Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of Restorative Justice Practices in Inclusive Classrooms

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Dedication

The author wishes to dedicate this colossal work to the best teacher that ever was, Stephen Bonnell. Thank you for all that you taught me, especially how to have fun. The difference between an ordeal and an adventure is your attitude. Thank you for modeling a life well lived. And to my children, Eloisa, Minerva, and Arlo, I could have finished this a lot faster without you, but it wouldn't have been as much fun. Where would I be without my family? Thank you all, especially Carlos and Linda for your support.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of Restorative Justice Practices in Inclusive
Classrooms

The study investigates educators' perceptions of Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) in

inclusive classrooms, focusing on students with dis/Abilities, within the frameworks of

Social Justice, Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies (DisCrit). It aims to address a

gap in the literature on equity in education, particularly the effects of RJPs on diverse

student populations. Employing a qualitative, interpretive design with grounded theory

for data analysis, the research seeks to understand the nuanced experiences of educators

and their views on the impact of RJPs on both students with and without disabilities, and

on the educators themselves. Despite limitations such as potential sample bias due to

purposive sampling, the study ensures credibility through established methods and

triangulation. This research contributes significantly to educational discourse, offering

insights into the implementation of RJPs in a way that respects the varied needs of all

students, thereby advancing equity and inclusivity in educational settings.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Restorative Justice Practices (RPJs) are increasingly being utilized across diverse school settings to address issues of equity in the educational experiences and trajectories of students involved in school disciplinary measures. Until recently, the majority of this body of research has focused broadly on increasing racial equity in disciplinary outcomes (Gregory et al., 2018; Grigorenko et al., 2012; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Schiff, 2018). However, the issue of racial disproportionality in discipline referrals within special education settings has not been addressed comprehensively; thus, there is a gap in the literature regarding the potential effect of RJPs in these educational spaces. This study will help inform teachers, building and district administrators, and other education stakeholders around the perceived effects of RPJs in inclusive classroom settings serving students with dis/Abilities. This use of "dis/Abilities" is used in disability studies to emphasize the abilities of the person and focus on a strengths-based perspective of development and will be used throughout. The study will approach the topic through a basic interpretive, reflexive design using a grounded theory approach, i.e. utilizing selected methodological approaches that aligned to grounded theory.

Statement of the Problem

In the last fifteen years, the amount of research conducted and published around Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) has increased significantly. Restorative justice practices (RJPs) are structured interventions and educational strategies aimed at resolving conflict, addressing harm, and fostering a sense of community and empathy. These practices involve the participation of victims, offenders, and community members in dialogue and decision-making to repair relationships and redress wrongs. RJPs emphasize

social justice, accountability, healing, and the restoration of harmony within the educational context. The majority of the research investigating RJPs has centered on reducing the rates of suspensions and punitive measures imposed on students in general education classrooms. This focus stems from the implementation of zero-tolerance practices enacted in school districts across the country (e.g. Los Angeles, CA; Denver, CO). Zero tolerance policies impose serious punishments for students who violate school rules (Hoffman, 2014). In essence these policies "push out" students, as they remove the students from the school community through suspensions, expulsions, citations and arrests (Curran, 2016). These policies created and brought to light already existing significant inequities around suspension rates for students of different racial backgrounds. Specifically, The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC, 2011-2012) found that within the same school setting, African-American students were suspended at much higher rates than their peers. The same research reported that the length of suspensions for similar infractions for African-American students was of a significantly longer duration than that of students of other races. RJPs have been investigated as a means of addressing this problem and interrupting the associated school-to-prison pipeline (Waggoner, 2018).

Students with dis/Abilities encounter disproportionately severe disciplinary measures: despite constituting only 14 percent of overall student enrollment, they account for 24 percent of out-of-school suspensions, 18 percent of in-school suspensions, and 17 percent of student arrests (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These figures underscore a troubling disparity, as such disciplinary actions not only interrupt the educational journey of these students but also isolate them from essential social interactions and learning opportunities. This imbalance in treatment calls for an urgent

reevaluation of disciplinary policies within schools, advocating for a shift towards more inclusive and supportive strategies that accommodate the distinct needs of students with dis/Abilities. Embracing such approaches is crucial in creating an educational environment that is equitable, nurturing, and conducive to the growth and development of all students.

The "school-to-prison pipeline" is a term used to describe how certain school policies and actions can lead to students, particularly those who are most vulnerable, being removed from educational settings and placed into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This concept highlights a tendency to favor punishment, such as detention or imprisonment, rather than educational support.

Much of the literature generated as RJPs gained popularity in the U.S. (1999 to the present) examines the effects of RJPs on discipline measures such as suspension, expulsion, attendance, and management of violent offenses (Fronius et al., 2016) and presents RJPs as a means of addressing social justice issues in schools. The work regarding RJPs as a means of addressing racial inequity in the educational system is a prime springboard for examining the effects of RJPs in special education settings since similar issues of equity present for the population of students with dis/Abilities, and the body of literature around this topic is significantly sparse. The small existing body of research examining the use of RJPs for students receiving special education reflects the important work that is being done, yet simultaneously highlights the need for additional research and investigation that can inform approaches to improve equity and access to education for all students.

Purpose and Research Questions

Although RJPs can have a significant effect on the amount of time students spend in the classroom by reducing suspensions and expulsions, and is associated with students' and teachers' more positive perceptions of school and classroom climates, there is little known regarding the effects of RJPs on students with dis/Abilities (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2019; Bruce & Flynn, 2013; Fronius et al., 2016). The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice expressed particular concern over the pronounced disparities in disciplinary measures for students with dis/Abilities. Students protected under the IDEA account for 12% of the student population but disproportionately represent 19% of in-school suspensions, 20% of single out-of-school suspensions, 25% of multiple out-of-school suspensions, 19% of expulsions, 23% of law enforcement referrals, and 23% of school-related arrests. Moreover, while students with dis/Abilities under IDEA and Section 504 comprise 14% of all students, they constitute nearly 76% of those subjected to physical restraint in schools. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html#ftn6). This study will help inform teachers, building and district administrators and other stakeholders about RJPs and how the use of these practices can lead to improved outcomes for teachers and for students with dis/Abilities.

This study addressed the following research question: *What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms?* The following sub questions investigated specific insights from the teachers regarding the perceived effects of RJPs in their classrooms:

1. How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on themselves?

These questions were addressed through the lens of three theoretical frameworks: Social Justice (Winslade, 2018), Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2019), and DisCrit theory (Annamma et al., 2013).

Statement of Potential Significance

A review of the extant literature suggested a need to better understand RJPs as they relate to issues of equity in school systems, particularly with attention to their application for students with dis/Abilities. Since the majority of the research around issues of inequity focuses on racial inequity in discipline systems, and since the literature around discipline also indicated that there is significant inequity for students with dis/Abilities, this study will explore how teachers perceive RJPs in their inclusive classrooms.

This study will explore findings to provide a multidimensional understanding of the literature around RJPs. It is clear that the topic of RJPs in inclusive settings is just now emerging as a focused area of research. The lack of research in this area indicates that the present study is not only timely, but also provides a critical contribution in response to the call to action in the literature for additional investigation of RJPs for students receiving special education (Fronius et al., 2016). In fact, in a literature review of RJPs in U.S. schools, Fronius et al. (2016) found that the majority of the literature examining RJPs takes the form of RJ program descriptions rather than evaluation studies.

Despite several decades of research in the field of RJPs, our understanding of its effects is still limited by a lack of substantial, rigorous research. The present study contributes to increased understandings by addressing several gaps in the current research base. First, although a few large-scale research studies have explored RJPs as an intervention for reducing rates of disciplinary action (Anyon et al., 2016, 2018; Carter et al., 2017; Farr et al., 2020; Gregory, 2016; Huguley et al., 2020; Kline, 2016), no such research studies have focused specifically on RJPs interventions for students with dis/Abilities. Additionally, these large-scale quantitative studies do not contextualize or give a voice to the primary stakeholders in the research contexts. When exploring issues of race, dis/ability and inequity, it is problematic to apply formulaic, post-positivist research designs which cannot capture the nuances of the human experience. In the qualitative research design employed in the present study, I have applied multiple a approaches to increase rigor and trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), in an effort to illuminate these experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Social Justice Lens

RJ has been presented as a means to decrease inequity in school systems and thus can be viewed through the lens of social justice. Much of the scholarly literature has applied this theoretical framework to situate research studies (Gregory et al., 2018; Haight et al., 2016; Mansfield et al., 2018; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Winslade (2018) connected RJ and social justice after asserting that both social justice and RJ emphasize the context around the event or the individual and both take an outward looking position.

They both invoke this context to help understand what is operating on a person

that does not just emerge from within the nature or the essence of that person.

Social justice does this by directing the focus on the identity group. Restorative

justice does it by focusing on the group of people that is constituted by an event,

specifically the event of an offense. This includes the victim and the offender and

those who are connected to these people or to the event (Winslade, 2018, p. 3)

In RJ, the emphasis is on maintaining a healthy community, not on penalizing or

punishing the offender (Willis, 2018), while still holding the offender accountable. RJ

and social justice offer a wider perspective of the situation under analysis. As in the case

of this study, it also includes examining the power dynamics present in the U.S. school

system.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that seeks to illuminate the

relationships between race, racism, power and social structures (Caldwell & Crenshaw,

1996). This theory emerged in legal studies systems as students spoke out and criticized

the lack of diversity in the law faculty, the marginalization of students of color from the

curriculum and the state of civil rights in the 1960s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). It

eventually expanded into the discipline of education as a means to "theorize race and use

it as an analytical tool for understanding school inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2018,

p. 48).

This theory has been translated to the educational system and applies to the racial

inequity in school-based disciplinary practices that has manifested into the proverbial

school to prison pipeline (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). Critical race theorists argue that

schools are racial institutions that perpetuate racial inequalities in power and privilege through their control of educational access and opportunity (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Lewis et al., 2015). Additionally, schools and educational systems teach and reinforce social rules and inequalities through colorblind policies that do not take into consideration the racist legacy of damaging societal and cultural stereotyping (Apple, 2012; Leonardo, 2009). While CRT works to eliminate racial oppression as a part of its broader aim of ending all forms of oppression, one tenet of CRT is that racism is endemic and has contributed to all modern forms of group advantage and disadvantage (Song et al., 2020). An examination of the research regarding the effects of school discipline policies on students provides clear evidence that students of color are at a severe disadvantage (Gregory et al., 2018; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Schiff, 2018).

The research on racial inequities in schools through a CRT lens outlines how "colorblind" institutional policies and informal practices harm outcomes for Black and Latinx students (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). In multiple studies (Carter et al., 2017; Hashim et al., 2018; Morris & Perry, 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019) colorblind zero-tolerance discipline policies and school security measures were associated with wider discipline gaps which led to increased entry to the criminal justice system and negative long-term outcomes for Black and Brown students.

DisCrit

There is little research around the effects of RJPs on student with dis/Abilities and little research that connects disability studies and RJ. However, DisCrit is a theoretical framework that connects CRT to disability studies (Annamma et al., 2013) and focuses on CRT and disability studies in education to examine how race and ableism interact in

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school systems. School systems in the U.S. privilege white normalcy as the standard for behavior and success (Huang & Cornell, 2017). In many cases, any deviance from this standard is perceived as negative; and often if the deviance is disruptive behavior, or viewed from a "threat" perspective, the student can be pushed out of the classroom (e.g., suspension, expulsion). The minority threat theory is the perspective that a growing minority population is seen as a danger to the white majority (Edwards, 2016; Welch & Payne, 2018). In a school, being a member of a minoritized group can mean being perceived as "bad" or "other" and needing to be oppressed to ensure the majority racial power dynamic. This is just one example of how racial bias manifests in the education system in the U.S. The student can be pushed out of the general education system through a Response to Intervention (RTI) process resulting in special education classification and placement in a more restrictive learning environment, or it can be a simple push out of the classroom through a behavioral referral (Bornstein, 2017). Both examples illustrate why this framework is important for examining the perceived effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms that serve students with special education needs. It emphasizes the need for awareness that teachers, administrators, and students are interacting in a context that pushes and pulls from their participation in a racially- and dis/ability-charged system.

Overview of Methodology

The foundational epistemological frame of this study is situated social constructivism (Richardson, 1997). This framework states that the individual and the learning environment cannot be separated. The act of learning and the content on which that learning is based are inextricably joined. RJ echoes this belief in its tenet regarding the philosophical journey that practitioners of RJ must undergo in order to be successful

(Winslade, 2018). Some in the RJ community argue that RJ is a philosophy and not a practice. To be considered a RJ practitioner, you must adopt the philosophy and beliefs that anchor RJPs; that is, the community benefits from whole, connected relationships between and among its members. This philosophical orientation situates this study and focuses on teachers' perceptions since they are the community builders in the classroom. To capture this perspective, a basic interpretive, reflexive study design will be used, following a grounded theory approach to analyze and interpret the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Since teachers are the gatekeepers of education, their perspective of RJPs in the classrooms are vital to understanding its role for increasing equity for students of color and/or students with dis/Abilities. A qualitative framework for this inquiry is appropriate because of the nuanced nature of race and dis/ability in school settings. As well, this study will be conducted through a critical lens since the nature of RJPs address power dynamics which are ubiquitous in educational settings. As researchers it is imperative to listen to the voices of the teachers and understand the construction and deconstruction of their perceptions of using RJPs in their classrooms, especially how those experiences influence the experiences of students with dis/Abilities.

A qualitative, interpretive research design was the method of inquiry for this study given my desire to deeply understand and accurately describe teachers' perspectives of RJPs in their inclusive classrooms. Qualitative research is uniquely and particularly suited to the study of educational settings, given its dynamic interactive nature (Klingner et al., 2005). In qualitative research, and especially following the epistemological stance of constructivism, the researcher is aware of the socially

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constructed nature of reality and this value is reflected in the context of the study and kept as the central phenomenon of the research (Burck, 2005). As well, the qualitative researcher must be aware of the interplay between the setting, participants, data and their own position within the micro and macro settings of the study, culture and society (Merriam, 2002).

Basic Interpretive Design With Grounded Theory Analysis

I chose a qualitative research design because the focus of this work is to gain insight into what teachers perceive in their restorative classrooms. The extant literature investigating RJPs often highlights the potential effects of RJPs on discipline referrals, but the purpose of this study was to understand what teachers observe and perceive to be happening in their classrooms, with specific attention to environments which include students with dis/Abilities.

Most of the qualitative literature exploring RJ is descriptive of the process or implementation without delving into the effects of RJ on students. Although these qualitative studies generally explore the topic of RJPs in this context, I did not find any that addressed the questions in this research study, nor any that used robust methodologies to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the data. Thus, I employed the present study's research design and methods to address these gaps.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 restorative teachers that were teaching in inclusive settings. The teachers were identified as successful RJ practitioners by Restore (pseudonym), an organization that implemented RJ in the school district and trained teachers, staff and administrators in how to support RJPs in their schools. Restore is the RJ branch of a non-profit that focuses on improving outcomes for students with

dis/Abilities in the school district. The overarching non-profit of which Restore is a part of is TeamTalk (pseudonym) and it employs 10-15 full-time employees, with five of them dedicated to full time RJ implementation and development. Each interview was approximately one hour long and was conducted at the convenience of the participant. I recorded the interview and transcribed it, checking it for accuracy before coding it. I used Microsoft Excel for coding the interviews, observations and memos and stored data in password protected archives.

Restore identified and connected me with successful restorative teachers that were teaching in classrooms with students with dis/Abilities and the interviews focused specifically on those contexts. The process followed the guidance of criterion-based selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As well, I conducted observations of the professional development sessions that Restore provided to participating schools. The professional development sessions that I observed were sessions that specifically address special education. I took notes during the sessions and documented questions, comments, and non-verbal cues and communications which I included in my coding.

I used thematic coding with a grounded theory approach to iteratively create and reflect on the emerging themes.. First, I conducted a round of open coding followed by axial coding and then selective coding. Glaser and Strauss (2017) call for constant comparison in this approach which allows the researcher to grow and thicken the interpretation through the gathering of rich, thick descriptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To consider my own influence in the research, I used reflexive memo-ing to reflect on and document my own thoughts and feelings during this process. My work included a subjectivity statement to clarify my own position in the research.

Limitations and Delimitations

There were several limitations to this study. First, the findings of this study were limited due to the characteristics of the sample of participants. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Since the participants were selected by the organization Restore, the sample may not have been as diverse as if selected randomly.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research study, reliability and validity were recognized through the ability to denote the findings as credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I attended to these concerns in a variety of ways. I used well established research methods and I read extensively on the subject and consulted with experts in the field of RJ to explore issues and concerns as they arose. Also, at the time of the study, I was on a RJ research team that met monthly to discuss the latest literature and developments around RJPs in school settings.

I used triangulation via my use of multiple data sources: individual interviews, observations, and reflexive memos. At the beginning of my interview protocol (Appendix A), it is noted that I allowed potential participants the opportunity to refuse to participate as well as outlined exactly how their contributions would be used. I used member checks from members of my RJ research community to provide credibility.

Finally, this study was limited by its exploratory nature. Since there is little literature to date regarding RJPs and inclusive classrooms, it would have been difficult to settle on a more specific focus at this point in time.

This study employed purposeful sampling, also known as criterion-based selection, to interview teachers and analyze their responses until data saturation was achieved, N=13, following the guidelines outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The

selection criteria focused on identifying teachers with at least two years of experience as "restorative" educators who either held special education roles or taught in inclusive settings with students having IEPs/504 plans. This dual-tiered sampling framework involved selecting participants from schools working with "Restore," a team of RJ practitioners and trainers, under the broader umbrella of "TeamTalk," an organization dedicated to fostering environments that support self-determination and collaborative problem-solving for youth with disabilities and their peers.

Summary

To realize the promise of RJPs in educational settings serving students with dis/Abilities, it is critical to understand how teachers, as constructors of restorative classroom environments, understand RJPs and perceive their effects on their students and themselves. To investigate these critical questions, I situated the study in CRT and DisCrit and explored these questions. The purpose of the research study was to specifically understand the impact of RJ and RJPs on students and teachers' in inclusive spaces and broadly contribute to increase equity in diverse schools settings for students with dis/Abilities.

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Definition of Key Terms

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Restorative Justice (Lockhart & Zammit, 2005) - "a values-based approach to responding to wrongdoing and conflict, with a balanced focus on the offender, victim, and community. Restorative justice focuses on transforming wrongdoing by healing the harm, particularly to relationships, that is created by the harmful behavior" (p.7).

Restorative Justice Practices – procedures that contribute to the implementation of RJ in a particular setting.

Students with dis/Abilities (Annamma et al., 2013)- student with a disability but with a special emphasis on what the student CAN do (i.e. abilities instead of disability).

Inclusive classroom (Keifer-Boyd & Kraft, 2003) – an educational setting which includes students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan in a general education setting.

Colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) - an ideology or approach that wrongly emphasizes ignoring racial differences to treat all individuals equally, regardless of their race or ethnicity. This approach oversimplifies and ignores the complexities of racial inequalities and systemic racism, failing to address the deep-seated issues that contribute to racial disparities, perpetuating and supporting systems and structures that harm people of color.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research around restorative justice (RJ) and restorative justice practices (RJPs) is abundant (Acosta et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2012, 2015; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014; Norris, 2022 2013; Lewis el al., 2015; Simson, 2012; Wilson, 2013, Freeman et al. 2016); however, expansive rigorous academic research is lacking. Much of the available research on RJ and RJPs is focused specifically on discipline practices. There is research pointing to RJPs as a means of decreasing rates of suspension and expulsion, which is why it has been touted as a solution for the racial inequities in disciplinary measures (Gregory et al., 2018; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Schiff, 2018), an issue that is at the forefront in the media and as an educational policy issue. There is also evidence that RJPs can lead to improved academic achievement and outcomes for students (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2016; Voight et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2017), but this evidence, and much of the evidence presented regarding RJ, comes from book chapters, practitioner interviews, reports, and non-peer-reviewed research, rather than academic research (Schiff, 2018). There is a need for more rigorous research about the effects of RJ and the first wave of that research is underway.

The first randomized controlled trial (RCT) to examine the effects of RJPs began in 2014. The study examines the Restorative Practices Intervention (RPI) to determine its impact on discipline referrals, positive youth development, social skills, and relationships (Acosta et al., 2016) In their follow-up publication, the RJ interventions did not yield significant changes in the treatment schools. However, student self-reported experience with restorative practices significantly predicted improved school climate and connectedness, peer attachment, and social skills, and reduced cyberbullying

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victimization (Acosta et al., 2019). The first complete study to examine the impact of RJPs was published in 2018 by the RAND Corporation. It details the implementation of a specific RJ framework, Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities (PERC), and its impact in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district. This study and its results are outlined later in this chapter.

In addition to the dearth of quantitative analysis, there is a need for rigorous qualitative research that provides insight into the effects of RJPs in the form of rich, thick description and triangulation of findings that focuses on the lived experiences of practitioners in the field, as they work in diverse classrooms to increase equity and positive outcomes for students. Along with the need for more rigorous academic research, there is also a need for deeper investigation into the effects of RJPs for students with dis/Abilities. This significant hole in the scholarly research base has been alluded to time and again in the literature, with little to no published research as a result.

