relationships (Riestenberg, 2013). Within an RJ framework, students learn how their actions affect others (McCluskey et al., 2008) and create a sense of responsibility as a “team member” to maintain these relationships and community. The RJ framework balances both accountability and support (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). In Ms. Jones’ example of peer mediation, the student became accountable for his hurtful words and actions, resulting in a meaningful dialogue. In previous research, students reported experiencing influential conversations with their peers when they engaged in restorative practices (Ortega et al., 2016), and they reported that their internal sanctioning systems were strengthened (Morrison et al., 2005).

The fourth theme, meaningful consequences, refers to the shift from the predictability of a single approach applied to all situations to a responsive, individualized consequence fitting to the specific wrongdoing. With exclusionary practices, such as an after-school detention, the student becomes removed from the situation, thus distancing the student from their misbehavior. RJ shifts from the predictability of a single approach applied to all situations to a responsive, individualized consequence fitting to the specific wrongdoing (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). These consequences demonstrate the attribute of being developmentally responsive with students (AMLE, 2010) because it provides the flexibility to select a consequence that is both developmentally and situationally appropriate. With the restorative mindset, teachers aspire for students to learn from their misbehavior and gain perspective on the effect of their actions—not only on others but also on themselves. Thus, the intention of restorative practices is to create, resolve, or reduce the likelihood of re-offense through intentional consequences (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Researchers report that schools using restorative disciplinary practices have students with increased levels of academic achievement, decreased absenteeism (Rideout et al., 2010), and a reduction in the school-to-prison pipeline (Payne & Welch, 2018).

For the last theme, expectations, the teacher imperatively sets the tone and expectations in the classroom for the restorative practices to become the classroom norm. Researchers have reported that RJ positively influences classroom climate (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014). Yet, these practices are often a culture shift for both the teachers and students (Morrison et al., 2005). In the example of Mr. Knight’s classroom, the goal to learn and grow together in an environment of mutual respect was established from the beginning. This sense of unity created active responsibility in her classroom—a normative value of RJ (Braithwaite, 2006)—for each class member. Individually, they were responsible to uphold this goal for the betterment of the group as a whole. These expectations created a climate for restorative disciplinary practices and an essential environment for purposeful learning and meaningful relationships (AMLE, 2010).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study focused on exploring the integration of RJ practices as a disciplinary approach within a middle school. The findings revealed that stakeholders representing various groups—including administration, instructional staff, and students—reported success of the approach. Thus, RJ practices may provide promise for schools seeking to implement an alternative disciplinary approach.

Implications

The RJ approach to discipline may be contradictory to how teachers and administrators are trained about school discipline practices. Therefore, the integration of RJ practices requires a shift in thinking about discipline and an openness to implement an alternative discipline approach. The findings provide evidence supporting the use of RJ discipline practices.

Although Smithville Middle School was not implementing RJ practices school-wide during data collection, the school had involvement from different stakeholders within the school, including representation from administrators, teachers, and students. Thus, when it is not feasible for school-wide implementation of a new approach, as the situation in this case study, schools may implement the approach with part of the school and involvement from different stakeholders. The commitment and involvement of administration, instructional staff, and student support staff (i.e., school counselors) may increase successful implementation. Additionally, evaluating the approach and reporting the results to stakeholders school-wide may create interest among additional personnel. The faculty presentation discussed in this case study elicited increased interest.
and support among school personnel for implementing RJ disciplinary practices.

Training is a crucial component of program success. The implementation of RJ disciplinary practices at Smithville involved a book study program that encompassed reading about the discipline approach, implementing practices, and meeting to discuss implementation and provide and receive feedback. Additionally, one member of the implementation team had received formal training and had extensive experience with using RJ practices. Thus, knowledge, practice, and support all appear to be crucial factors for implementation and success.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Although implementation of RJ practices for discipline at Smithville Middle School involved various stakeholders, the approach was not implemented school-wide. Future research may involve longitudinally examining the use of RJ practices gradually across a school with the goal of becoming a school-wide approach. Researchers may also conduct a collective case study including multiple schools implementing these practices school-wide. Another limitation was the lack of formal training for integrating the approach. In future studies, researchers may compare the use of the book study approach to formal training on RJ disciplinary practices. Additionally, researchers may explore effective consultation practices for training school personnel in RJ. The current study also focused solely on RJ disciplinary practices, so future studies may expand on the integration of a school-wide restorative model. Researchers may also expand upon this study by examining the effectiveness of the approach, such as examining the presence of prosocial behaviors (e.g., problem-solving skills, empathy development) as well as behavioral concerns (e.g., bullying, vandalism) within a restorative school setting.

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