Process for Collection of Literature

The nature of the research about RJ and RJPs (e.g., generally non-rigorous) led to a nontraditional method of searching for and collecting recently published work around the topic. Since much of the literature is observational, anecdotal, and/or non-peer reviewed, the literature was collected through a forward search beginning from a rigorous research article by Ryan and Ruddy (2015) and followed the citation trail forward into the most recent literature. The research articles were also selected through a Mendeley citation search of related articles until no new articles were collected. The selection criteria were that the articles be peer-reviewed and published in the years 2015 until the present. The year 2015 was chosen since it is one year before the steep increase in RJ

publications, as evidenced by the publication trend on the Web of Science database. Using the terms, "restorative justice" and "schools," which was a common search based on other publications, there were five publications in 2014 and 2015, which increased to 16 publications in 2016 with that number remaining constant in 2017 and increasing to 28 in 2018. When that search was restricted to the United States, the total number of articles dropped to 21. However, that search did not include one of the first and only RCT studies on RJ written by Acosta and a team of researchers in 2016. This could be due to the fact that this study uses the term "restorative practices" in place of RJ or RJPs. Thus, this search term was also used in the collection of literature. From 2018 to 2023, 29 more related publications were found. The diverse use of terms and expressions as well as the diverse understanding of RJPs in action makes a large systematic sweep of the literature difficult. The inconsistency in search terms used to identify and cull articles mentioned previously exemplifies the difficulty in collecting research and publications regarding RJ. As well, there is little literature regarding RJPs in inclusive settings that goes beyond a focus on disciplinary measures. There are numerous articles and reports that call for more research into the effects of RJPs for students with dis/Abilities, and four dissertations published in 2018 (Waggoner), 2019 (Potter), and 2023 (Meeks; Shirley) that focus on the impact of RJ on students with dis/Abilities. Three out of the four published dissertations focused on improving equity in discipline for students of color and students with dis/Abilities.

Historical Contexts of RJPs

The origins of Restorative Justice (RJ) in an educational context are not clear. There are several events that have been referenced as the "first time" that RJ made its

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way into an education setting. It is clear, however, that the philosophy and practice of restorative justice is not new. The roots of restorative justice practices (RJPs) go back to the traditions of justice from indigenous people, ancient Roman, Greek and Arab philosophy and religious beliefs (Zehr, 2002).

The manner in which these cultures viewed social conflict emphasized repairing the social harm done after an offense instead of focusing on the offender. These practices could take the form of family group conferences and circle hearings as used by indigenous groups such as the Aboriginals, Inuit and native tribes in the Americas (Kohli et al., 2019) The common principle of these practices focused on repairing the harm done rather than punishing the offender, and this is a central tenet in RJ frameworks.

As an intervention practice, RJ was first used in the criminal justice system in the 1980s. It began in the United States as an intervention for low-level, nonviolent crimes (Sliva et al., 2020). This practice reduced repeat offenses for individuals while incarcerated and reduced recidivism after exiting from the criminal justice system (Gregory et al., 2016). As RJ was found to be increasingly effective in these settings, the U.S. justice system scaled up to using broader implementations of RJPs, such as restorative dialogue and offender mediation (Sliva et al., 2020). Other countries such as Australia and New Zealand have been using RJPs in both the justice and educational system for decades. Most notably, New Zealand has used RJPs in formal justice settings since the 1980s (Zehr, 2002).

While RJPs have ancient roots in the criminal justice system, its use in a school setting is more recent. In 1994, a school in Queensland, Australia, convened a Restorative Justice conference in a school setting to respond to an assault (Kohli et al., 2019). This is

generally recognized as the first use of RJ in a school-based setting as it is cited in various overviews of the history of RJ in schools (Bornstein, 2017; Fronius et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Monell, 2018a; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015; Song & Swearer, 2016; Waggoner, 2018; Winslade, 2018). RJ gradually expanded in the school setting and eventually could be found in use in 100 schools in Australia with a few pilot studies to determine its effectiveness in improving school climate, culture and discipline. These studies found that for the most part, participants were engaged and invested in the process (Molloy et al., 2023). Gradually RJ expanded to schools across the nation, to New Zealand and beyond, finally landing and gaining a foothold in the United States and Canada in the beginning of the 21st century (Fronius et al., 2016).

Defining Restorative Justice

Regarding its use in schools, Restorative Justice is sometimes used in conjunction with a Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) plan but is classified separately in much of the literature since it has a unique framework and theoretical model. The agreed upon definition of RJ is as nebulous as the term itself sounds. An expert in the field of RJ, Zehr (2002) defines it as "a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (p. 36). Other experts offer a slightly different definition. For example, RJ has also been described as "a values-based approach to responding to wrongdoing and conflict, with a balanced focus on the offender, victim, and community. Restorative justice focuses on transforming wrongdoing by healing the harm, particularly to relationships, that is created by the harmful behavior" (Lockhart & Zammit, 2005, p. 7). Both of these

definitions emphasize the importance of collectively addressing the harm caused by the offense and preserving the balance of the community in which the offense has taken place.

Zehr (2002), a foundational figure in the RJ movement, detailed three critical questions that are fundamental in the understanding of RJPs in contrast to punitive approaches often employed in community offense situations:

1. Who was harmed? What is the extent of the harm?

2. What are the needs that contributed to the event?

3. How do we make this right? How do we ensure that harm is repaired, relationships are restored, and future harm is prevented?

Achilles and Stutzman-Amstutz (2007) used Zehr's critical questions to outline six guiding questions that frame the restorative justice process:

1. Who has been hurt?

2. What are their needs?

3. Whose obligations are they?

4. What are the causes?

5. Who has a "stake" in this?

6. What is the appropriate process to involve stakeholders in an effort to put things right?

In this process of deconstructing the tenets of a philosophical belief to capture its process, the challenge and elusiveness of RJ as a practice is laid clear. Add the complexity and nuances that come with school communities to the context of RJ, and there is even less clarity. In one sense it is easier to highlight the disagreements, rather than the agreements

to create a clearer understanding of RJ (Winslade, 2018). There is little that can be agreed upon in terms of clearly defining RJ but there are certain tensions in the RJ field that illuminate the nuances of varying approaches to RJPs.

Process of RJPs

In the field of restorative justice, three models dominate: victim offender conferences, family group conferences, and circle approaches (Zehr, 2002). These models have been combined and blended; for example, a conference may take the form of a circle, or the process may utilize multiple models throughout. Because these models have common elements, they are sometimes grouped together and referred to as restorative conferences or restorative circles. However, it is important to note that the use of *circles* in a mediation does not automatically render the process as *restorative*.

Ron Claassen, another important RJ practitioner states that for the process to be restorative, that is, for the resolution of wrongdoing to occur, three things are key: "the wrong or injustice must be acknowledged, the 'equity' needs to be restored, and future intentions need to be addressed" (as cited in Zehr, 2002). The process of how those things occur is less defined. In many school systems, circles are used in classrooms and disciplinary settings, but the emphasis of the process is the cycle of repair and the careful consideration of restoring the community.

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Disagreements in the Field

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Song and Swearer (2016) outline three primary disagreements in the RJ community about RJPs in schools. First is the specificity of training necessary to successfully implement RJPs in schools. There are differing views on whether RJ can be "taught" based on the perspective that RJ is belief or value system and not an

intervention. Thus, some would argue that RJ needs to be learned through a mentorship model of training (Song & Swearer, 2016). Contrarily, others would suggest that the RJPs can be implemented systematically through the use of restorative circles and/or through explicit training.

The second disagreement that Song and Swearer (2016) outline is the degree of integration of RJ into the school framework. The overwhelming majority of RJPs in U.S. schools are focused on discipline referrals. Furthermore, they are focused on the use of restorative circles, but are not limited or standardized in how, when or where circles are used. This creates a problem in analyzing RJPs as an intervention in any context because there is no defined standard practice of RJ. In other words, any use of a "circle" can be deemed a restorative practice, although that might not be true based on the philosophical objective of the action (Song & Swearer, 2016). This is especially frustrating when it comes to analyzing the literature focused on RJPs in the school system. A self-proclaimed definition of RJ might result in the use of a practice that is not necessarily restorative based on another individual's definition. As a result, since there is no agreed upon definition, the dissemination of hazy, anecdotal research about RJ abounds.

The third disagreement, as stated by Song and Swearer (2016), is "the degree to which RJ explicitly addresses racial equity issues" (p. 314). The recent conversations and acknowledgement that disciplinary practices are inequitable and racist have pushed this tension to the forefront as RJPs are being used as a remedy. The disagreement about RJPs being used as a tool to address racial equity in disciplinary issues is based on whether RJPs *should* directly or indirectly be used for that purpose. Some proponents of RJ believe that it should be used explicitly to address issues of racial inequity while others

believe that RJ will naturally restore balance and justice to the community (Ryan &
Ruddy, 2015).

For the purposes of this discussion, the definition of Restorative Justice that is
used is the previously stated definition from Lockhart and Zammit, (2005) who defined
restorative justice as "a values-based approach to responding to wrongdoing and conflict,
with a balanced focus on the offender, victim, and community. Restorative justice
focuses on transforming wrongdoing by healing the harm, particularly to relationships,
that is created by the harmful behavior" (p.7). This definition was chosen based on RJ as
a belief or value that addresses inequity on many levels and in many forms. In exploring
the literature and the values and tenets of RJ, it is clear that practices alone are not the
intent of RJ practitioners. It is a process that includes absorbing the essence of RJ into a
way of being, acknowledging that it be "restorative" in practice, including the values of
RJ into your personal framework and philosophy for navigating the world.
Contextualizing the discussion around the definition of RJ is important, as RJ is currently
and increasingly being used to remedy the lack of equity in school disciplinary practices
in the United States. Much of the recent conversations around discipline in schools have
emerged from the school-to-prison pipeline and how to disrupt it (Bleakley & Bleakley,
2018; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Curran, 2016; Mallett, 2016a; Mallett, 2016b; Rocque
& Snellings, 2018; Schiff, 2018).

Disciplinary Practices in the United States' Education System

The Safe and Clean Neighborhood Program of 1973 marked a shift in the
discipline policies of U.S. communities nationwide. This program focused on reducing
neighborhood crime in 28 cities in New Jersey by paying for police officers to be put on

foot patrol in disorderly areas. A few years later, the results were brought to the public

via an article in the *The Atlantic*, expanding the informal results to encompass the broken

window theory (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). This theory posited that one broken window

would lead to more broken windows in quick succession due to the lack of care and

attention of local residents. In a school setting, this might be thought of as the impact of

graffiti on the school wall. The message that is received by observers of the graffiti is that

the space is unimportant and uncared for; therefore, more graffiti will soon appear. The

converse to this theory is that if you attend to the small details (e.g. garbage on the

hallway floor) it will lead others to perceive the importance of the space and increase

buy-in to respect it. The broken window theory brought a focus on safety through

policing, and even though there were no quantifiable decreases in crime, the public did

perceive a decrease in criminal activity (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). The cross-over of a

police presence into community spaces continued to grow and expand, and today this is

evidenced by the fact that it is more common than not to find metal detectors and school

resource officers in urban school settings (Voight et al., 2015). More than a just a police

presence, this focus on safety has led to zero-tolerance policies in schools and an

escalation of punitive school discipline practices and policies (Waggoner, 2018).

Many of these zero tolerance policies enforced blanket consequences for rules

violations with no exceptions or explanations. For example, a school might have a policy

of expelling students for fighting but a teacher might characterize rowdy rough-housing

between students as fighting, after a long day when she has little patience left. There are

few interactions in a social environment such as a school where subjectivity and

perceptions do not play a role in stakeholders' meaning making of the world around

them. Furthermore, researchers have established that the subjectivity in disciplinary judgements are often racially biased against minority groups in the schools (Meeks, 2021; Rocque, 2010; Rocque, 2010; Sliva et al., 2020). One study on zero tolerance policies found that Black students were disproportionately affected (Hoffman, 2014). Hoffman (2014) found that the zero-tolerance policy in a school district was associated with a doubling of the rate of expulsions for Black students, with a 20% increase for Latinx students and 40% increase for white students.

Another larger scale study (Curran, 2016) that utilized data from two nationally representative data sources (National Center for Education Statistics; the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, 1989-2007) found that state zero tolerance laws are predictive of a 0.5 percentage point increase in district suspension rates. The results also show that zero tolerance laws are predictive of higher suspension rates for Black students as compared to white students. This confirms other findings around zero tolerance policies' contributions to the Black-white suspension gap.

The discipline practices that are often the source of the school-to-prison pipeline often start in the classroom (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Mallett, 2016a; Mallett, 2016b; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Schiff, 2018). How a teacher escalates, or deescalates an interaction has a lasting impact on the relationship with, and future perceptions of, the student (Monell, 2018a; Williams, 2018). Vavrus and Cole (2002) refer to this as a *disciplinary moment*. They state, "these approaches allow us to treat the activity preceding suspension as negotiated social practice rather than as a series of events that can be specified in school discipline policy without regard to the sociocultural context of the classroom" (Vavrus & Cole,

2002, p.89). A teacher's decision to refer a student for punishment is the critical moment where the process and decision to take a student out of the classroom begins. Schools create policies and practices that contribute to destructive disciplinary processes that can include police presence at schools, use of physical restraint, and automatic suspensions and expulsions for some behaviors. These harsh discipline practices, combined with zero-tolerance policies, result in students being pushed out of school, with minority students and students with dis/Abilities being disproportionately affected (Hoffman, 2014; Monell, 2018a).

According to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2011), African-American students were 3.5 times more likely to be expelled when compared to their white peers. Students with dis/Abilities were also disproportionally pushed out of the classroom. One study found that students with dis/Abilities made up 32 percent of the youth in juvenile detention centers while representing only 8.6 percent of public school children (Jain et al., 2014). It is difficult to separate the issue of overrepresentation of race and students with dis/Abilities, and when these two factors are combined, the results are even more staggering. An analysis of a government report in 2012 found that one in four African-American students with dis/Abilities had been suspended at least once, in comparison with one in eleven white students. In 2011, a study that tracked almost one million students in Texas for more than six years, found that African-American students were disproportionately disciplined when compared with similar students from other racial groups (Fabelo et al., 2011) Similarly, students with emotional dis/Abilities were also disproportionately disciplined

(Fabelo et al., 2011). These statistics point to the disparity in, and the impact of, harsh, push-out disciplinary practices on both minority students and students with dis/Abilities.

Many school districts across the U.S. employ practices that push students out of school for minor offenses with often serious consequences for students, which include doubling the probability of arrest for Black students compared to white students (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). The harsh discipline policies these schools employ are designed to remove students from the learning environment as a response to perceived problematic behavior. Students who are pushed out of the public school system often are pushed into the criminal justice system, creating what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Mallett, 2016b; Rocque & Snellings, 2018; Schiff, 2018).

Furthermore, push-out practices do not result in a positive change in behavior. Recent studies have shown that pushing students out of school, either through suspension or expulsion, does not change behavior; instead, it increases the chances of dropping out of school entirely or incarceration (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Freeman et al., 2016; Kalvesmaki & Tulman, 2017; Mallett, 2016). This could be due to the increased "policing" of schools where school resource officers have the ability to arrest students or charge them criminally for behavioral offenses (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Lacoe, 2015; Mallett, 2016a; Tanner-Smith & Fisher, 2016; Voight et al., 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018).

The increase of school resource officers has contributed to school cultures in which students can be criminalized and fed into the pipeline of the criminal justice system (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Mallett, 2016a; Owens, 2017). According to the U.S.

Department of Justice, the number of school resource officers has risen consistently since 1997 and continues to rise. One study found that students are more likely to be arrested at school than ever before and that most of these arrests are for being disruptive, which is considered a nonviolent offense (Waggoner, 2018). In an effort to improve student behavior, zero-tolerance policies have instead exacerbated the problem by providing a process by which disruptive students are removed from the classroom instead of a system working to keep children in school.

On December 12, 2012, Senator Richard Durbin from Illinois held the first ever federal hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline (S.HRG. 112-848, 2012). Senators Durbin (IL), Leahy (VT), Blumenthal (CT) and Franken (MN) were joined by 410 attendees to discuss the overrepresentation of minority groups in U.S. incarceration, and the fact that the rate of incarceration in the U.S. is the highest of any nation in the world (Wilson, 2013), a rate that persists today. Additionally, Senator Durbin stated that, "For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance that is widespread in our schools and is depriving many children of their fundamental right to an education (S.HRG. 112-848, 2012). Organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Dignity in Schools testified in the hearing to the devastating effects of such policies on young people, especially students of color. One testimony from a young man spoke to the power of suspension to endanger the future of young Black men in his community:

When you suspend students or you put them out of school,

whether it be expulsion or suspension, you expose them to

these violent crimes, or you expose them to this idea of

being shot, being killed, being hurt, or being harmed. I have

seen it all too many times where some of my family

members were actually gunned down in front of my own

house. (...) I think that we have to be able to tell the

differences between troubled youth, not bad youth but

troubled youth, because you label them as threats, then you

get consequences and not results. If we want to see action,

if we want to see improvement in our schools, suspension

just does not work. I have seen too many of my peers being

suspended, and they have gotten to the point where, when

they become afraid to get suspended, they decide that the

best thing for them to do is leave, considering the fact that

the schools label them as bad students and label them as

mistakes. So we have to change the label on these students,

and we have to give them an opportunity and a chance to

express themselves, look into their history, look into where

they come from, because a lot of youth from where I come

from face huge struggles, huge difficulties. (S.HRG. 112-

848, 2012, p. 31)

Issues of Equity

RJPs have been touted as a method of improving equity in disciplinary actions in

schools. Experts agree that Black and Latinx students as well as students who are eligible

for special education (SPED) are disciplined at higher and harsher rates than their peers (Carter et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Fabelo et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2017). In fact, the introduction of RJ as a practice and its far-ranging adoption by school districts is directly connected to its promise of reducing racial bias in suspensions and punitive actions (Edwards, 2016; Gregory et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018; Kline, 2016). While this effect has been somewhat well documented, a closer look into the research is needed based on the aforementioned tensions regarding the training, the degree of implementation of RJ into the school framework, and explicit intent of RJPs to address racial inequity in disciplinary measures.

To date, the focus of RJP-related research has been to document its impact on racial bias in disciplinary actions in U.S. schools. Various studies have documented this effect such as Hashim and colleagues (2018). They used an interrupted time series design using twelve years of student level administrative data from the 2003-2004 to 2014-2015 school year to examine trends in suspension rates in the Los Angeles Unified School District. They found large rates of decline in the years following the suspension ban and reduced suspension gaps between frequently disciplined students and their less-disciplined peers. However, suspension gaps between Black and non-Black students and SPED and non-SPED students still persisted. This may be due to more time needed for the RJPs to fully resolve inequities.

Such logic is supported by results from a recent randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a teacher professional development program demonstrating that when teachers improved their relationships with students of color, racial discipline gaps were reduced (Gregory et al., 2016). However, this trend is not as straightforward in one of the first

RCTs of RJPs which followed the implementation of the RJP "Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities" (PERC) in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district (Augustine et al., 2019). This study found that the implementation improved teachers' ratings of overall school climate and reduced the overall suspension rates and the racial suspension gap between African-American students and white students. However, Augustine and colleagues. (2019) did not find that academic outcomes improved, nor did they see a reduction in arrest rates. The results of both studies suggest that quantitative data alone do not tell the whole story, and there is a clear need for robust qualitative inquiry in order to uncover the nuances of the effect of RJPs in schools.

Racial Bias

Discussing race and inequality in social contexts can be uncomfortable but is necessary in an effort to stop racial bias. Carter et al. (2017) discussed why some groups find it difficult to face issues of race including the notion of race as a consequence of slavery and conquest, the archetype of the dangerous Black male, the effects of stereotyping leading to greater inequality, and the continued deleterious harmful effects of stereotypes today. They asserted that the legacy of segregation continues to be carried out in the separation and isolation of minority groups via race and class, the perpetuation of disadvantaging student from minoritized backgrounds, and troubled relationships between minoritized groups in school and school districts (Carter et al., 2017). The old patterns continue today and are supported by implicit bias, microaggressions and "colorblindness" that avoids the subject of race completely (Ottowein & Mun, 2023).

The idea of difference as a threat drives enough of the research that it deserves a conversation. While previous studies have found that Black students are punished at

higher rates and with harsher punishments for similar offensives, one study found that the issue is more complex than looking at minority versus majority status (Edwards, 2016). Edwards (2016) explored the racial threat theory outlined by Blalock in 1967 which posited that for each unit increase in the proportion of Black people in a population there was a similar increase in whites' perception of Blacks as a threat. This theory is used in the criminal justice system to examine links to crime, rates of arrest, rates of incarceration, and harshness of punishment (Edwards, 2016).

Lustick (2017) claimed that an unintended consequence of positive behavioral interventions is that they benefit white students the most in regard to reducing expulsions and suspensions. She cited various studies that found that even after positive behavioral support systems had been put in place, African-American and occasionally Latinx students still remained disproportionally represented in behavioral infractions in elementary, middle and high school (Vincent et al., 2011; Vincent et al., 2012). She argued that the current literature on positive discipline, which includes RJPs, critical conversations about racism and race are missing, even as the disparities in racially disproportionate suspension and expulsion of Black and Brown children are noted (Vincent et al., 2012). She proposed that anti-racism and culturally relevant education be included in any positive school discipline practice (Vincent et al., 2011). The aforementioned work by Carter et al. (2017) supported this call to stop colorblind approaches as a means to increase equity in school. They state, "to effectively address inequity, the role of race must be explicitly acknowledged in addressing racial disparities in discipline" (Carter et al., 2017, p. 207).

A similar perspective is offered by Schiff (2018) who cautioned that the promise of RJPs to limit the school-to-prison pipeline will not be fulfilled unless the underlying social-organizational structures that support the institutionalized racism that pervades the disciplinary system are addressed. She calls for the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and a recognition of socially unjust and racist policies that create forms of structural violence against students of color. She concludes that RJPs hold potential for keeping students in school and minimizing the use of exclusionary school discipline while promoting inclusiveness, respect, trust, honor and engagement. However, without considering the political, cultural and policy contexts of such initiatives, the institutional bias and structural racism present in these systems will prevent the acceptance and implementation of RJPs (Schiff, 2018).

The need for this dialogue is apparent even in examining the research around this topic. Rocque (2010) outlined two competing explanations for the racial disparity found in school discipline practices: differential behavior (discrimination) and differential treatment (bias) Later in his work, Rocque and Snellings (2018) controlled for ratings of student behavior using a fixed effects model and found that even then, Black students received more disciplinary referrals than any other student group. This quantitative analysis that attempted to parse out objective behavioral ratings around such a complex issue such as racial bias and discrimination in a socially constructed environment falls short due to its lack of student voice, as does the majority of the research in this area. Although important contributions result from such studies, the research designs do not facilitate exploration of the lived experiences of those involved in RJPs and indicate the need for robust, qualitative inquiry.

A finding that is more straightforward is the effect that RPJs can have on students' interactions with disciplinary actions. Anyon and her colleagues (Anyon et al., 2016) examined disciplinary statistics from 180 schools (N = 90,546 students) and found students from minoritized groups were overrepresented in suspension and expulsions and that Black, Latino, Native American, boys, and students with an Individualized Education Program, had equal or more participation in RJPs than their peers. As their participation in RJPs increased, their odds of receiving disciplinary actions and suspensions decreased (OR.21, p < .001; OR.07, P<.001 respectively) but the suspension gap between Black and white students remained (Anyon et al., 2016).

In a review of the literature around RJPs and their potential to reduce disparities in school discipline actions, Kline (2016) found that in some cases, specifically 14 out of 18 United Kingdom schools from a study by McCluskey et al. (2008), there was a significant reduction in the number of discipline referrals when RJPs were employed. However, what is more striking in the piece is the lack of a systematic literature review process and lack of an overall landscape of the effects of RJPs to reduce disparities in school discipline data, in spite of the article title, *Can Restorative Practices Help to Reduce Disparities in School Discipline Data? A Review of the Literature* (2016).

Morris and Perry (2016) analyzed the intersection of race, school discipline and academic outcomes. Specifically, they analyzed the association between race and suspension and academic achievement using multilevel mixed logistic and linear regression. They used data from the Kentucky School Discipline Study (n=16,248) over three years as their baseline. They concluded that school suspensions contribute to racial inequalities in academic achievement even when controlling for socioeconomic status

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and individual-level variables (Morris & Perry, 2016). Students who had been suspended

scored substantially lower on benchmark achievement tests than those who had not

experienced suspension, and African-American and Latinx students were more likely to

be suspended than white and Asian students in the same school. The significance of these

findings is profound: suspensions had long term impacts on the students, with poor test

performance carried over to years where the student was not suspended (but had been

previously suspended) (Morris & Perry, 2016). It stands to reason that suspensions and

expulsions can have a lasting impact on student achievement since not only do they miss

instructional time, but their self-confidence and engagement in the school system

weakens. After synthesizing multiple research perspectives, it is clear that push-out

discipline removes the students from the learning environment, and also erodes their

confidence and trust in the education system and the people who staff it (Anyon et al.,

2016; Gregory et al., 2016; Lustick, 2017b; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Voight et al., 2015;

Yeager et al., 2017).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) Learners' Bias

The racial bias that permeates the school system operates from a basis of fear and

power imbalance. The minority threat theory, or power threat/social threat/racial threat,

posits that harsher social control policies and practices will be present in places with high

concentrations of African-Americans and Latinx in order to protect the racial and

economic dominance of whites (Welch & Payne, 2018). This threat is also felt in the

school system, as evidenced by schools' harsher responses to misbehavior from students

who identify as part of the racial minority (Anyon et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2018;

Gregory et al., 2017; Morris & Perry, 2016; Rocque, 2010). Research around the

discipline gap usually focuses on Black students as the recipients of the harshest discipline practices, but few studies have explored the discipline gap for Latinx students. This is an important highlight given the current political and media campaign to vilify immigration and the criminalization of immigrants in the United States.

One study used a nationally representative sample of almost 3,500 public schools to examine the relationships between schools' Latinx student population and specific types of discipline, while also exploring possible moderating influences of school crime and socioeconomic status (Welch & Payne, 2018). Their study presented logistic regression models that partially supported their hypotheses that schools are more likely to adopt and use punitive out-of-school suspension when a disproportionately high population of Latinx students are enrolled; furthermore, they found that schools with disproportionately high populations of Latinx students are less likely to adopt more mild disciplinary policies of loss of privileges and probation (Welch & Payne, 2018). They also concluded that the Latinx threat effect was larger in schools with lower rates of overall school crime, pointing to its moderating effects. In their conclusion, the authors speak to the fact that the discipline gap and minority threat effect is much greater and more pronounced for Black student populations. While this study illuminates a need for more work in the area of CLD students, it also is significant in its weakness: the lack of stakeholder voice. Again, the quantitative nature of this investigation renders the method unable to examine the nuances of the human experiences of RJPs and indicates that need for qualitative approaches to investigate these issues.

On the opposite end of the research methods spectrum is the work of Ingraham and her colleagues (2016). They combined a single-case study design and qualitative

methods to examine the implementation and effects of RJPs in a multi-lingual and CLD elementary school. The researchers used multi-cultural consultee-centered consultation and culture-specific intervention methods to collaboratively design, implement, and evaluate outcomes for school stakeholders. While this study found preliminary evidence through school data, surveys, interviews with teachers, students, and parents, that the implementation of RJPs created fewer discipline referrals, greater collaboration between stakeholders and increased parent and youth leadership in supporting restorative practices, the research was primarily focused on how their specific model was effective for implementing said practices (Ingraham et al., 2016). Findings did indicate that following the introduction of RJPs in the school and through consistent, open, multilingual conferencing, there was a reduction in the total number of behavior referrals (133 in Year 1 to 20 in Year 3). There was a 100% reduction in the number of referrals for battery, physical injury, possession of knife/inappropriate items and property damage (Ingraham et al., 2016). As well, participation from parents, teachers and students in the RJPs increased as evidenced through qualitative data collection from focus groups, conferences and interviews. Nonetheless, the researchers acknowledged that this work was designed as a service delivery and intervention project rather than a research study; even so, it points to the importance of culturally relevant communication in the RJ process.

In another qualitative research study, a group of researchers from Colorado State University designed a research project, Culture of Care, which took place in a large urban high school in Denver, CO. They worked together with the teachers, students and parents to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline through 1) and ethic of care, 2) culturally

responsive pedagogy of relations, and 3) RJPs (Cavanagh et al., 2014). Focus group

interviews of student and parents as well as interviews with the principal and vice

principal were collected and "testimonios" were created (Cavanagh et al., 2014). Their

qualitative analysis revealed a need for change in the school, especially in terms of deficit

theorizing by the teachers. The parents and students felt that the teachers could make a

difference and improve outcomes for the students at the school, but the teachers did not

feel like the students came from homes with sufficient educational experiences to be

successful in post-secondary opportunities (Cavanagh et al., 2014). RJPs were used to

navigate and reduce these tensions, with the work continued by the students and parents

after the end of the research study. This project highlights the importance of qualitative

data collection in the exploration of socially nuanced situations and the promise of

responsible RJPs to explore and improve such situations in school environments.

Much of the literature around RJPs and racial bias in discipline practices is

riddled with calls to action, or as Gutierrez (2008) terms it, "gap gazing." This approach

is to name the gaps and holes in the focus area without offering a solution or suggestion

for change. For example, Lustick (2017) stated the problem of disproportionate

representation of Black and Brown students in school discipline outcomes and called for

a positive discipline approach which includes the tenets of culturally relevant education

(Lustick, 2017a), but included no contextual example to show how or why RJPs do or do

not work. Although this research does offer a suggestion, scholars (McCluskey et al.,

2008) may argue that it does not add to the research around RJPs in a meaningful way

since it offers no evidence. The field of RJPs needs to be improved with rigorous research

that contributes to stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of best practices and outcomes of RJPs.

For example, Willis (2018) outlined the importance of communication as a shared capacity that manifests in diverse ways. Communication is a vitally important aspect of RJPs because of the dialogical and participatory process that is emphasized and prioritized by restorative justice practitioners (Green et al., 2019). In an ethnographic study, Willis argued that RJPs privileges middle-class forms of communication. The study used comparative methodology contrasting two different restorative justice conferences. She discussed the implications of class-based linguistic disadvantage which can be also extended to include CLD students who may have drastically different communication needs and abilities as well as students with dis/Abilities. This discussion of socio-economic status and its effect of RJPs is sparingly attended to in the literature. In various other research studies, socio-economic status is an effect that is controlled for, not addressed specifically (Ingraham et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015; Welch & Payne, 2018; Willis, 2018); however, its effects must be addressed.

Socio-economic Status

Willis (2018) delves deeply in the work by Lareau (2003) regarding middle-class versus working-class communication. She outlined three main tenets for distinguishing social class: field, habitus and capital, with most of the focus being on the latter. 'Capital' refers to the many forms of advantage that an individual accumulates over their lifetime. This can include economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). Willis took this distinction one step further to determine how the range of capital in social class affected school participation. Willis (2018) used this as a foundation of her

ethnographic study which found that working-class participants have a harder time expressing themselves in a restorative way than middle-class participants. She noted, "Indeed, from what I observed, middle-class characteristics of scripted restorative justice prevented working-class individuals from full participation in the process; consequently, working-class participants were less power-fully positioned and at risk of having their rights under-enforced" (Willis, 2018, p. 4). RJ practitioners must acknowledge the diverse communication skills of their participants and offer culturally relevant strategies for engagement and opportunities for all students. This is especially true when implementing RJPs in inclusive classrooms where differently abled students are at higher risk for entering the school-to-prison pipeline, dropping out, and/or having limited post-secondary opportunities (Cavendish et al., 2015; Hashim et al., 2018; Ramey, 2015).

Disability Bias

In one study, the authors (Miller & Meyers, 2015) found that the rate of suspension, expulsion, referral to law enforcement and dropout was higher for students with dis/Abilities when compared to students without dis/Abilities in the Chicago Public School system. This study used chi-square analyses to examine system-wide data and found that the disparities varied by specific disciplinary practice and disability type. This was especially apparent in the number of in school suspensions (ISS) that the student received. For example, students without dis/Abilities had higher rates of an out of school suspension (OSS) than students with dis/Abilities, but multiple ISSs were related at a higher rate to students with a disability and especially students with dis/Abilities who were Black, Hispanic, white, Asian, and English Language Learner status when compared to students without dis/Abilities with the same designations (Miller & Meyers,

2015). When comparing the rates of OSS, the results were even more pronounced. Students with dis/Abilities received multiple OSS at more than 45 times the rate than students without a dis/Ability. This effect was consistent when looking at gender, ELL status and 10th and 11th graders who were Black, Hispanic, and white (Miller & Meyers, 2015).

When examining rates of suspension across disability type, the findings aligned with other studies that found students with emotional disturbance had the highest rate of suspensions, followed by students with learning dis/Abilities and then autism spectrum disorder (Miller & Meyers, 2015). This study is important because it one of the only studies that examined expulsion as well as suspension (although expulsion could not be due to a manifestation of the student's disability). The analysis showed there was a significantly higher rate of expulsions for students with dis/Abilities compared to students without dis/Abilities. However, this effect was not consistent when examining effects across boys, girls or Black students (Miller & Meyers, 2015). There was a very small effect for the referral to law enforcement category which the author states with caution. There were higher rates of dropout for students with a disability and more specifically, the highest dropout rate was for students with emotional disturbance, leaning disability and autism, respectively (Miller & Meyers, 2015). This study highlighted the importance of alternative, effective discipline measures for students with dis/Abilities since they are both disciplined at a higher, harsher rate and they also are at a higher risk to not finish school.

In a completely different approach and from a social work perspective, another study investigated the experiences of four Black students, their caregivers and educators

(Haight et al., 2016). The authors examined the intersection of disability and race; culture and perceptions of misbehavior; misbehaviors as a response to sexual harassment; and criminal justice language as it connected to a criminalized self- and social identity. This in-depth look at the varying perspectives of youth, caregivers and teachers gave a voice to the diversity of the student experience and the importance of alternatives to suspensions.

In an optimistic report (Mansfield et al., 2018), the authors found a decline in suspension rates over a five-year period for students overall and specifically for students with dis/Abilities, Black students, and for males. The results were documented in one high school in Virginia and based on the overall total number of suspensions in each category by year, yet because of the small sample size and general nature of the study, it was impossible to conjecture causality. However, the study did include anecdotal evidence in the form of direct quotes from stakeholders to express their hopes that the school continues to work on RJPs and reduce suspensions (Mansfield et al., 2018).

The optimism of research around RJPs is infectious. Many researchers and professionals believe that it can offer an alternative to harsh discipline practices that are more harmful than helpful (Mallett, 2016a; Monell, 2018b). Stenhjem (2005) and her team of secondary transition professionals echoed the hope that RJPs can offer a viable alternative and keep students with dis/Abilities out of the juvenile justice system. They included a clear caveat with their report: RJPs are most effective with the support of wrap-around services that attend to all of the needs of the student, not just focused on discipline practices (Stenhjem, 2005).

RJPs and Equity

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Research on the effects of RJPs on post-secondary outcomes does not exist.

However, there is more research underway which will examine RJPs and their impact on

long-term outcomes for students (Acosta et al., 2016; Green et al., 2019). Restorative

Practices Intervention (RPI), which is one particular RJ intervention, has been noted as a

potential positive influence in lowering discipline referrals and increasing and promoting

positive youth development (e.g. social skills and relationships) (Acosta et al., 2016). In

their follow-up publication, the RJ interventions did not yield significant changes in the

treatment schools. However, student self-reported experience with restorative practices

significantly predicted improved school climate and connectedness, peer attachment, and

social skills, and reduced cyberbullying victimization (Acosta et al., 2019). Even more

recently, another RCT study was outlined that will examine the effect of RJPs on

negative behaviors (Green et al., 2019). This study will use a mixed methods analysis to

examine RJPs' potential effects on expulsions, suspensions, truancy, and bullying, and

improvement of positive outcomes (academic grades, sense of safety and teacher support)

(Green et al., 2019). The study will run for four years, pending approval from the

participating school district's research review committee, and with funding provided by a

grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. There are still no published results as of

January 2024.

School Climate

One of the biggest effects of RJPs in the school environment is on school climate

(Augustine et al., 2019; Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018; Gage et al., 2016; Payne & Welch,

2018; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Voight et al., 2015). When students and teachers feel safe

and valued, they are able to more readily and meaningfully engage in the school

community (Augustine et al., 2019). The use of RJPs for addressing disparities in school discipline practices was highlighted by Deborah Delisle, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education in a 2013 federal hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline (112-848, 2012). Delisle stated that the Department of Education data indicated the overuse of punitive discipline that led to the involvement of the justice system for minor acts of misconduct. Once a student enters the juvenile justice system, they are 50% more likely to enter the adult justice system (112-848, 2012). Furthermore, there is little evidence to show that push-out practices lead to safer schools. In fact, one review of the research (Skiba et al., 2006) found that zero tolerance policies and practices were not shown to improve school climate or school safety.

Likewise, many schools in the United States use visible security measures such as metal detectors, security personnel and security cameras to try to keep schools safe. In a study (Tanner-Smith & Fisher, 2016) that utilized data from two national surveys (School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, N = 38,700; School Survey on Crime and Safety, N = 10,340 schools), the researchers found that there was no evidence that these measures had any sizeable effect of academic performance, attendance, or postsecondary aspirations of U.S. middle and high school students. In fact, there was a small detrimental effect from heavy surveillance measures on schools serving students with a low socio-economic status (Tanner-Smith & Fisher, 2016).

Feeling safe in school should be a given; however, given evidence of the use of harsher disciplinary measures for students of color, it stands to reason that feelings of safety differ based on racial identity as well. In fact, Lacoe (2015) found just that. In an

analysis of student surveys, administrative student records, administrative school data, neighborhood crime data, and neighborhood demographic data from 80% of New York City School District middle schools, the researcher found that Black students reported lower levels of safety at school, on average, than their white and Asian peers. As well, the study reported that racial and ethnic gaps in safety vary by location in the school (Lacoe, 2015) Black students had greater odds of reporting unsafe feelings within the classroom compared to white and Asian students. Both Black and Hispanic students reported feeling unsafe outside of school, with a greater probability of staying home than their white and Asian classmates. However, in areas with less supervision, white and Asian students reported lower feelings of safeness than Black and Hispanic students (Lacoe, 2015).

In a multilevel regression analysis of student and teacher survey data from 400 Californian middle schools (Voight et al., 2015), findings supported Lacoe's (2015) results that Black and Hispanic students had less favorable perceptions of safety than their white and Asian peers. Black and Hispanic students also had fewer positive feelings of connectedness, relationships with adults and opportunities for participation when compared to white students (Voight et al., 2015).

Another study (Gage et al., 2016) linked student perception of school climate as a predictor of office discipline referrals, which, as explored in the previous discussion (Mallett, 2016b; Payne & Welch, 2015; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019), can be connected to negative outcomes for students. Gage and colleagues found that students with strong caregiver involvement were least likely to receive an office discipline referral (2016). This highlights the need for caring adult relationships and positive communication and engagement of caregivers in the academic life of their students.

Loss of Trust

   This feeling of vulnerability, or lack of safety, can lead to an erosion of trust between the students and the school and all that are a part of the school system. This loss of trust can have a serious effect on the students' future outcomes as a few researchers have acknowledged (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2016; Lustick, 2017b; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Voight et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2017). These studies examined the impact of RJPs on students and found that one of the long-term effects of bias in discipline actions results in a loss of students' trust in the education system and those that power it. One study examined students' perceptions of differences in teacher treatment of students, suspension practices, and school climate (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). Researchers found that students felt teachers and administrators were treating students differently based on the student's race. This study of three high schools in Central New York with almost 1,500 students participating demonstrated that race was the most significant predictor of students' perceptions of differential treatment in suspension practices and teacher treatment (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). Black students, in particular, showed a strong prediction of school climate based on perceptions of differential treatment; the students felt less engaged as part of the school community based on how fairly they perceived their teacher's treatment of them and other students. This is important because students' perceptions of racial bias influence their experiences in the classroom and in school. If students believe that teachers are racially biased, their trust and buy-in into the educational system will suffer, as will their long-term outcomes, such as perseverance, self-efficacy, and engagement (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019).

Another study (Gregory et al., 2016) surveyed 29 high school classrooms, teachers and students, that had implemented RJPs in their classrooms. One of the few quantitative studies of RJPs, they found that teachers with high implementation of RJPs had more positive relationships with their diverse students, as reported by students. The students perceived the teachers as more respectful and less authoritarian in terms of discipline referrals. This study is important because it outlines the beginning potential success of RJPs for lessening the racial discipline gap. Teachers who had higher implementation scores had fewer discipline referrals for Latinx and African-American students when compared to teacher with lower rates of RJ implementation. As well, this study pointed to the importance of high-quality implementation of RJPs for effects to be claimed, as there is significant variation in what constitutes a RJ intervention or even RJPs.

This idea of trust as the basis for equity in schools was further outlined in a study by Yeager and his colleagues in 2017. They surveyed middle school white and African-American students twice a year, over the course of three years, from sixth to eighth grade. The Black students were more aware of racial bias in disciplinary actions, and this awareness predicted a loss of trust that increased into seventh grade. This loss of trust in seventh grade predicted future discipline infractions; that is, the lower the trust, the more disciplinary infractions and the lower future four-year college enrollment. Causality was confirmed through a trust-restoring practice in seventh grade that subsequentially improved Black students' discipline outcomes in eighth grade and their college outcomes. These findings were replicated with Latino and white students in a second study (Yeager et al., 2017). This study is important as it points to the potential and importance of RJ in

building community and relationships to improve long term outcomes for diverse students.

Teacher Perceptions

While the majority of the literature focuses on race in disproportionality, it is important to consider race in the role of teachers' perceptions of disciplinary actions and engagement in systems. Lustick (2017) examined Black teachers' perceptions of RJPs and found that they felt reluctant to engage in a system that traditionally represents the oppression of students of color. The teachers expressed an understanding of the inequities in the school system for Black students and they struggled with their role in supporting a faulty system while maintaining a level of professionalism in the schools where they taught. They expressed a need for a clear understanding of how RJPs were intended to improve equity before their participation and engagement with restorative practices.

As well, teachers' perceptions of ability can play an important role in the successful adoption of RJPs. Cavanagh and colleagues (2014) examined teacher perceptions of RJPs in diverse school settings and found that teachers were operating from a deficit framework and needed to use RJPs to change their perceptions of students' strengths (when looking towards CLD students). On the most basic level, teacher beliefs about the capabilities of their students does matter, especially for students with dis/Abilities (Klehm, 2014). On another level, teacher perceptions and race can influence how they interpret a specific behavior and enhance their detection of behavioral patterns over time (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). In a study of teacher's perceptions of behavior based on race, 50 Kindergarten teachers were asked to view a picture of a student that was either white or Black and read a modified school record and discipline report for a

student who had misbehaved twice. Then they were asked how troubled they felt by the student's behavior and to rate how likely they would be to receive a disciplinary action. There was a significant interaction between the teachers' perceptions and the student's race. As well, the Black student was more likely to have their misbehavior characterized as a pattern of misbehavior than the white student (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015).
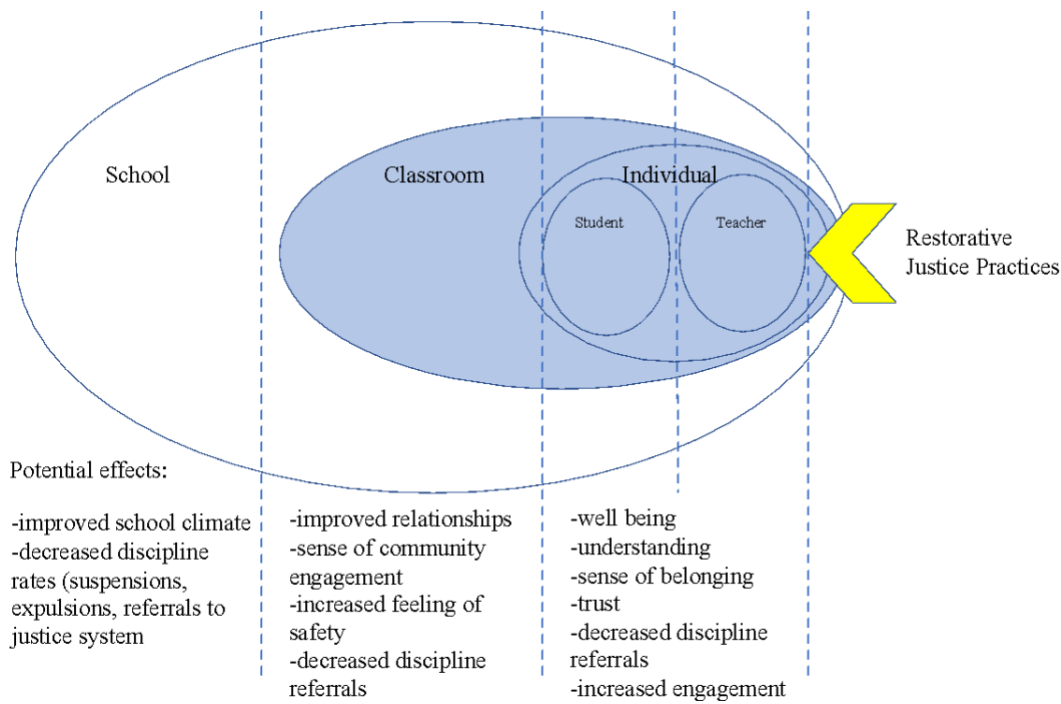
The importance of addressing racial bias in teachers' perceptions of students' behavior and potential achievement is clear. RJPs offer teachers the opportunity to engage with their students from a strengths-based perspective, while promoting equity for diverse students.

Conceptual Framework

Through an investigation of the research literature on RJ and RJPs, the conceptual framework illustrates both the context of the RJPs in the school environment and the potential effects that the implementation of RJPs could have in an inclusive classroom. In viewing RJPs as an intervention that affects the teachers' actions, the directionality of this study is expressed in Figure 1 as moving from the right to the left. Through the use of RJPs, the teacher and students would experience increased feelings of well-being, understanding, sense-of-belonging, trust, engagement, and decreased discipline referrals. These individual effects could lead to improved relationships, sense of community engagement, feelings of safety, and decreased discipline referrals in the classroom. On the school level, the potential effects could be improved school climate and decreased discipline rates. Figure 1 is a visualization of the conceptual framework in action.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Impact of RJPs in Educational Settings

School | Classroom | Individual | Student | Teacher | Restorative Justice Practices

Potential effects:

-improved school climate
-decreased discipline rates (suspensions, expulsions, referrals to justice system

-improved relationships
-sense of community engagement
-increased feeling of safety
-decreased discipline referrals

-well being
-understanding
-sense of belonging
-trust
-decreased discipline referrals
-increased engagement

Theoretical Frame

Given the social structure of criminalized and biased school discipline, a critical lens is needed when exploring this issue (Ramey, 2015). Research demonstrates how criminalization and racial bias disproportionately affect students of color. Harsh discipline policies are put in place to criminalize and deter students from misbehaving when these policies actually have the opposite effect (Kim et al., 2023). They erode the students' trust in the education system and cause disengagement and detachment (Yeager et al., 2017). The theoretical framework of this study examined the work and findings through a critical lens that acknowledges the complex disenfranchisement of students of color and power structures that erode trust and equity in the U.S. educational system.

Social Justice Lens

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It is clear that there are challenges to equity in the educational system in the U.S. and that RJ has the potential to create a path to resolve those issues. Many in the field of RJ approach its practice through a social justice lens (Gregory et al., 2018; Haight et al., 2015; Mansfield et al., 2018; McCluskey et al., 2008). Winslade (2018) made the argument that RJ mirrors social justice principles based on the idea of "fairness" for the wider social good presented by John Rawls (2011). Rawls' idea that fairness, which has been replaced by the more widely accepted term "equity," is better applied to institutions than individuals, and aligns with the premise of RJ outlined by Zehr (2002), that any offense is primarily an offense against the relationships in a community. Winslade also asserted that RJ and social justice share a common ground in that they both emphasize the contextualization of the forces around the individual. In RJ, that is the emphasis on the repairment of the community, not just the offender and victim, while also holding the offender accountable (Zehr, 2002). In analyzing this community around the individual, the paradigms of power that hold the community in place must be viewed through a critical lens.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) holds that race is the fundamental hierarchy on which our society is built (Crenshaw, 1989; Darling Hammond, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2018). CRT comes from a theoretical legal movement within American law schools as a challenge to the contemporary, white majority order and to illuminate racial subordinating systems and processes (Caldwell & Crenshaw, 1996; Capper, 2015; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2019; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2018). This theory has been translated to the educational system and can explain racial inequity in

school-based disciplinary practices that have manifested into the proverbial school-to-prison pipeline. Critical race theorists argue that schools are racial institutions that perpetuate racial inequalities in power and privilege through their control of educational access and opportunity (Barajas & Ronnkvist, 2007; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Lewis et al., 2015). Additionally, schools and educational systems teach and reinforce social rules and inequalities through colorblind policies that do not take into consideration the racist legacy of damaging societal and cultural stereotyping (Apple 2012; Donnor & Dixson, 2013; Leonardo 2009).

The research on racial inequities in schools through a CRT lens outlines how colorblind institutional policies and informal practices harm outcomes for Black and Latinx students (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Welch & Payne, 2018). In multiple studies (Carter et al., 2017; Hashim et al., 2018; Morris & Perry, 2016; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019), colorblind zero-tolerance discipline policies and school security measures were associated with wider discipline gaps which led to increased entry to the criminal justice system and negative long-term outcomes for Black and Brown students. To further examine this phenomenon as it occurs outside the classroom, where strong teacher-student relationships are more common, a team of researchers examined the relationships between student racial background and the sub-contexts (location) of schools' discipline referrals (Anyon et al., 2018). They found that students of color (Black, Latinx and Multiracial youth) had the same, or less, likelihood of having a discipline incident take place outside of their classroom as their white peers (Anyon et al., 2018). This further supports the notion that implicit bias is present in all aspects of the educational system in the form of systemic bias and colorblind policies and practices in

discipline disparities and that RJ, as it applies to the whole community, could be a first step in repairing racial equity.

DisCrit

Since the research around the effects of RJPs on students with dis/Abilities (SWD) is lacking, there have been few connections made between Disability Studies and the guiding philosophies of RJ. However, the recently established field of DisCrit Theory (Annamma et al., 2013), a combination of critical race theory and disability studies in education, can help understand how race and ableism interact in school systems. This layer of nuance is important to this work because in many cases "difference" is interpreted as deviance and has a negative connotation (Bornstein, 2017). An example of how this framework can be applied is taken from Conrad and Schneider (1992) and the classification of energetic children as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He explains that as institutions analyzed individuals in scientific systems, the informal and formal diagnosis of ADHD were supported by the schools' lack of accommodation of active learning. This tunnel vision which focused on any difference becoming a deviance is further nuanced by the understanding that school systems institutionalize and prioritize white behavioral patterns (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). Most response to intervention systems (RTI) are based on white norms for acceptable academic performance (Cavendish et al., 2015), with interventions designed to "return all students to normalcy and which do so by placing them in some form of classification scheme" (Bornstein, 2017, p. 138). This framework is important to examining the perceived effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms because it emphasizes the need for

awareness that teachers, administrators and students are interacting in a context that pushes and pulls from their participation in a racially and dis/ability charged system.

The conceptual framework connected the work that the teachers do in the classroom to the impact that restorative justice can have. The theoretical frame situates the action and impact of RJ within the larger systems at play in the educational setting.

Chapter 3: Methods

The epistemological frame of this work is based on situated social constructivism following the view of Richardson (1997) From this perspective, the individual and the environment in which the learning takes place are transformed. "In terms of school learning, the environment is thought of as a social milieu that affects the actions taken by students and the learning that occurs and is affected by those actions" (Richardson, 1997, pp. 7-8). The content that is learned cannot be separated from the action of learning; they are one and the same. This fits well with the tenets of Restorative Justice (RJ) in that the action and the content are dialogically enveloped and melded together in the school community (needs citation). An example of how strongly this epistemological stance is ensconced in RJ is the fact that some practitioners of RJ emphatically state that it is a philosophy and not a practice that can be taught (Winslade, 2018). This juncture encapsulates the situated social constructivism endcap to this work. The overall success of Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) is connected to the adaptation of the philosophical values and understanding of the classroom as a community and RJPs as a tool for creating an inclusive community.

This study approached the topic through a basic interpretive, reflexive design using a grounded theory analytic approach. Following the criteria laid out by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) for interpretive research, this study focused on:

1. understanding the meaning the participants have constructed about their environment and their place in the environment;

2. the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis;

3. the inductive process of inquiry; and

4. rich description as a product of the inquiry.

Basic interpretive design in qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret experiences in their life. It allows researchers to engage deeply with participants, often through interviews or observations, to gain insights into their perspectives. This design is used to explore the complexity of human experience by analyzing how individuals construct their realities, how they make sense of their world, and the processes through which they engage with and reflect upon their experiences.

Through thematic analysis of the data collected, I aimed to offer detailed, nuanced understandings of the teacher's perspectives under study, grounded in the participants' own words and contexts. In Merriam and Tisdell's work (2016), semi-structured interviews are highlighted as versatile tools that allow for both guidance on the topics of interest and flexibility to explore participants' responses more deeply. Open-ended questions are emphasized for their ability to elicit rich, descriptive answers, enabling researchers to gain insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings. This approach is beneficial for exploring complex topics where the researcher aims to understand the nuances of human experiences and perspectives.

Observations are utilized in qualitative research to triangulate emerging findings, acting as a complementary method alongside interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach substantiates findings and provides context by offering firsthand encounters with the phenomenon of interest. Observations allow researchers to capture specific incidents, behaviors, and interactions in natural settings, which can then be used as reference points in subsequent interviews. This method enhances the depth and credibility

of the research findings by providing multiple perspectives on the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Study Purpose

In instances of student behavioral issues, teachers face a critical decision-making point where they must choose to either escalate or de-escalate the situation (Monell, 2018a; Williams, 2018). This "disciplinary moment," as defined by Vavrus and Cole (2002, p. 89), is a complex social negotiation between teacher and student that could have far-reaching consequences on the student's life. Disciplinary actions such as suspensions or expulsions have been linked to detrimental long-term outcomes, including increased dropout rates and greater likelihood of subsequent criminal justice system involvement (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; González & Gonzales, 2012; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Waggoner, 2018; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Moreover, the perceptions and biases of teachers regarding student behavior and potential significantly sway the students' academic and social success (Klehm, 2014; Monell, 2018b; Nadelson et al., 2012; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Wilson, 2013).

Teachers, as pivotal figures in education, play a crucial role in the application of RPJs in classrooms, particularly in relation to students of color and those with dis/Abilities. The subtleties involved in race and disability within educational contexts necessitate a qualitative research approach. This study adopted a critical perspective, recognizing that RJPs inherently address the power dynamics present in educational environments, which influence student equity (Alexander, 2009; Anyon et al., 2016; Bornstein, 2017; Fronius et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2018; Hollweck et al., 2019; Massey, 1990). Thus, the purpose of this study was to engage with and understand

teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of RJPs, for both themselves and their students, as they hold the key to classroom inclusivity and the academic trajectory of students with dis/Abilities (Jain et al., 2014; Ramey, 2015).

Research Questions

In the most recent (1999 to present) body of literature regarding the use of RJ in the United States' school system, the focus has been on the effects of RJ on discipline measures such as suspension, expulsion, attendance and violent offenses (Fronius et al., 2016). As harsh discipline measures have been proven to be racially biased (Carter et al., 2017; Lustick, 2017a; Mansfield et al., 2018), the research has increasingly called for and suggested that RJPs could address issues of equity in disciplinary practices (Gregory et al., 2018; Pena-Shaff et al., 2019; Schiff, 2018).

The literature and practitioner perspective regarding RJPs as a means of addressing racial inequity in the educational system is a prime springboard for examining the effects of RJPs in special education settings since similar issues of equity present. As well, the body of literature around this topic is almost non-existent. The existing body of literature reflects the important work that is being done, and highlights the need for additional research and investigation that continues to improve equity and access to education for all students (Cavendish et al., 2015; Gregory et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2017; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018). Although we know that RJPs can have a significant effect on the amount of time students spend in the classrooms by reducing suspensions and expulsions (Green et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018), and change their perceptions of the school and classroom climate, there is little known regarding the effects of RJPs on

students with dis/Abilities. This study helped inform teachers, building and district administrators and other stakeholders about RJPs and how the use of said practices can lead to improved outcomes for teachers of and students with dis/Abilities and their perceptions of school culture and climate.

Based on the lack of research around the effects of RJPs on students with dis/Abilities, and the call for more focus on disproportionality of students with dis/Abilities in special education and who experience pushout disciplinary measures (Hashim et al., 2018; Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2017; Stenhjem, 2005) this study focused on the following overarching research question and sub-questions to guide inquiry:

What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms?

1. How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on themselves?

Overview of Research Procedures

A qualitative, interpretive research design was the method of inquiry for this study given my desire to deeply understand and accurately describe teachers' perspectives of RJPs in their inclusive classrooms. Qualitative research is uniquely and particularly suited to the study of educational settings, given its dynamic interactive

nature (Merriam, 2002). In qualitative research, and especially following the epistemological stance of constructivism, the researcher is aware of the socially constructed nature of reality, and this value is reflected in the context of the study and kept as the central phenomenon of the research (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) The qualitative researcher must be aware of the interplay between the setting, participants, data and his or her own position within the micro and macro settings of the study, culture and society (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I used semi-structured interviews to explore the research questions as well as observations of professional development sessions for teachers with a focus on RJ in educational settings serving students with dis/Abilities. Memo-ing attended to both my positionality and the critical nature of the subject matter.

Sampling Procedure

This study used purposeful sampling of 13 teachers which continued until data saturation was reached. Purposeful sampling is also known as criterion-based selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With criterion-based sampling, the researcher decides what attributes of the sample are critical for the study. In this case, the criteria for selection was be based on the teachers' status as a "restorative" teacher for two or more years as well as their special education affiliation (i.e. SPED teacher OR general education teacher who co-teaches OR general education teacher who teaches students with IEPs/504 plans). This selection was based within two levels of selection, the guidelines of which fall under two-tier sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016): 1) the teachers were selected from schools that were under the guidance and leadership of a RJ focused non-profit in the local area charged with implementing RJPs within the school district (referred to by its pseudonym

"*Restore*") and 2) the teachers were designated as successful "restorative" teachers in their inclusive setting. "TeamTalk" (pseudonym) was the umbrella organization for *Restore* and its focus was to create "spaces that promote self-determination and a voice for youth with dis/Abilities and their peers by encouraging collaborative problem-solving" (TeamTalk website, 2019). *Restore* receives funding and support from federal sources as well as the local public and charter school system, as well as grants through foundations and non-profit organizations. The focus of the umbrella organization on students with dis/Abilities is important to note since this study focused on the perceived effects of restorative practices in contexts, inclusive classrooms, where students with dis/Abilities were present and impacted. TeamTalk is a well-respected organization that has the full support of its funders.

Participants

The study analyzed interviews with 13 educators with varying levels of teaching experience, ranging from 3-19 years, who were working in inclusive settings at the time of the interviews. These educators taught across different grade levels, from pre-kindergarten to grade 12, either as special education teachers or teaching students with disabilities in co-taught or general education settings.

Research Setting

The teachers whose interviews were used in this study all taught in public and charter schools within the same district. All the included teachers' schools were under the guidance of TeamTalk by way of Restore and were in year two or beyond in the implementation of RJ at the school. All the teachers were judged as being successful practitioners of RJPs by the professional trainers employed by Restore.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant Recruitment

After receiving approval for the study from institutional review board, I worked with Restore to contact the identified teachers. Various employees of Restore reached out to the teachers with an introduction and I followed up with more information about my study to schedule an interview. I contacted 22 teachers and was able to schedule and conduct interviews with 13 participants. After the interview was scheduled, I emailed them the informed consent information which we discussed and confirmed at the start of each interview. Since the recruitment and interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually via zoom.

Development of Interview Protocol

Prior to beginning data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with two teachers of inclusive classrooms. This allowed me to ask questions and to revise the interview questions (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which I then used for the 13 interviews included in this study.

The interview protocol was designed to guide the semi-structured interviews that were included in this study. The purpose of the protocol was to understand teachers' perceptions of RJPs in their inclusive classrooms and their academic, emotional and behavioral effects on students with dis/Abilities. The included questions were derived from the research questions and were carefully crafted to generate data to increase understanding of the study (Maxwell, 2012). These interview questions were both open-ended and focused on the objective of this study: What are teachers' perceptions of the

effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms? Appendix A shows the complete interview protocol and the probes that were used in each interview.

Interview Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in virtual setting and were scheduled ahead of time. I followed the interview protocol (Appendix A) and used it as a guide for the interview process to ensure consistency across interviews. Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, to be destroyed one year after publication. As well, I took notes regarding body language, expressions, emphasis and other observations that could be captured via voice recording. The recorded interview was transcribed and the transcriptions, including the observation notes and memos, were uploaded into Microsoft Word and Excel for the first round of open coding and subsequent rounds of coding discussed ahead.

I allotted one hour for each interview. Eliciting and scheduling interviews was conducted via email with each participant and the interviews taking place in a mutually agreed upon virtual location at the interviewee's convenience. Twelve interviews were conducted via zoom and one interview via Google Meets, as per the participants preference and convenience. Participants were asked for permission to audio record and transcribe the interview. All participants agreed to be recorded. Prior to questioning, each participant was informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their participation and information, and their right to stop the interview at any time for any reason. The interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and then reviewed and edited by me for accuracy. The audio and transcriptions were stored in OneDrive, accessible via two-step authentication process and password. All recordings will be deleted one year

after the publication of this dissertation. The interviews were saved using nondescript identifiers, the interview number. In the transcription, all identifying information was coded for confidentiality purposes.

Observations

At the time of the study, Restore conducted district-wide professional development (PD) sessions with school personnel and followed up with technical assistance to individual schools that were implementing RJ. The professional development sessions focused on topics such as: Restorative Overview, Trauma Awareness and Restorative Steps to Brain Regulation, Pro-Active Circle Keeping, Responsive Discipline, Restorative Communication, Restorative Justice and Special Education, Restorative Justice & In School Suspension. They also ran a Community of Practice (CoP) which offered the opportunity to network, reflect and engage with other professionals implementing RJPs in the district.

Observations of Restore's work with school professionals were conducted in sessions related to Special Education, as designated by Restore. I attended and observed two PD sessions that I chose based on the participants and the topic and one Community of Practice meeting (COP). One PD session was a restorative overview for school personnel, attended by teachers, support professionals, and administrators. The other PD session focused on Special Education. The COP meeting was attended by a variety of local professionals in the area of secondary transition and Special Education. Members discussed RJ implementation. The observations were captured with a focus that attended to the concerns and observations of the school professions regarding implementing RJPs in their school settings and its effects. These observations captured the larger context of

the teachers' and administrators' understanding of RJPs for students with dis/Abilities. I took observation notes which were stored and coded in the same way as the interview transcripts.

Data Management

Data was collected though semi-structured individual qualitative interviews captured via voice recording. All data was locked, stored and saved on password protected files via OneDrive. Miles and Huberman (2014) recommend that researchers store information multiple ways. The study data was stored in a OneDrive folder as well as a backup file in Dropbox and a flash drive. Pseudonyms were given to all participants to protect their identity and secure confidentiality.

<div align="center">

Data Analysis

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The data collected was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) which calls for constant comparison to grow and thicken, through the gathering of rich, thick descriptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), my understanding of the participants' perceptions of RJPs in their classrooms. The coding of the data began with a round of open coding, then axial coding, and selective coding were used to ground the themes, or categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Microsoft Office Word and Excel were used to organize and code the data.

Data analysis commenced concurrently with data collection as recommended by Miles and Huberman (2014) to promote opportunities to revisit, revise and improve data collection. For example, interview transcripts between two interviews were reviewed and revisions were made for the subsequent interview to make sure that the maximum amount

of rich, thick data was gained from the questions asked. This transcript analysis was used to develop codes.

Saldana (2013) refers to the process of coding as rigorous and scrutinizing, requiring careful thought. The codes were developed as they emerged from the collected and transcribed data through three layers: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This multi-leveled coding provided links between and among the data, and ideas about its meaning based on the data. The transcribed interviews with the notes as well as the reflexive memos and PD observations were coded through the cyclical act described by Saldana (2013).

The codes were developed as they emerged. First during the open, inductive coding cycle, data (transcriptions, memos and observations) was organized and labeled according to emerging themes, patterns, events and actions that relate to the research questions (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The second part of the coding, axial coding, was used to identify links to the research and conceptual framework outlined in the previous chapter. The third cycle, selective coding, helped return me to the raw data but zoom out to see the larger picture of how my interpretation came together with the research questions to tell the story of teachers' perceptions of RJPs in inclusive classrooms. This last cycle of coding was an important aspect of the grounded theory approach that was used in this study. All of the data, which included the transcribed interviews, the reflexive memos and the observations, were used throughout the coding process.

I used the data and coding process to develop a web of interconnected codes, categories, and eventually, themes. I used Microsoft Excel to outline the codes and the

connected evidence. This allowed me to organize my codes into lists, content descriptions, and brief examples that were used in the constant comparison and member checks to provide validity to my work.

Twice during the data analysis, I reached out to participants for volunteers to review potential themes. Two participants agreed. We met via zoom to discuss the emerging themes. They affirmed the data and accuracy via a verbal discussion.

Essential Considerations

Subjectivity Statement

I am a White Latinx female in my early forties. I am a caregiver of a family member with a dis/ability and the mother of three Latinx children. I have lived and worked in a variety of school systems and settings, public and private, in and outside of the United States. My perspective as an insider and outsider of different groups has given me the opportunity to observe how people act and interact on both sides (i.e. parent/teacher, White/Latino, cultural majority/minority). My personal commitment to social justice, my family make-up, and the fact that I was an educator of racially diverse students with dis/Abilities for twelve years influences my perspective on what I perceive in the research and in the classroom. Although I have participated in numerous anti-bias trainings and reflected on my various lenses of teacher, parent, caregiver as I travel through my career and life, complete objectivity is impossible. As a researcher, I am uniquely situated in this study and so being, I engaged in reflexive memo-ing throughout the duration of this research study. My reflexive memos were included in the data transcriptions for coding.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1994) outlined two forms of rigor: methodological and interpretive rigor. These two forms of rigor were applied to this study through the big tent criteria laid out by Tracy (2010) which states that the study must have a worthy topic, conducted with rich rigor, exhibit sincerity through transparency of methods, have credibility, resonate with a variety of audiences, lead to significant contributions, attend to ethical considerations and have meaningful coherence. These tenets were consulted and considered in the design of this study and were adhered to throughout. To ensure validity and reliability, I used a variety of means that have been vetted by well-regarded qualitative methodologists such as Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Guba and Lincoln (1994), and Patton (2014). These means included triangulation for internal validity through multiple methods of data collection, multiple sources of data, member checks, adequate engagement in data collection and researcher reflexivity.

Bernard and Ryan (2010) outlined the various constructs of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A variety of provisions were taken into consideration to ensure credibility, which Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue is one of the most important factors to establish trustworthiness. First, this study used research methods which are well established in qualitative research, basic interpretive design with a grounded theory approach. Second, I ensured through my work with *Restore* that I am familiar with the culture of the participating organization. I attended a monthly research meeting where we discussed the relevant literature and their perspective on current issues and trends around RJPs. This research study employed triangulation through various methods of data collection: individual interviews, observation and reflexive memos. Each participant was given the opportunity to refuse

participation in the study to ensure that data was collected only from participants who were genuinely willing and prepared to offer their participation freely and without obligation. Member checks were another method that was used to ensure credibility.

The rigor of these methods, analysis, and collection of rich, thick description (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Maxwell, 2012) allowed for transferability of findings (e.g. external validity) by providing ample descriptive data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) to allow the reader to apply the results elsewhere as they deem fit. Transferability was attended to through the transparency and documentation of the organization participating in the study, the participant descriptions, the number of participants, the data collection methods, the number and length of the data collection session and the time period over which the data was collected. The documentation of this information allows for future research studies in this area to confirm or deny this study's findings in other contexts.

Dependability has been expressed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as the answer to the question of "how can one determine whether the findings of an inquiry would be consistently repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context?" (p. 80). Through the detailed outlining of the methodology and methods used, the reader is able to judge the appropriateness of the design and practice.

The confirmability of the findings was managed through the reflexive memo-ing which allowed me to report on my predisposition, beliefs and assumptions Moon (2019). As Moon (2019) stated,

> the researcher needs to report on the steps taken both to manage and reflect on the
> effects of their philosophical or experiential preferences and, where necessary (i.e.

according to the ontological and epistemological position of the research) to

ensure the results are based on the experiences and preferences of the research

participants (subjects, respondents) rather than those of the researcher (pp. 103).

By creating reflexive memos as I recorded and coded the data, I examined my beliefs and

bias as a researcher. This process helped me maintain the focus on the participants'

perspectives over my own.

Human Participants and Ethics Considerations

When listening to and translating human voices and stories from one format to

another, and as a researcher of complex, fluid social constructs such as is the nature of

this study, ethical considerations are of the utmost importance. Patton (2014) outlines an

Ethical Issues Checklist which were used in this study to ensure that the process is

principled and honest and adheres to the highest ethical standards possible. This checklist

attends to:

1. Explaining the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used;
2. Reciprocity;
3. Promises;
4. Risk assessment;
5. Confidentiality;
6. Informed consent;
7. Data access and ownership;
8. Interviewer mental health;
9. Ethical advice (who will be my counselor?);
10. Data collection boundaries;
11. Ethical and methodological choices; and
12. Ethical versus legal (Patton, 2014, pp. 408-428).

This study posed minimal risk to the participants involved. The George Washington

Office of Human Research Internal Review board (IRB) were consulted before data

collection began to ensure that the necessary guidelines were followed and considerations

met to protect potential participants. The research adhered to all guidelines of the IRB

and took specific steps to ensure the confidentiality of each participant in the study. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to provide informed consent, and were given details about the study, the disclosure of personal risks/benefits, opportunities to ask questions, and reminders of voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and all data reports. Additionally, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to individual schools and/or school districts. Precautions were taken to avoid the use of descriptors, such as background or professional roles that might enable identification of an individual or a specific school. All electronic and printed data, including transcribed interviews, will be destroyed one year after the study's completion.

Chapter 4: Results

Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) have been increasingly recognized for addressing equity issues within school systems, with previous research primarily focusing on racial equity in discipline measures. However, there was a notable gap in the literature regarding the potential effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms and special education settings. The study aimed to contribute to this knowledge gap by providing insights into the perceived effects of RJPs in inclusive classroom settings, informing teachers, administrators, and education stakeholders. The research adopted a basic interpretive, reflexive design, utilizing a grounded theory approach.

The statement of the problem emphasized the surge in RJPs research over the past decade, predominantly concentrating on reducing suspensions and punitive measures in general education classrooms. Zero-tolerance policies, implemented in various school districts, were associated with pushing students out of the school community through severe punishments.

These policies exacerbated existing inequities, particularly in suspension rates for students of different racial backgrounds. RJPs were explored as a potential solution to address these disparities and interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

The literature on RJPs in the U.S. has mainly focused on their impact on discipline measures and social justice issues in general education settings. However, there was a dearth of research on the effects of RJPs in special education settings, where similar equity issues persisted. The study recognized the need for additional research to improve equity and access to education for all students, building on the existing body of literature.

The purpose and research questions highlighted the limited understanding of the effects of RJPs on students with dis/Abilities, despite their known positive impact on reducing suspensions and creating more positive perceptions of school and classroom climates. By addressing this gap, the study aimed to inform educators, administrators, and stakeholders about the potential benefits of RJPs in improving outcomes for both teachers and students with dis/Abilities.

This study addressed the following research question: *What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms?* The following sub questions investigated specific insights from the teachers regarding the perceived effects of RJPs in their classrooms:

- How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?

- What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?

- What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on themselves?

Data Collection and Participant Demographics

To facilitate a meaningful examination of the participants' experiences and perspectives, it was imperative to first outline the procedures employed in gathering data and delineate the distinctive attributes of the participants. This preliminary step laid a robust groundwork, furnishing context and significance to the subsequent exploration of results.

The participants in my study formed a varied cohort of educators, each contributing individual experiences and diverse backgrounds to the research. This

inclusivity guaranteed the solidity and multi-dimensional nature of the insights obtained

and provided an extensive perspective on teachers' engagements with Restorative Justice

(RJ).

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Grade Levels Taught	Years of Teaching Experience
Participant 1	Grade 9-12	8 years
Participant 2	Grade 9-12	19 years
Participant 3	Grade 6-12	11 years
Participant 4	Grade 3, 9-12	10 years
Participant 5	Grade 6-12	3 years
Participant 6	Grade 1-3	5 years
Participant 7	Grade 9-12	14 years
Participant 8	Grade 7-12	10 years
Participant 9	Pre K-1	7 years
Participant 10	K-2	5 years
Participant 11	Grade K-1, 6-12	16 years
Participant 12	Grade 6-12	10 years
Participant 13	Grade 1-11	9 years

Overall, the 13 participants spanned the K-12 grades and varied in experience from 3-19

years. The teachers who contributed to this study were all, at the time of my interviews,

working in inclusive classrooms, either as Special Education teachers or teaching students with dis/Abilities in co-taught, or general education settings.

Data Analysis Approach

The research methodology used in this study embraced a qualitative, interpretive design and utilized a grounded theory analytic approach, aligning with the constructivist epistemological stance. This design was chosen to deepen my understanding of the perspectives and experiences of teachers who use RJ practices in inclusive classrooms and the impact that it has had on them and their students. The literature on RJ practices often focuses on potential effects on discipline referrals, while this study sought to understand teachers' firsthand experiences. While addressing a gap in existing research, the design incorporated measures for validity and trustworthiness.

The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 13 restorative teachers identified by Restore, an organization implementing RJ in a school district. Included in the data were three observations, two observations of PDs conducted by Restore and one observation of a COP. Reflective memos were not included in the data for analysis. Restore's selection of participants followed a criterion-based approach, ensuring a focus on restorative teachers in inclusive settings. The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were recorded and transcribed by Otter.ai. I reviewed and revised the interview transcripts to ensure that the transcription was faithful and coded them in Microsoft Word and then extracted the codes into Microsoft Excel. The first round was open coding, then axial and selective coding in the second round followed by thematic coding with multiple emergent themes. The grounded theory approach with thematic coding, involving open, axial, and selective coding, aligns with Glaser and

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Strauss's (2017) constant comparison method, enriching interpretation through thick descriptions. The data was securely stored, adhering to ethical considerations, and will be archived and securely stored for five years after the final publication of the dissertation.

Presentation of Findings

In this chapter, I present the results of my qualitative inquiry into the experiences of classroom teachers who have embraced restorative justice (RJ) practices within their inclusive classrooms. The findings that follow outline the teachers' perspectives on the transformative potential of RJ in the educational landscape, showcasing its impact on showcasing its impact on academic success and learning for all students, as well as its transformative effects on how teachers engage in and perceive their teaching practices.

To understand my participants' perspectives more clearly and thoroughly, I employed a qualitative data analysis methodology grounded in thematic analysis. This method allowed me to systematically identify recurring patterns and themes, both anticipated and emergent, in my data. Through a detailed coding process that combined inductive and deductive approaches, I identified themes and subthemes of teachers' perceptions of Restorative Justice practices.

Table 2

Thematic Findings and Their Relationship to Research Questions

Relationship to Research Question	Themes and Subthemes
1. How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?	RJ Becomes a Transformative Mindset • Shift/change in Attitude • RJ as a Mindset and Philosophy

- RJ as a Lifestyle

2. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?	RJ is a Gamechanger for Academic Success - Academic Learning - Giving Students the Confidence to Take Risks RJ Gives Students "A Space to Be Who They Are" - A Safe Space to Grow - Inclusion and Belonging RJ Builds Connection - Building Authentic Relationships - Consistent and Respectful Interactions - Strengthening the Teacher-Student-Community Triad
3. What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on themselves?	RJ helps teachers with "Understanding Who My Students Are" - Tailoring Strategies for Different Needs - Communication and Expression of Needs - RJ as a Culturally Inclusive Practice - Empowering Through Individualization

- Building Trust and Equity

Research Question 1: How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?

Restorative Justice Becomes a Transformative Mindset

In response to research question one, the following theme emerged: Restorative Justice becomes a Transformative Mindset. The implementation of restorative justice (RJ) within educational settings represented a shift in the traditional approach to discipline and conflict resolution. It was not only a set of practices but rather a comprehensive philosophy that underpinned the educators' work. The transformative power of RJ began with a fundamental change in mindset, moving away from the conventional punitive approach toward understanding the actions of students and their motivations. The objective was not simply to punish but to delve deeper into why students behaved as they did, fostering a holistic perspective on academic and behavioral matters.

Shift/Change in Attitude

Several participants shared their journeys of personal transformation in their teaching approach. One teacher recounted their transition from a zero-tolerance mindset to adopting Restorative Justice, noting, "I went from being very, very zero tolerance-based... to completely RJ." (Interview 1) This significant shift underscored the change in attitude from rigid discipline to empathetic conflict resolution. One participant noted:

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Yeah, so as a dean of students, we unfortunately are one of the people that is in charge of suspensions, we're in charge of the quote unquote disciplinary actions, or we are technically the disciplinarian for the students. So I think for us as a school, we've been trying to move away from thinking as ourselves as disciplinarians or thinking of the dean role to be the people that process the suspensions or being a vessel to the school to prison pipeline. And I think that now that we are a little bit more... or we're implementing restorative justice in our school, I think we've been able to find different ways, alternative ways to suspension. And to your question, it's more about holding those RJ circles.

(Interview 1)

This change in how the teacher and their school colleagues thought about discipline was important because the response indicated the adoption of a more empathetic and understanding stance, exemplifying a change in mindset from punitive reactions to restorative questioning.

Another participant's response supported this finding as well:

And last year was all about RJ circles, making sure that students are restoring the harm that was made, whether it was student to student, student to teacher, and also I'm the one that's trying to create a different avenue to suspension. So maybe alternative quote unquote consequence, or what could we do to hold that student accountable but not suspend them? Or not throw them into ISS? Like what else could they do? Could it be a RJ circle? Could it be a restitution speech to the entire class? (Interview 2)

The teacher highlighted their shifting mindset that moved them away from punishment and toward restoration. Another teacher observed that their attitude had changed as well as how they approach students about their behavior:

> I've always been that kind of teacher. What has changed is the way that I approach and the way that I handle any of those kind of things, those behaviors that could lead to someone getting put out of the room. I think before I really got introspective and got educated, I was a little bit on the mean side and more so on this is my way or the highway. I'm still my way or the highway. I do want to be clear. I still come off like that, but now I don't go like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "So why did you do that?" I'm like, "I can't believe you just said that." Like, "The thing you said hurt my feelings. "It used to be like, "No, you're going to stay in this room. You're going to do what I said because I said it. Now sit here and do this." Now it's like, "Let me talk to you. Let's figure these things out. Do you feel better now? I feel better. Okay. Let's go back in here and let's get this learning going." (Interview 5)

After engaging with restorative practices, the teacher found that their approach to interpreting student behavior had shifted as well. They thought more about the student's feelings and finding out "why" instead of moving straight to punitive measures.

Additionally, a shift in mindset also raised questions about the readiness of educators to embrace Restorative Justice practices. A participant pondered:

> Well technically I have with this teacher that I was talking about. I think the results were pretty immediate, because she had a growth mindset. She really was really to rock and roll. But I wonder, to your question for a teacher that's not

ready to learn or maybe they're teachers that have been teaching for over 20, 25 years, 30 years. Would they be this open to learn this RJ practices? I do question that. And I wonder if checklists would actually be helpful for them or if they just want to see an example and see a result and then say "Okay, now I believe in it". So to answer your question, I really think it depends on the person. (Interview 8)

This concern underscored the importance of aligning mindset changes with effective strategies to facilitate the adoption of Restorative Justice practices. This perspective is further explored in Theme 5, "Understanding Who My Students Are."

This shift towards restorative justice was not always an easy journey. As one educator highlighted, their initial teaching approach was founded upon the principles of zero tolerance. In the early years of their teaching career, strict adherence to rules and regulations was the norm, resulting in a 'my way or the highway' attitude. However, through the adoption of RJ, their teaching style underwent a remarkable evolution:

Yeah, so that I actually... it's interesting you ask that because it was really difficult to get to this point. It was very tough, to be honest. I think I got to the point, I was a teacher that believed in punishment for eight years. I was a teacher that was very much zero tolerance. So that's what I was taught to be a teacher, that was one of the number one classes that we would take is, you know, you have to make sure there's no opting out. It's zero tolerance, you know? If a student doesn't do this, here are the rules, here are the regulations, if not, they're out. And so I went from being very, very zero tolerance based, of like that's how I used to run my classroom, to completely RJ. It's just a huge difference. If you see my first year teaching and my eighth year teaching there's a huge difference. (Interview 1)

The teacher was able to reflect on their journey from year one of teaching to year eight and the difference that a restorative mindset has made in how they think about punishment. This transformation from being unequivocally zero-tolerance-oriented to a restorative approach demonstrated the profound impact of a restorative mindset on an individual educator's teaching practices.

As with any pedagogical shift, the extent to which educators embraced restorative practices varied. It became evident that the readiness of teachers to incorporate RJ into their teaching methods was a complex interplay of factors. While a checklist of practices and strategies may be beneficial for some, it did not guarantee universal acceptance and adoption of RJ. The mindset of each educator, influenced by their teaching experience and personal beliefs, played a critical role in determining their willingness to embrace this new approach:

> I think personally if you had given me a checklist, maybe I would've understood it and I would've taken it and bought into it. But I do believe it has to do with where you are in your mindset. You could have taught 30 years and then just be brought into this RJ initiative, RJ practices, and checklists are good for you and then you buy into it and it's perfect and it clicks. There could be another teacher that's 25 in and they're just like "No, I'm not even looking at this checklist". So, I think it does depend on each person and their personality and where they are in their teaching mindset. Because it could vary, in my opinion. I would like to try it though to see the checklist part. That would be interesting to see if that could help some teachers. I know I just did more about building relationships and using those restorative practices to build relationships, and then it just trickled on to the point

where the teacher was like "Okay, I really like this". And they're just starting to

use RJ initiatives and they bought into it. It wasn't an ongoing coaching cycle

because she was in a better growth mindset area, like she was just ready to grow.

She was a first year teacher, so she was just like "Anything, great". (Interview 4)

This highlighted the importance of recognizing that the transition to a restorative mindset

was a highly individualized process that may have depended on each educator's unique

disposition and experience. The teacher's words suggested that the effectiveness of RJ

initiatives, like the use of checklists, was not merely about the tools or practices

themselves but significantly depended on the personal readiness, openness to change, and

the growth mindset of the educators involved. The speaker highlighted variability in how

teachers, regardless of their experience, might respond to RJ practices based on where

they are in their professional mindset and personal growth journey. Some may have

readily embraced RJ practices if aligned with their current mindset and perceived needs,

finding such tools and methodologies to be exactly what they needed to improve or

enhance their approach to teaching and classroom management. Conversely, others might

have resisted or disregarded the same practices, not seeing their value or relevance, due to

a different stage in their mindset or a lack of openness to change.

RJ as a Mindset and Philosophy

Furthermore, participants noted that the impact of restorative justice extended

beyond the realm of discipline. It infused into every aspect of interactions within the

educational setting, influencing relationships between teachers and students and among

students themselves. It fostered an environment where students were encouraged to take

responsibility and actively engage in finding solutions to conflicts. The adoption of a

restorative mindset facilitated the integration of effective questioning techniques, as exemplified in one teacher's words:

> I just think that I always personally find that the small changes are the most powerful. Just to go back to that effective questioning. Even if you don't ever do a circle, but you change the way that you question students that will have a huge impact. (Interview 2)

Questioning emerged as a valuable tool in promoting open communication and understanding. Instead of enforcing compliance through authoritative measures, educators learned to approach students in a way that encouraged them to take ownership of their actions, learn from their mistakes, and engage in the process of repairing harm:

> For me, all of the different strategy circles, all the things are great, but the biggest change for me, I got a little card and it had these effective questions on it. Ever since then, I was like this is such a simple way of going about it. Asking why more, showing concern more, being focused on what is most important. It was just a little card and I just kept it in my pocket. I pull it out so it's not like, "Oh, you're late." It's not like, "You just got to class late." It's, "I'm so glad you got here. I'm so glad that you're here with us now." Really just changing the way that I engage with and talk to students and see them as the people that they are versus as these kind of the kids that I got to get in, and get out, and do this and do that. (Interview 9)

This narrative illustrated how RJ, as a philosophy, went beyond procedural or mechanical applications to influence the fundamental attitudes and behaviors of educators. It emphasized the value of communication and connection, showcasing how simple,

reflective questions could lead to a more inclusive, supportive, and nurturing classroom environment. This approach fostered a sense of belonging and respect among students by acknowledging their worth and contributions, which are critical elements in creating a positive and restorative learning atmosphere. The influence of Restorative Justice on mindset change was also exemplified in how educators approached discipline. This shift towards empathy and patience exemplified how Restorative Justice becomes a part of an individual's personal and professional lifestyle, promoting a more empathetic and understanding society.

The adoption of a restorative mindset also demonstrated its potential to address underlying disparities in discipline practices. For instance, one educator noticed a disproportionate rate of suspension among minority students, particularly Black students. This raised concerns about the equity and fairness of traditional disciplinary methods. In response, they began to challenge the effectiveness of school suspensions and other punitive measures, questioning whether these actions truly serve the best interests of the students and the community:

> And I would say my passion or just the reason I use restorative justice and just believe in that is, and again, specifically at my school, I know this is all anonymous we have about 60% to 65% ESL students, Latina students. Only about I would say 10 of them are level ones and twos, but still a huge population. And then about 30% are Black students. And the other 5 to 10 are assorted everything else. And so our Blacks population is our lower. They're not a massive part of our school makeup, but they are suspended and reprimanded at an extremely disproportional rate. So that was a big frustration for me my first year here and

really is the reason that I just very strongly don't believe in school suspension and those means to behavior management, if you will. (Interview 4)

Thus, RJ emerged not only as an alternative disciplinary approach but as a means to address systemic issues of injustice within the educational system.

Moreover, the transition to a restorative mindset could significantly impact students' behavior and relationships. One teacher noted that as they began to employ RJ principles, students began to ask each other for help more frequently, thus fostering a culture of cooperation and mutual support:

Pre-pandemic, my students work at tables in groups and sometimes I'd say sit wherever, sometimes I'd say you're sitting specifically in certain places. I've just found that in my classes where I've adopted a more restorative mindset, that students are more willing to ask each other for help. And I think that's really beautiful. It's a tough thing for me to do with my superiors sometimes, but to see them overcome the cliche in high school walls of confidence and to say "I need help on this," not "Do this for me," but "Could you show me how this works?" And I think that's something that comes from having a class that's a bit more welcoming. (Interview 7)

Rather than fostering a competitive environment, where students are reluctant to admit their need for assistance, RJ cultivated an atmosphere of trust and collaboration.

A recurring theme in our interview discussions was the philosophical shift that underlies Restorative Justice. Educators and administrators alike emphasized moving away from punitive practices. For instance, one dean of students articulated the school's transformation away from punitive roles and toward a more empathetic approach, stating,

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"I think for us as a school, we've been trying to move away from thinking of ourselves as disciplinarians." (Interview 1) This demonstrated the shift from a disciplinary philosophy to a restorative one.

This emphasis on restoring harm through dialogue and understanding encapsulated the core philosophy of Restorative Justice. Multiple teachers connected their adoption of a restorative philosophy to their practice of teaching. They recognized that their teaching practice changed after becoming a restorative teacher:

I think they go hand in hand. I think philosophy comes first. I think that you must first have a mindset shift and change. Then once that happens, then you are able to recognize in certain situations what restorative justice strategy would work best. Do we need a circle here? Do I need to do some effective questioning? Do we need this to be 10 people sitting around or is this more of a two person conversation?You can start really diagnosing what is going to be the best approach, but you can't do that until you understand and believe in what it means to have a restorative approach. (Interview 13)

One teacher emphasized the change in practice as a result after becoming a restorative practitioner, "First it has to come from the philosophy and the mindset change. Like you were saying, once you have that mindset change well, that infuses into everything that you do with students." (Interview 11)

The teacher's words showcased the change in mindset that becames a philosophy that permeated into all interactions in the classroom. The teacher became restorative as they engaged in restorative practices. As teachers became more involved in using

restorative practices in their classrooms, the more they tried to work with the students, instead of against them:

> Typically, the results that we want are not gained from acting the way we naturally want to act. What do you really want? Is being mad or being angry, the goal? That can't be the goal. You got to want to accomplish something. I'm not one to really spin my wheels. If I find immediately that something's not working, I'm immediately looking for another solution. (Interview 8)

This quote illustrated the core principle of restorative justice as a philosophy that encouraged reflection on one's intentions and the outcomes of their actions, highlighting a proactive approach to conflict resolution and personal interactions. It underscored the importance of moving beyond instinctive reactions, like anger, towards more constructive and goal-oriented behaviors, emphasizing the need for adaptability and the pursuit of effective solutions in the face of challenges. In the end, the ultimate goal was to create a culture of respect, understanding, and empathy within the educational community.

Restorative Justice as a Lifestyle

The application of Restorative Justice principles extended beyond the classroom for many participants, becoming a way of life. One participant expressed, "It's a way of viewing young people in the classroom, outside of the classroom. It's a way of viewing the families that we work with, even the way we connect with other adults in the building." (Interview 2) For these individuals, Restorative Justice wasn't confined to school hours; it influenced their interactions with students, families, and colleagues on a daily basis.

The restorative approach could also seep into life outside the classroom and school. One teacher recalled a student who used restorative practices at home:

So here they have that, and some students have actually tried to bring that into their household as well. Like, one of my students had, it was a family, a dispute about, I think it was over a holiday, where to go. So, he said, well, I just said, "Let's talk about it." Let everyone have a voice. And he set the time. And he said, because everyone always yells and stuff at me. They come up a couple of days, they're okay that we never talked about the situation at hand. So he did learn that from here. So I said, "Wow, you're actually doing this at home." So he said his mom said, you're right, I appreciate you doing that. He's just never had that type of conversation in his household, when it's a disagreement. (Interview 9)

The influence of Restorative Justice on how students and teachers lived their lives or "show up" in their classrooms was also exemplified in how educators approached discipline. A participant explained that using Restorative Justice approaches allowed for open dialogue, noting, "It has taught me to have more patience and to really try to figure out the problem... how I show up in working with my students." (Interview 8) This shift towards empathy and patience exemplified how Restorative Justice becomes a part of an individual's personal and professional lifestyle, promoting a more empathetic and understanding society. As one teacher noted:

Sometimes I'm always like, what's the difference between this particular practice and just being a better human? I like to think I'm working on being a better human and if that means I've become a restorative practitioner, then so be it. So that's

fine. But I think there is an ease now in teaching and I felt it for a few years.

(Interview 4)

This showed that the application of RJPs extended beyond the classroom for many

participants, becoming a way of life. For these individuals, RJ wasn't confined to school

hours; it influenced their interactions with students, families, and colleagues on a daily

basis:

It has been fun. It has been a lot of work. It has taught me a lot of things about

myself and just how I show up in working with my students, especially inner city

children, being from inner city, and going through a lot of things they went

through and wanting to do things different, but not knowing that I'm replicating

some of the very things or I had replicated some of the very things I fought

against in different ways. It has taught me a whole lot about myself. (Interview 1)

This teacher's statement reflected the integration of restorative justice into personal and

professional life, showing how it served not only as a method for managing classroom

dynamics but also as a tool for self-reflection and personal growth. It highlighted the

transformative journey of adopting restorative justice as a lifestyle, where learning and

self-discovery lead to recognizing and changing behaviors that inadvertently replicate the

issues one aims to address, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and connection with

others, particularly in challenging environments. In essence, RJ was not just a set of

practices or strategies; it was a way of life within the educational environment.

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on

students with and without dis/Abilities?

The second research question asked teachers to consider the impact of RJPs on their students. Three themes emerged. The first theme outlined below is: Restorative Justice as a Gamechanger for Academic Success. Within this theme, several sub-themes emerged, each shedding light on a distinct facet of RJ's influence on the academic journey.

Restorative Justice as a Gamechanger for Academic Success

Not only was RJ important in changing how the teachers thought, that change also created a change in academic outcomes for students in restorative classrooms. The teachers found that RJ was a gamechanger for academic success and their comments revealed several subthemes. The first was the change in academic learning.

Academic Learning

My participants repeatedly attested to the transformative power of RJ in the realm of classroom learning. As one teacher expressed:

The other benefit I would say is it will eventually get you... it could be even immediate, but you will be a better student. And they will receive your information. And by student I mean like, you will be a better performer in any classroom. I have a whole opinion about this that I will keep to myself. But you will do better in school, or your grades, your report card, you will see better results because you're able to be who you are and then the adults that are in front of you are also able to see how you learn and to see what makes you be more successful in classroom. So I definitely think that that's one of the biggest benefits. And I think even for a teacher that might be super academic focused, if I tell them "Hey, restorative justice is actually really good for your test scores that

you're probably thinking about because you're evaluated by that. But I'm telling

you right now that if you do these three things, that is very much RJ practices and

initiatives, your students will probably score better or your students will just

perform better in general in all your classes. And I think that that might create

some kind of buy in. Although it shouldn't be because of scores and whatnot.

(Interview 1)

This sentiment reflected how RJ practices changed classroom learning by allowing

students and teachers to perform authentically. The teacher's words highlighted the

significance of restorative justice in classroom settings, emphasizing that it not only

promoted students' academic success by allowing them to be their authentic selves but

also helped teachers understand how students learned best, leading to improved

classroom performance. Additionally, it suggested that even teachers primarily focused

on academic outcomes could benefit from restorative justice practices as they could

positively impact test scores and overall student performance, potentially fostering

greater buy-in from educators, although the primary motivation should not solely have

been test scores. Similarly, one teacher reflected on how adopting RJ practices made her

a better teacher:

And then I just think small scale, selfishly, it has made my teaching better. I enjoy

teaching way more when I'm in a classroom room where there is just a

community that cares for each other genuinely. It makes the overall learning- I

hate even bringing it up, but again, test scores go up. All of those things generally

improve in a class where you have effective teaching happening and that's

happening when kids are paying attention truthfully and focused. (Interview 6)

This statement underscored the positive impact of restorative justice practices on the teaching experience, highlighting that when there was a genuine sense of community in the classroom, teaching became more enjoyable and effective. Furthermore, it suggested that such a classroom environment could lead to improved academic learning outcomes, including higher test scores and increased student focus. Another participant's words supported this perspective. She noted that RJ made her a better teacher but because RJ helped her to be a more reflective teacher:

But this is one of the priorities of our team. And that is to start thinking about how connection before content really supports the optimal engagement with the content. Right? And so restorative practice and thinking with that lens allows a teacher or allows the adult or the support staff to be able to approach the situation with that mindset. And it may not always happen the first time. Right? Because we're all human. But that's the work of restorative practice. That even when it doesn't go the way that I wanted it to the first time, I'm in a space where I can reflect, connect, figure out the solution and then try it that way the next time. (Interview 9)

Furthermore, RJ practices manifested in the classroom environment through initiatives such as circles. These practices created opportunities for open dialogue and self-expression, fostering an atmosphere where students could freely share their thoughts and ideas. As one teacher elucidated:

For example, we could have a circle and have a talking piece, we could... We were reading and we had a character, we had just read about that character and okay, we have the talking piece and, "What is a word that you would use to

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describe this character?" Everyone's going around with the talking piece and

saying their part and just continuing with those questions that would get to the

character and have students really delving deep into who they are. In that space,

where are all kind of sitting around looking at one another and one person has the

floor and we're sharing openly and being free to really put our ideas forward.

(Interview 3)

As the teacher highlighted, the use of restorative justice practices, such as circle

discussions with a talking piece, engaged students in deep exploration of literary

characters and promoted open, free sharing of ideas within the classroom. This approach

fostered a collaborative and inclusive learning environment, encouraging students to

delve deeper into their understanding of characters and enhancing their engagement with

academic content. Such strategies encouraged deeper engagement with course material,

nurturing a richer learning experience.

The participants' words also illuminated how RJ contributes to academic

excellence. They emphasized the pivotal role of relationships in this process. Another

educator supported this idea as they articulated:

And I think just me building a relationship with him over time has been really,

really important. And now, I've seen him push himself to practice his English a lot

more in class. He volunteers to read in class, which even advanced readers don't

do. And yeah, his classmates have commented on how engaged he is in the class,

and they shout him out and encourage him. I don't know, it's just really sweet.

And I think that it really is ... I don't know. I think just building a relationship in

those opening activities, having opportunities for humor, and just something for

him to share his interests and his opinions. And then me checking in with him

one-on-one over time. It is a 180, the first week he was in my class to now. And

now, he's always engaged. Whether he totally understands exactly what the

activity is or not, he's always trying. And I think if I hadn't made an effort to build

a relationship with him, I think it would be the same. I still would have no idea

what he was doing or whatever. (Interview 5)

This testimony underscored how trust and rapport were catalysts for enhanced academic

performance.

Moreover, my participants revealed a symbiotic relationship between the

classroom culture and academic outcomes. When the classroom culture was characterized

by respect, empathy, and inclusion, as often observed with RJ practices, academic

achievements naturally followed. As one teacher noted:

I think when the culture of the classroom is strong, the academics naturally follow

suit. So when the relationships between teacher and student is strong, you see

some change. When the relationships between students is strong, I feel like that is

the game changer for academic achievement. And then when the relationship

between families and teachers are strong, then you see it even more. And I would

say that this year, the past couple of years, I've been noticing positive changes in

my students' writing. (Interview 8)

The teacher underscored the importance of a strong classroom culture built on positive

relationships between teachers and students, among students themselves, and with

families, highlighting that these relationships havda significant impact on academic

achievement. Additionally, the mention of positive changes in students' writing suggested

that fostering such relationships could lead to tangible improvements in academic

outcomes, particularly in areas like writing skills. The connection between the social and

academic dimensions of learning became evident, demonstrating the holistic impact of

RJ.

Giving Students the Confidence to Take Risks

A recurring motif in my findings centered on the bolstering of student

engagement and confidence. Teachers unanimously recognized the foundational role of

trust in this regard. Remarked one educator:

> Yeah, I think the foundation of all the benefits is just building a relationship of
>
> trust where students feel cared for, understood, and like valued members of our
>
> community for all of their gifts and all of their struggles as well. And I think that
>
> foundational relationship opens so many doors for students to feel more
>
> compelled to engage in class, to feel more capable in class, knowing that they
>
> have a strong relationship with their classmates and with their teacher. And also
>
> just be able to receive more support. And I think whether that's academic or SEL
>
> support, because I think with that relationship, students are able to to
>
> communicate more what they need and what's going on, which is really essential
>
> for the teacher to best serve their needs. (Interview 5)

This teacher highlighted the significance of establishing a foundation of trust and care in

the classroom, which gave students the confidence to take risks academically and

emotionally. When students felt valued and understood, they were more likely to engage

actively, believe in their capabilities, and communicate their needs effectively, which

ultimately led to a more supportive and conducive learning environment. Trust served as

a catalyst, empowering students to embrace their identities and contributions within the learning community.

Additionally, RJ was credited with empowering students to show up authentically, fostering a sense of comfort in self-expression. A teacher shared:

I think that RJ has helped me to bring out the best in me and in the young people. I believe that when kids are comfortable with showing up as themselves and they just lay it all out there, sometimes the very things that would drive a teacher crazy are the very things that become assets to the school community. And I think that when kids get confidence in themselves, whether it be social-emotional or academic, that when they get that confidence it's like you can't stop it and they will perform, and then it trickles into other classes. It'll trickle into them acting different at home. I've had parents say that. And then it would even trickle into the clubs they start to join. All of a sudden they're now the leader of the club. So I definitely have seen that. (Interview 8)

This assertion underscored how RJ practices created an environment where students felt empowered to be themselves, resulting in heightened self-confidence and engagement.

Central to the transformative power of RJ was its ability to cultivate a safe and supportive classroom environment. As one educator emphasized:

In this process of attending an institution, being at a school, being away from your home, right, so kind of your second home, students are not going to be able to remember information, retain information and even take a risk of exploring new information and how they connect and engage with that information if they don't first feel connected with the other human beings in this space and feel safe. And

so for me, that's the biggest benefit. It's the strengthening and maintenance of

relationships. (Interview 9)

This perspective emphasized that in an educational setting, students needed to feel

connected, safe, and valued by their peers and educators before they could effectively

remember, retain, and take risks in their learning. Building and maintaining strong

relationships in the classroom was crucial for creating an environment where students felt

emotionally secure, enabling them to engage more confidently with academic content and

explore new ideas. This assertion underscored the foundational importance of safety and

belonging in the learning process.

Moreover, the sense of safety cultivated by RJ practices emboldened students to

take risks in their learning journey. Students' academic achievement goes up because

they are willing to take risks. They are willing to take risks because RJ practices create a

safe space for students to be who they are. A teacher expressed this idea, connecting

taking risks to building academic resilience:

Well, they're able to take risk. That's that safety thing they were feeling. You're

more willing to take risks when you feel safe about who and where you are taking

that risk at. They're willing to try different things inside the classroom work-wise

they would initially try. They're willing to hop up on a board and do different

things that they would initially always do because they know it's a safe space.

They know that the classroom morale will be built through the different avenues

of restorative justice that they have the comfortability to say, "Hey, I'm going to

try. I don't know it 100%, but I'll try it." When they get it right, we're all going

crazy. But then when they have like a, "Hey, I'm stuck here," it's like, "Remember

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this, and remember that." They have that community to help bring things back to their remembrance. (Interview 13)

This heightened willingness to explore and experiment which contributed to a dynamic and enriching educational experience. From a broader perspective, RJ contributed to increased seat time and enhanced academic engagement. When students felt valued and secure in their learning environment, they were more inclined to actively participate in their educational journey. This increased engagement, particularly among students with dis/Abilities, translated to more learning opportunities and, ultimately, greater academic success. As one teacher noted,

I think large-scale-wise, we can think just about general seat time. Kids want to come in the school when they're interacting with people that love them. And we know from especially with our special education students, what you're looking at, the more seat time the more learning time that these kids have, the more successful they're going to be. So I think at a large scale that's huge. And especially specifically thinking about discipline, it just also if we're not having to suspend kids, which I don't think there ever is a real reason, there's always just a better environment to get them into in my personal opinion. So if we never have to have a kid out of the classroom, then same kind of thing. Just seat time. We just want kids in school. And so that's large scale. (Interview 2)

The teacher emphasized that creating a supportive and loving environment in schools was essential for students' overall success, especially for special education students who benefit from more seat time for learning. It also highlighted the importance of avoiding suspensions, focusing on maintaining a positive classroom environment, and keeping

students in school to maximize their learning opportunities, ultimately giving them the confidence to take risks and succeed academically.

In sum, the theme "Gamechanger for Academic Success" encapsulated the multifaceted impact of RJ on the educational journey. It transformed classroom learning, nurtured academic excellence, bolstered student engagement and confidence, and created a safe and supportive classroom environment. The narratives of my participants collectively illustrated the transformative potential of RJ, positioning it as a catalyst for academic success.

RJ gives students "A Space to Be Who They Are"

Within the overarching theme of "A Space to Be Who They Are," two sub-themes emerged, shedding light on the impact of RJ practices on the classroom environment.

A Safe Space to Grow

One aspect of RJ's influence was its capacity to foster emotional growth in students. While Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) provide essential insights into students' academic needs, they often fall short in revealing their emotional dimensions. As one teacher aptly put it:

When we get our students with dis/Abilities, we get out their IEPs. We have 504s and different things like that. It gives you a snapshot of the child. But, I am a teacher who loves to teach and I say attack in a sense. I going to use that word, attack the whole child. What IEP doesn't show you is their emotions. IEP doesn't show you that they've never done this or this is a goal on their IEP not because they can't do it but because they've been scared to even try. It doesn't show you that they have a hole in academics because of this and a third or whatever the

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reason is. If someone had just taken the time out to just show them, they can actually grasp the skill. It doesn't show you that they don't feel comfortable or they have so much of my family wasn't good with money, and my family hasn't been with math, so I feel I'm not good with math, but I've never really tried to apply it. It doesn't show you those different things. It just shows you, hey, this child has a deficit in doing this. Being able to do RJ in the classroom has allowed the kids to be like, "Hey, Miss Izer, I don't know this," or, "Can you show me this again? And I know this," and also to be like, "Hey, so come into my small group," or, "You may not do a small group. You may do one-on-one with me today because I know this is something that you're a little embarrassed about being in the eighth grade or the seventh grade and you don't know your multiplication." That IEP doesn't show me. (Interview 13)

This teacher highlighted the limitations of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in capturing the emotional and personal aspects of a student's development, which may include fear, lack of confidence, or family influences affecting their academic skills. Implementing restorative justice in the classroom allowed teachers to create a safe space where students could openly express their needs, seek help, and receive personalized support that goes beyond what was documented in their IEPs, fostering a holistic and emotionally supportive environment for growth. Recognizing that a student's emotional well-being was intertwined with their academic journey (Payne & Welch, 2018), RJ practices enabled teachers to address emotional hurdles, encouraging students to step outside their comfort zones and attempt tasks they previously shied away from.

One of the central tenets of RJ is the creation of a safe and supportive classroom environment. This safety was a catalyst for student growth and risk-taking. When students felt secure in expressing their ideas and attempting new challenges, they were more willing to take academic risks. RJ practices instilled a sense of comfort and belonging. This nurturing atmosphere empowered students to venture beyond their academic comfort zones, ultimately leading to deeper engagement and growth.

Many teachers recounted the power of RJ practices to empower students by amplifying their voices and reinforcing their sense of belonging in the classroom community. By providing students with a platform to share their thoughts, experiences, and perspectives, RJ practices conveyed the message that their voices were valued. This recognition encouraged active participation and fosterd a sense of belonging. As one teacher elucidated, "It shows children that, for one, also, my voice is also valued. I have a say in this space. I'm valued. Which makes them feel like, 'Hey, when I do something, I don't want an infraction with my community.' That's short term."(Interview 5) This newfound agency bolstered students' self-esteem and commitment to the classroom community.

> In addition, RJ gaves them a space to talk about how they feel and who they are: ... in the family or, you know, in their maybe family setting they might not have that space to speak about what's going on. Or they don't have a therapist and they might need it, or they don't have a space to speak about what they're going through. And I think that restorative justice does give them that space of just having a circle and just talking about it. Even like community circles when there isn't an incident truly, it's just a time to talk about and to build relationships with

your teachers, with adults in the building. I think that that's super powerful

because again, it gives them the voice in a space to be who they are. (Interview 6)

This teacher's experience underscored the significance of restorative justice in providing

students with a safe and supportive space to express themselves, especially when they

may not have had such opportunities within their family or therapy settings. It highlighted

the value of community circles as a means for students to build relationships, share their

thoughts, and find their voice, ultimately contributing to their personal growth and

emotional well-being. This was especially powerful for students with dis/Abilities:

I think that my students with dis/Abilities down through the years definitely

benefit from restorative approach. One of the biggest things is it gives them a

voice and it makes them feel like they matter. They feel like they belong at

school. (Interview 7)

This teacher's observation emphasized how a restorative approach in education

empowered students with dis/Abilities by providing them with a voice and a sense of

belonging at school. It highlighted the significance of creating a safe and inclusive

environment where these students could grow, express themselves, and feel valued as

part of the school community.

Inclusion and Belonging

An inclusive classroom environment is a hallmark of RJ. It transcends barriers,

embracing students of diverse abilities and backgrounds. RJ practices dismantle

stereotypes and prejudices, creating an inclusive space where every student is valued and

embraced. For instance, a teacher recounted the transformation of a student on the autism

spectrum who initially kept to himself. Through RJ circles, this student found his voice

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and place within the classroom community. His newfound confidence was exemplified

when he named himself "rice and beans" during a discussion:

> There's also, one of the kids who are on the autism spectrum, who at the
>
> beginning of the year, as tends to happen with autistic kids, kind of was on his
>
> own. Sweet, sweet kid, always on his own. Nobody really talked to him. He didn't
>
> really seek out people because of autism. Through the circles, he has found a
>
> voice and he's hilarious. We were trying to think of a name for our squad. We
>
> were kind of talking about it in the circle, restorative justice circle, and
>
> somewhere along the way, the cookout squad came out. Some reason they all
>
> liked food and everything. They all gave themselves food nicknames. Every day
>
> we'd go through and everybody would be like, "Hey I'm pork chop," or, "Hey, I'm
>
> this." Then it would get to him, and there was silent. One day he just took the
>
> talking piece and he said, "Hi, I'm rice and beans here." It was great. Probably my
>
> favorite moment of the school year so far. He now has found his voice and he has
>
> input in the thing, which he would not have done without our community circle.
>
> Kids know him and they stick up for him and they look out for him. We've
>
> become very much a family through it. (Interview 7)

This example highlighted the transformative impact of restorative justice circles in

fostering inclusion and a sense of belonging within a school community. It illustrated

how a student on the autism spectrum found his voice, established connections, and

became an integral part of the group, demonstrating the power of these circles in creating

a supportive and inclusive environment where students embrace their individuality and

form strong bonds. The classroom became a familial space where diversity was celebrated, exemplifying the transformative potential of RJ.

RJ practices, when applied inclusively, had a profound impact on students with dis/Abilities. These practices afforded them a voice and a sense of belonging that was often elusive in traditional classroom settings. As one teacher stated:

I think that there are tremendous benefit for students with dis/Abilities. I have in particular, I'm thinking of one student who last year, didn't like to speak a lot in front of people and would always separate himself from other people. Now, he's there in the circle every morning. The beginning, it wasn't easy. We had to kind of, "Hey, come into the circle. Hey, come into the circle." Then when we'd ask him a question, he'd take for talking and he'd pass. He'd just pass every time. But now, you can't stop him talking. It's a total opposite. There's an example there. (Interview 3)

This quote highlighted the positive impact of restorative justice circles on students with dis/Abilities, particularly one student who initially struggled with isolation and speaking in front of others, but has since become actively engaged in the circle and has gained confidence in expressing himself. It underscored how inclusion and a sense of belonging are nurtured through these circles, leading to significant personal growth and increased participation among students who initially may have been reserved or hesitant. RJ dismantled barriers, ensuring that every student, regardless of their abilities, was an integral part of the learning community. Another teacher shared her experience with this:

And it was restorative justice and restorative practices that made Keyon feel like he could be himself. There were times where he would say the weirdest stuff, the

weirdest answers, but his classmates would celebrate him. He was extremely

intelligent, very intellectual, and he would give them the deepest response and we

would just smile. The whole room would smile and the kids were like, "Yes,

Jaylon." So they kind of embraced him, whereas if there were no restorative

practices in that room where you see a child going from self-contained and all the

school knows him, they know what he's doing, they know his behavior, he comes

in the room, you would expect the students to treat him like his behavior

manifested in the former class, but I watched my students literally embrace him.

(Interview 2)

Through restorative approaches, the student found acceptance and was celebrated by his

classmates for his intelligence and unique contributions, demonstrating how these

practices fostereda sense of inclusion and belonging, even for students with challenging

backgrounds or previous behavioral issues. An additional teacher remembered a similar

experience of how RJ practices impacted her students with dis/Abilities, in both their

perception of themselves and the learning community's perception of them:

I think that comes from learning from the teachers that maybe you're acting

different, maybe you look different, maybe you have different needs, but you are

still a part of our community. And as we practice that, everybody belongs here.

And those are words that we actually said. And I think that's part of that effective

language and that restorative language. Everybody belongs here. Everybody has

something to bring to our community. We practice that in our circle, we practice

that in how we partner the students up to do activities that weren't even academic

related. We worked out a lot in our classroom. And that was the way that we

practiced team building and connecting with others and turn taking, right? So we

would do things like squats or sit ups or jumping jacks, but you had to let your

partner go. You had to choose who was going go first and then count to 10 or 15

or whatever the number of the focus of the week was. (Interview 10)

The teacher emphasized the importance of inclusive and restorative language in creating

a sense of belonging within the school community. By reinforcing the idea that everyone

belongs and has something valuable to contribute, and by implementing inclusive

activities, the classroom grew a culture of acceptance, teamwork, and connection among

students, promoting a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

In summary, the theme "A Space to Be Who They Are" encapsulated the

transformative power of RJ in fostering a classroom environment where students could

authentically express themselves. RJ practices valuing emotional growth, fostering a safe

space for exploration, amplifying student voices, promoting inclusion and belonging,

giving students with dis/Abilities a voice, and enhancing academic engagement

collectively demonstrated the profound impact of RJ on creating an inclusive and

nurturing educational space. The teacher's perspectives from this theme illustrated how

restorative justice practices created an environment where students authentically

expressed themselves and thrived.

RJ Builds "Connection" Between School Community Members

Within the overarching theme of "Connection," a diverse set of sub-themes

surfaced, supported by direct quotes from participants. Together, these sub-themes

emphasized the significant impact of Restorative Justice (RJ) in fostering meaningful

connections within the educational community.

Building Authentic Relationships

At the heart of RJ's transformative impact lies the cultivation of robust and authentic relationships. My participants recognized that strong connections between students and educators influenced the classroom atmosphere and academic outcomes. One teacher recalled a year when they taught an all-boys class, emphasizing how RJ circles allowed them to "really get to know each other" and set the stage for academic success. Building these relationships, as exemplified by the transformation from "Who are you" to "Auntie, mom, I mean Miss Sadie," proved to be a game-changer, with improvements in students' academic performance:

So any classroom, I feel like when I've had strong relationships between the students and myself, I've seen the culture of achievement shift when it comes to academics. And I don't know why I keep thinking about the year that I taught all boys. So the year I taught all boys at X High School, I had 10th grade boys, and when you get all boys in a room it's so different because they can't hide behind anybody. Everything comes to the surface, whether it is hidden talent or hidden deficits or both. Everything comes up, there's no escaping it. And we had to do a lot of circles when I taught all boys at the beginning of the school year where we could really get to know each other to set us up for success for the rest of the year because I look young, so I'm in a room with all boys. It went from them like, "Who are you," to "Auntie, mom, I mean Miss Sadie." It changed because I had to teach them that it was not acceptable for people to yell at them, to demean them, or diminish them when they were being taught. And they were so used to that, that when they came across Miss Sadie, they're like, "Well, she's talking to me

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like she respects me. Wait do I have to listen to her?" And they did! So they kind

of got used to it and it was a game changer and you could see it in their

academics. (Interview 8)

This teacher's words underscored how building strong, authentic relationships between

teachers and students positively impacted the classroom culture and academic

achievement. It highlighted the transformation that occurred in a classroom of all boys

when the teacher established respect and trust, resulting in improved academic

performance and a more respectful and engaging learning environment. Restorative

justice practices extended beyond creating connections with students; they also

encompassed repairing harm and fostering open communication.

Educators acknowledged that harm can be unintentional, not only by students but

also by staff members. RJ offered a framework for repairing these harms, as one staff

member expressed:

And in reverse, (the harm) a staff member can do. Because the students don't

always do the harm. Sometimes us as staff members, even myself, do a harm that

we don't even notice. It could be something simple like we're so caught up in

something else that's going on, a student comes in, and I'm stressed out about that.

And so they're, "Hey, Dean B." And I don't even hear them, or I brush them off,

and they may feel some type of way about that. So then, I don't realize I did that. I

see them later in the hallway, out of uniform, and I say, "Hey. Get in uniform."

"Man, forget you, Dean B." But I didn't realize that it's coming because I didn't

even speak to them that morning. So, it gives us an opportunity to build

relationships and repair any harms that are created. And allows students I think

to... It allows students to take some ownership in whatever violation or thing that

they committed. (Interview 2)

This participant highlighted the importance of staff members recognizing their role in

sometimes inadvertently harming students and the need for building authentic

relationships to repair and prevent such harm. They also emphasized that these

relationships could enable students to take responsibility for their actions and foster a

sense of ownership and accountability in the school community. RJ encouraged honest

dialogue, even when addressing challenging situations, ensuring that students felt heard

and valued. By focusing on making connections with students, teachers began to see their

students and their families in a more compassionate light:

So restorative justice to me is the humanizing approach that we take to education

to our young people where we literally see them as human beings, just like we

are. All about restorative processes, all about building relationships with young

people, building relationships with their families. (Interview 6)

Consistent and Respectful Interactions

RJ created a supportive environment, fostering relationships that allowed students

to open up gradually. This emotional growth was exemplified in the story of a once-

disruptive student who, through a single conversation and genuine engagement,

transformed into a school leader. RJ encouraged educators to extend their focus beyond

academics, engaging in non-academic conversations to build trust and connection. This

approach, rooted in genuine concern for students' well-being, enhanced the overall

learning experience, emphasizing the importance of strong connections in the school

environment.

Many students arrive at school facing personal challenges and struggles, often with their defenses up. RJ practices facilitate a smoother transition for these students by creating a supportive environment where relationships can flourish. Educators recognized that students who feel connected are more likely to engage positively in their academic journey. RJ, as one teacher pointed out, allows students to "come in struggling" and gradually open up, creating a nurturing space for emotional growth and connection:

> The art teacher's like, 'I don't know what to do. She is so disrespectful in class.' So I giggled a little bit because she's still a kid and I definitely knew she was being a little bit dramatic, but I took her (the student) up to my classroom. I listened to her. And just that one conversation, this child, you would think that she was like one of my family members. She's always with me. And that behavior turned into that following year she became the student government president. She now is one of the leaders in her eighth-grade class. She's the drum major.
>
> (Interview 4)

These words illustrated how a teacher's consistent and respectful interaction with a student who was initially seen as disrespectful resulted in a positive transformation. By taking the time to listen and build a connection with the student, her behavior improved significantly, leading to her taking on leadership roles in school and demonstrating the power of respectful engagement in shaping students' development and behavior. Restorative justice practices encouraged educators to take an interest in their students' lives beyond academics. This personal engagement and genuine concern for students' well-being resonated deeply.

Educators shared their experiences of engaging in non-academic conversations, such as favorite hobbies or interests, to demonstrate their genuine interest in their students as individuals. This approach fostered trust and connection, enabling students to engage more actively in the learning process and develop a sense of belonging. As one teacher pointed out, time spent in school is the largest time chunk of the day, so having a strong connection, fixing problems was vital to building strong connections:

> In general, I think it builds up students, especially on the part with reparation and stuff. It emphasizes, 'Okay. Nobody's perfect,' and, 'Hey, okay. Something's been done, but nothing is unrepairable either.' How we work together as a community, we are here, we basically spend more hours here than we do in our home.
>
> (Interview 13)

Educators stressed the importance of repairing harm and maintaining open communication to strengthen relationships. Students spent a significant portion of their day at school; they needed to feel safe and connected to learn effectively. Restorative practices contributed to this by fostering consistent and respectful interactions. The teachers also highlighted RJ's role in empowering educators to provide a consistent and fair environment for students, ultimately contributing to their emotional development and engagement, especially in the formative years of elementary school.

Consistency in relationships and interactions was a cornerstone of RJ's impact. Students thrived when they knew what to expect in terms of both expectations and treatment. RJ empowered educators to provide this consistency and fostered emotional development in students.

Strengthening the Teacher-Student-Community Triad

One undeniable outcome of RJ was the strengthening of the triadic relationship between teachers, students, and the broader school community. Participants observed that RJ practices positively influenced the culture of the classroom, leading to academic improvements. Additionally, when students perceived strong relationships between their families and educators, the impact on their academic journey was even more pronounced. These connections created a sense of belonging and mutual respect that transcended the academic realm.

An educator discussed what they learned from a student's parent that helped support the student in the school:

> Because that could just set a person all to be super vocal and disrespectful or to shut down and not, so. And I learned that from a parent having IEP and eligibility meetings and her not getting along with everyone, as far as for adults, and she was becoming disrespectful and I was able to talk to her, so she could understand, I could understand we can't do that. And I would check in on her. And again, it goes back to getting relationships, but I had to tell her in advance, who's going to be in the meeting. I would tell her, the principal may jump in. So she had to process that a whole day before we actually had the meeting. And she stopped being so reactive. (Interview 5)

This teacher emphasized the importance of proactive communication and building relationships to strengthen the teacher-student-community triad. By preparing the student for IEP meetings and addressing her concerns in advance, the teacher was able to improve the student's behavior and foster a more productive and respectful relationship,

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highlighting the significance of open communication within the educational community. Another teacher stated:

> We were transparent, we were honest. But we built a relationship with her. And so then we see what happened with that restorative work, she began to trust us. When the mom, the family trust, then the student feels that. And they feel, even if I don't know you yet, I can start to trust you. And you started to see that happening. And then because of this particular situation and the special needs of the student, there was lots of challenges with impulse control. That required restorative work on our side as the adults, right. We had to be reflective in our own light to say, this is a behavior and a skill that needs to be developed. This is not who this student is." (Interview 13)

RJPs supported and deepened open and honest communication which, in turn, strengthened relationships between participants. They provided students with the opportunity to express themselves and their emotions in a safe environment. This not only helped them process their feelings but also allowed educators to better understand their needs and challenges. It fostered emotional expression and understanding, leading to improved self-awareness and emotional development.

In summary, the theme "Connection" illuminated the profound transformative power of RJ in cultivating relationships, fostering open communication, and enhancing the overall sense of community within the classroom. The quotes from my participants underscored how RJ practices contributed to each sub-theme, ultimately outlining how RJ creates a nurturing environment where connections are the bedrock of academic and emotional growth.

Research Question 3: What Are Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of RJPs on

Themselves?

Restorative justice (RJ) significantly reshaped how teachers think about disciplinary practices within educational settings, representing a comprehensive philosophy that goes beyond punitive approaches. Unlike a mere set of practices, RJ prioritized understanding students' motivations over punishment, fostering empathy, and a holistic perspective on disciplinary matters. This theme, "Understanding Who My Students Are," explores how educators have transformed their approaches, applying restorative practices to address diverse learning styles, communication needs, and individual challenges faced by students.

RJ Helps Teachers with "Understanding Who My Students Are"

The perspectives and words of the teachers revealed that RJ is not confined to disciplinary measures but became integral to the educational culture. The application of RJ involved tailoring strategies to meet different needs, facilitating open communication about students' well-being, fostering inclusivity, and addressing systemic issues of injustice. This theme established the groundwork for an examination of how restorative justice transforms the teacher-student relationship, promotes equity, and contributes to the creation of a compassionate and just learning environment.

Tailoring Strategies for Different Needs

Educators in the study emphasized the importance of recognizing and addressing diverse learning styles and needs within a classroom. As one teacher shared:

> but you take it to the next level when you understand that restorative justice has different strategies and practices to meet different needs in the classroom.

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Knowing when A is going to work best and knowing when B will work

best. (Interview 1)

This adaptive and nuanced application of restorative justice aligned with the

diverse demographics and abilities present in a typical classroom. One participant stated:

It's a mix of different types of learning styles. It's a mix of different needs and

what folks really respond to in the classroom. That's just kind of the setup of our

school in general. That's kind of the demographics in terms of ability wise. It's

everybody all in one class together. (Interview 12)

This observation highlighted the inclusive and heterogeneous nature of the school

environment, emphasizing the necessity of adapting instruction to meet the varied

abilities and preferences of students. Moreover, the teachers' perspectives revealed how

educators observed and responded to individual students' needs. For instance, one teacher

highlighted the necessity of understanding the different strategies of restorative justice,

noting that effective implementation involved knowing when specific approaches would

work best:

So I view it as it is a very specific approach to every single kid. There's no kid I

talk to exactly the same because part of the micro proficiencies, it's like, I need to

talk to you the way again, makes you feel comfortable and safe, and protected all

those things. Then I think because of all that individualization, the ultimate goal is

to be the equalizer. So then it's like if every single one of you gets this

individualized love and support, then you will all be able to meet this one very

high expectation I have for what our learning looks like. So it's like the equity

blocks basically, right? Get everyone on that level they just need different things

to get them there. (Interview 7)

They highlighted the significance of recognizing that restorative justice strategies should

be individually tailored to each student's needs and comfort, with the ultimate aim of

achieving equity by providing the necessary support for each student to meet high

learning expectations. Another teacher supported this perspective as well:

Also just making multi-tiered scaffolds for my students with dis/Abilities has

been really helpful too. Just saying it isn't a binary of you need the scaffold or you

don't. It's you need multiple choice questions where people are doing open

response. This person needs sentence stems and then this person needs nothing.

(Interview 4)

This adaptive and nuanced application of restorative justice aligned with the diverse

demographics and abilities present in a typical classroom. All students had different

needs and abilities, but restorative classrooms were a safe place, especially for students

with dis/Abilities, as noted by one participant:

I think it's really scary for them. Well, I think every student is different so I want

to say that first. Every student is different whether they have a disability or not.

Even students with dis/Abilities that do receive special services, I think that

they're all different because there are some students who can thrive in

environments that are not restorative. But there are some who shut down,

especially students with dis/Abilities, are fearful, are afraid just in terms of

academics and I'm thinking about their attitudes. (Interview 6)

This participant highlighted the importance of recognizing the individuality of students, including those with dis/Abilities, and understanding that while some students may thrive in non-restorative environments, others, particularly those with certain needs or fears related to academics, may benefit greatly from restorative practices. They underscored the need to tailor teaching approaches to each student's unique characteristics and circumstances.

Another teacher recounted a specific case of a student's struggle to articulate thoughts in English. Through consistent engagement and supportive activities, such as opener questions, the student gradually increased their participation, showcasing the transformative power of tailored restorative practices:

And then I think just through doing, we always have some kind of SEL or opener question at the start of class. And I notice with time, I learned that he's at a level where he can understand pretty well, but he just struggles to articulate his thoughts in English. So I think through him, just even responding in the chat at the start of class when we're doing these opener activities. With time, he's literally hilarious. So he would send really funny GIFs in the chat, or just lots of emojis. After a couple weeks of him kind of slowly increasing his participation pretty much only in these opener activities. I don't know. He's very, very open about when he doesn't understand. I remember one of the first times where he was super, super engaged was he was typing in the chat in the beginning. Other students were typing, he typed in all capitals. He was like, "Que?" And he had put a big emoji, and he was like, "I don't know." But he thought it was hilarious. (Interview 12)

The teacher highlighted the significance of tailoring strategies to accommodate a student's language proficiency level and comfort in expressing himself, which, in this case, led to increased participation and engagement through humor and emojis in the classroom. This restorative approach illustrated how adapting teaching methods to individual needs fostered a supportive and inclusive learning environment, even for students who may have initially struggled to articulate their thoughts in the primary language of instruction.

Communication and Expression of Needs

The conversations with teachers illuminated various ways in which students communicated their needs within a restorative justice framework. Teachers implemented interventions like secret codes and emojis, allowing students to discreetly express when they required a break or felt lost:

> Also, another intervention that I've used with some students where they'll pick a secret code that they can send in the chat if they feel like they really need a break. Because especially with our students with ADHD, them just feeling overwhelmed, can't focus, need a break is a very common discussion that we have about what's going on in the class. So students will send, they have a set emoji that they'll send in the chat if they feel like they really need a break. And we'll figure out a time for them to just take a minute for themselves, which I think is helpful for them to communicate their needs and feel heard in that way. We know it's really hard, and we're trying to make it work for everybody. (Interview 5)

Another teacher used the same strategy to communicate with struggling students:

I have several students who have two emojis that they've picked. And one of them

is I'm lost, I don't know what we're doing. And one of them is that I need a break.

And kids are always sending emojis in the chat. So it's very inconspicuous.

Nobody knows that it's their special thing. So I think it works well. (Interview 8)

Both participants highlighted the significance of using emojis or secret codes in the chat

to allow students, especially those with ADHD or struggling with focus, to discreetly

communicate their needs for a break or assistance during class. These strategies enabled

students to express themselves effectively and feel heard, contributing to a more

supportive and accommodating learning environment. This facilitated open

communication about the students' well-being and created a supportive environment. As

one teacher explained,

> No, yeah, I think in general, a lot of teachers, and me included you're intimidated
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> by learning dis/Abilities a lot when you're not trained in... I'm a gen ed teacher, so
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> I know how to differentiate things, but I don't know how to... It's still scary. They
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> need so much of me. So I feel like when you commit a lot of time to getting to
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> know them on a personal level, it makes it less scary to think about, am I doing
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> everything I can to support this student's ability level? So I think it also just kind
>
> of it makes it easier for teachers to just approach something that's challenging for
>
> me as an educator is how to teach the best I can to students who have different
>
> needs. (Interview 4)

The teacher's words highlighted how taking the time to build personal connections with

students with learning dis/Abilities reduced the intimidation factor and helped teachers

feel more confident in providing the necessary support for each student's unique needs.

They underscored the significance of teacher-student relationships in facilitating effective communication and support for students with diverse learning requirements. Additionally, the establishment of a signal system, such as using a designated seat to indicate a need for a break, demonstrated the integration of restorative practices in addressing immediate concerns:

> And we kind of create a signal system like, "Miss, something crazy just happened in the hallway. I need to sit in your cool down seat for five minutes because I'm hot and I'm about to pop off in this classroom." But why I didn't get to run in here really quickly. One of my special education students is feeling like she's being bullied in a small group and a virtual small group. So she knew that she was like, "Miss, I got to talk to you at the end of class. I got to explain this to you and I need some help." So I got her in with it. (Interview 10)

Understanding the individual needs of students and building the space that allows them to communicate their needs was a powerful intervention. One teacher noted the change in her student when he was with her, as opposed to other non-restorative classrooms:

> And there were days where he had meltdowns, but it didn't manifest the way that it did in that self-contained. So there were days where he was like, "Ms. Hawkins, can I take a break by the door for a minute?" And we would go, or there was times when I was like, "Listen," tap on the shoulder, "we're going to go talk," or there were times where I would assign a student, "Can you sit with Keyon for a second and help?" So I build that type of community, I could definitely see the difference. He wasn't the only student that received services in class, but he was

the one who was moved from self-contained to our class. So I think that's a good

example. (Interview 11)

This difference between restorative and non-restorative classrooms was noted by another

participant:

It actually breaks my heart sometimes. Even this year with virtual, looking at how

my students performed across classes, it is different. I work with young people at

my church and sometimes when they share some of their experiences at school, it

almost makes me want to cry because when I think about teachers putting them

out of class or them being told all kinds of things by other kids and it not being

addressed in the moment, they make me so sad. Because I have quite a few of my

church young people that do receive special education services and they go to

different schools. And we do like a homework center where we get to talk about

school and we help them with their homework so those types of things kind of

come up and we just see a different child at church. So we don't see behavior

concerns at church. We see them for who they really are, but it looks like

sometimes when they go to school, they show up different based on their comfort

level.So I don't know, it hurts. It does. Even in my family, I have younger cousins

who are still in school and just knowing some of the things they tell me about

class, and I'm not, not judging teachers because I know teaching is not easy at all,

but just thinking about the student is...heartbreaking. (Interview 1)

This teacher emphasized the emotional impact of witnessing students, especially those

with special education needs, facing challenges and negative experiences in the school

environment. They described the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive

atmosphere where students could be their true selves and expressed the pain felt when students' authentic selves were not always recognized or nurtured in a school setting.

Restorative Justice as a Culturally Inclusive Practice

The application of restorative justice principles extended beyond the classroom, fostering a sense of community and inclusion. Educators emphasized the need to recognize and respect students' diverse backgrounds, particularly in dual immersion settings. Especially the nuances of having a racially diverse population of students in the dual language setting was a challenge for teachers, but with the use of restorative practices, students felt safe to share their experiences. One teacher explained:

> And to get even granular. Having taught in Mexico, that's not the same experience
> as teaching a student from El Salvador or Guatemala or teaching a student from
> the Dominican Republic who identifies as Latinx but at the same time is taken in
> by the surrounded community as maybe black. When you talk to your students,
> you realize that their experience is different, especially for the Afro-latino
> students. (Interview 4)

This teacher's observation highlighted the need for educators to be sensitive to these differences and tailor their approach to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Another teacher shared their perspective on creating trusting relationships with students:

> So basically it's the purpose of, or just the act of engaging that is like it's the polar
> opposite of microaggression. So it's like if normally you would undercut a student
> that's Black and say something racist but in a micro way, the opposite is what are
> the little things you're saying that are anti-racist or the little actions you are doing

that are anti and are defying or uplifting Black culture? So particularly at my school, we are a dual immersion school. So a lot of our Black students are not Spanish speaking. So they struggle a lot in our Spanish-speaking courses. And the approach to that a lot of it is just, "Well, you have to do it. Well, you've got to learn." And it's very frustrating. And it causes a lot of escalations when you're not really leveling with students. So one way is just a general framing of learning. So it's, How do we talk to kids about why we're learning certain things? Why you have to take these courses in different languages? When it comes to actual mini-actions, things like welcoming kids and the way they greet you, you greet them the same way. So matching your students talk to make them feel comfortable, or if they like want to hug, if they want to high five, those little things. If kids are bantering with each other, engage in the banter. I think a lot of we're always like, "Get focused, get focused." And that's very ineffective to say that. So it's kind of engage, maybe add a quiff or two when they're going at it and then you transition it back instead of but in a conversational way. (Interview 4)

This teacher highlighted the need to address microaggressions and promote anti-racist actions in the classroom, particularly in the case of Black students who may face challenges in a dual immersion school, by fostering a welcoming and supportive environment that values their cultural identity and preferences. Furthermore, the conversations underscored the significance of creating practices that provided dedicated time for relationship building that cut across language and culture:

It's just building those relationships for at the beginning, especially for my ESL special education students who are at high risk feel really comfortable in my

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space, I guess, in my virtual space not. And then I use some of the… I have a

calming corner, kind of a thing in my classroom. I use classroom jobs, like my

water bottle filler, if you need to take a walk. So some of those things I believe

are the more traditional restorative justice things that were taught. But I do just

think it's stemming purely from spending a lot of time, just one-on-one with

students and figuring out what makes them tick. (Interview 3)

This statement underscored the importance of building strong relationships, particularly

with ESL special education students, to create a comfortable and inclusive virtual

classroom environment. It highlighted the use of restorative practices such as calming

corners and individualized support, stemming from a deep understanding of each

student's needs and preferences, as key elements in fostering a culturally inclusive and

supportive learning space. This inclusive approach positively impacted academic

performance and served as a supportive space for students facing external challenges,

such as community violence:

I would say probably my best example is we are very fortunate at my school

where we have a block that is a mentoring block. So during that class period, I

had my last year one was really affected because I had 15 kids in my mentoring

block and then they were also my English students in my next class. So we had an

hour or two hours in a row of just relationship building and connecting with each

other and learning and growing. And that class I had three-level one language

learners at least six or seven other three to four language learners, all Spanish

speaking. They grew academically, surpassed all of my other classes

academically. And then also we live in a community where there is a lot of gun

violence and we had two family members lost at a particularly bad event and they were both in that class. We talked about that a lot. They needed that. (Interview 8)

This teacher spoke of the positive impact of a mentoring block that allowed for extensive relationship-building and connection among students, particularly those who were language learners and had experienced trauma due to community gun violence. The passage demonstrated how restorative practices, like fostering a supportive classroom environment, contributed to significant academic growth and provided a much-needed space for students to discuss and process their personal experiences.

The culturally inclusive practices afforded by restorative practices extended beyond the classroom. One teacher noted that her adoption of a restorative mindset led her to try harder to reach the caregivers who spoke languages other than English:

I changed with my students and also getting relationships with the parents so they can understand. So if they, one that I'm aware of, reach out to the parents and being at just a diverse setting, I'm working on my Spanish. Other than that, just making sure I have an interpreter as well. I can tell with some parents, if you know the English, isn't the best. I know they can express or say what they want to say .I always said, do you want to use the language then. And even parents, that they don't speak English. I just text them in Spanish. I mean, may not be perfect, they understand what I'm saying. So, that's one part that I had to work on. I had to be brave. (Interview 10)

Creating a restorative classroom also meant creating a relationship with the parents of her culturally and linguistically diverse students. The teacher tried to build relationships with both students and parents from diverse backgrounds, including those who speak Spanish.

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It demonstrated the importance of linguistic inclusivity and the willingness to communicate in a language that parents feel comfortable with, reflecting a commitment to culturally inclusive restorative practices.

Empowering Through Individualization

The following perspectives highlighted a shift in perspective from a one-size-fits-all approach to education to an emphasis on individualization. Educators recognized the importance of tailoring their interactions to each student, acknowledging that a restorative mindset requires understanding and meeting the unique needs of every learner:

> Yeah, I think for some, absolutely. So if we're thinking of students that are identified with ADD, or ADHD, or behavioral-focused learning dis/Abilities, this approach changes that completely because now I'm recognizing that and or I'm approaching, "Okay, if you have a lot of energy and that hinders your learning, how am I approaching you so that I can help you manage that energy or redistribute that energy so it doesn't hinder your learning?" I think for students that have dyslexia, dysgraphia, those types of things, the one-on-one just helps me actually see it. I'm not trained in special education so I'm not a hundred percent sure how to teach students flip letters. (Interview 8)

Furthermore, the narrative emphasized the potential of restorative justice in addressing the challenges posed by learning dis/Abilities. Teachers expressed how the one-on-one approach allowed for better understanding and support:

> But if I am doing one-on-one, I'm correcting and supporting them if they're doing read alouds and things like that. And I actually am seeing more students who do just flip words because I'm trying intentionally to do so much more one-on-one

things, granted it's a lot, it's very challenging online. So I'm referencing in-person

more. And so, yeah. So I feel like, for the behavioral stuff, it's switching the way I

teach and the way I approach teaching. And then for the actual more cognitive

dis/Abilities, it's just giving me more time to correct and support them and

understand what's actually happening when they read something or when they

write something. (Interview 4)

The teacher's words highlighted how the shift to one-on-one teaching approaches

allowed the teacher to provide more individualized correction and support to students. It

emphasized the significance of adapting teaching methods to better address the unique

needs of students and improve their academic performance.

In reflecting on past practices, one teacher noted a previous tendency to shield

students with IEPs, 504 plans, or ELL plans. This protective stance, once perceived as

potentially hindering student progress, shifted to a more trusting approach:

I think when I was first starting out, I had a tendency to want to shield students

who had IEPs or 504s or an ELL plan from and I'm certain that was maybe

hamstringing progress and not giving enough trust in what the student could can

do. It was also different when I was teaching down in Texas because in the RGV,

I was in a pretty homonymous culture. So moving up to DC was a radical shifting

of what that looked like. And now part of me was wondering how much of this

shielding is happening because I don't know what to do versus what the students

actually need. And is mostly the former rather than the latter. So I've just become

more, "You can do this. You should sit here, meet with these folks. It's going to

be all right." (Interview 5)

The acknowledgment of this shift was contextualized within the teacher's changing environments, emphasizing the importance of trust-building and recognizing students' capabilities for a more inclusive and empowering teaching approach.

Building Trust and Equity

Restorative justice emerged as a tool for building trust between educators and students. The conversations with teachers illustrated how establishing trust was crucial, especially when working with students who might feel marginalized or face academic challenges:

> I had a student who was constantly getting kicked out. He seriously was never in a class. He was Black and had an IEP. I feel like I never ever thought about root cause of actions and I never really focused on why a kid threw a chair or something. I was always just like, "Why are you throwing a chair?" And knew and thought they were actually going to answer and tell me they actually knew why. So I think RJ totally flips that on its head for me. And I definitely approach just what student needs, what they're going through outside of my classroom. And I've very much decentered me in the conversation. Instead of, why are they doing this to me, or why are they doing this to my classroom? It's like, okay, how do I center them? What do they need from me to create this into a space where they are safe and can learn honestly. They need to trust me. (Interview 9)

Building trust was crucial for meeting the needs of students with dis/Abilities. The teacher-student relationship was supported by open and supportive conversations and created an environment where students felt comfortable expressing their struggles. For instance, taking a student aside for breathing exercises not only provided a coping

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mechanism but also fostered meaningful dialogue. The teacher-student relationship became a platform for introspection, with the student recognizing their own capabilities and successes. This realization, coupled with a strong rapport, prompted the student to question unnecessary self-imposed stressors, demonstrating the transformative impact of trust-building interactions:

> Then I can take her on the hallway, do breathing exercises with her or something. She has said to me, "Wow, I'm starting to realize that I'm putting all this on myself. This isn't that bad. I can do this. I've succeeded. I get the good grades. Why am I stressing myself out?" We have this great relationship where we can now talk about it. So yeah. I think absolutely there is a benefit. I know that the gen ed students... For special ed, there's no one look. You can't look at someone and be like, "Hey, special ed," usually you can't, but students are very quick to notice differences. Through this team building experience and this community building experience, I really see them appreciating the differences in other people and helping them when they need help and stepping back when they don't need help. Really just acceptance. (Interview 12)

In Special Education, where individual needs varied widely, a restorative approach emphasized the importance of recognizing and appreciating differences. Through restorative practices, teachers and students worked together to make sure that they were creating inclusive spaces for all students. This emphasis on acceptance and understanding laid the groundwork for trust, enabling educators to identify and address the distinctive requirements of students, especially those identified as needing extra support, to provide

tailored systems and procedures to foster an inclusive learning environment. One teacher spoke about this process:

> What we've done is ... We've identified our high flyers, the kiddos who are typically in a little bit more things sometimes than others and may need that extra touch a little bit and check-ins often. We've identified them. We've identified their close contact for teachers. Who are those people that if something was to happen or if they were to have an incident that can talk to them off that ledge and get them calm or that they trust to be like, "Hey, this is what I'm feeling now"? That's kind of where we started it and built out from there because we just know those students need a little extra support. And it's not a problem. We just need to identify who they are, what that support is, and how do we best accommodate it. (Interview 13)

In conclusion, the participants perspectives and experiences emphasized the transformative potential of restorative justice as it aligned with the theme of "Understanding Who My Students Are." The implementation of tailored strategies, effective communication of needs, an inclusive approach, empowerment through individualization, and the building of trust contributed to creating a more empathetic and equitable educational environment.

Summary of Research Questions, Themes, and Subthemes

The first research question, "How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?" explored teachers' perceptions and descriptions of Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) within their school environment. The overarching theme that emerged was "RJ Becomes a Transformative Mindset," highlighting the

profound impact of RJPs on teachers' attitudes and approaches. This theme was further divided into sub-themes, including "Shift/change in Attitude," which reflected the transformative effect of RJPs on how teachers viewed discipline and conflict resolution, "RJ as a Mindset and Philosophy," emphasizing the integration of restorative principles into teachers' core beliefs and values, and "RJ as a Lifestyle," signifying the comprehensive and holistic adoption of restorative practices as a way of life. These themes and sub-themes collectively illustrated the profound and far-reaching changes that RJPs instigated in educators' perspectives and practices within their school community.

The second research question, "What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?" investigated teachers' perceptions of the impact of RJPs on both students with and without dis/Abilities. The first overarching theme, "RJ was a Game Changer for Academic Success," underscored the significance of RJPs in academic contexts. This theme encompassed sub-themes such as "Academic Learning," which emphasized how RJPs contributed to improved academic outcomes, and "Giving Students the Confidence to Take Risks," highlighting how RJPs empowered students to engage more confidently in their learning journeys. The second overarching theme, "RJ Gave Students 'A Space to Be Who They Are,'" underscored the importance of creating inclusive and nurturing environments. This theme comprised sub-themes like "A Safe Space to Grow," which emphasized the role of RJPs in fostering personal growth and development, and "Inclusion and Belonging," highlighting how RJPs facilitated a sense of belonging among all students. Finally, the third overarching theme, "RJ Built Connection," focused on the relationships and interactions within the school community. This theme encompassed sub-themes such as "Building Authentic Relationships,"

emphasizing the role of RJPs in fostering genuine connections, "Consistent and Respectful Interactions," highlighting the importance of maintaining respectful behavior, and "Strengthening the Teacher-Student-Community Triad," underscored the role of RJPs in enhancing the overall educational ecosystem by reinforcing the bonds between teachers, students, and the broader community. Together, these themes and sub-themes provided a comprehensive understanding of how RJPs impacted both students with and without dis/Abilities, highlighting their positive effects on academic achievement, personal growth, inclusion, and community building within the school environment.

The third research question, "What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on themselves?" delved into teachers' perceptions of the impact of RJPs on themselves. Under the overarching theme, "RJ helps teachers with 'Understanding Who My Students Are,'" several sub-themes emerged. "Tailoring Strategies for Different Needs" emphasized the adaptability of RJPs to cater to diverse student needs. "Communication and Expression of Needs" highlighted the role of RJPs in fostering effective communication between teachers and students. "RJ as a Culturally Inclusive Practice" underscored the significance of RJPs in promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. "Empowering Through Individualization" focused on how RJPs empowered teachers to provide individualized support to students. Lastly, "Building Trust and Equity" emphasized the role of RJPs in building trust and promoting equity within the educational setting. Together, these themes and sub-themes provided a comprehensive understanding of how RJPs affected teachers, helping them better understand and support their students while fostering a more inclusive and equitable classroom environment.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) have been gaining prominence as a means to address equity issues within school systems, particularly focusing on racial equity in disciplinary actions. Yet, the exploration of RJPs in inclusive classrooms and special education settings has remained largely uncharted in existing literature. This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring the perceived impacts of RJPs in such settings, thereby providing valuable insights for educators, administrators, and stakeholders in education. Employing a basic interpretive and reflexive design, the research leaned on grounded theory to understand the experiences of teachers in RJPs' application and effects in inclusive educational environments.

The research underscored a critical examination of the surge in RJPs research, which had primarily spotlighted the reduction of suspensions and punitive measures in general education, against the backdrop of zero-tolerance policies contributing to educational inequities. It noted the scarcity of studies on RJPs' implications in special education, where issues of equity persisted, emphasizing the need for further research in this area. Through its focus, the study sought to elucidate the effects of RJPs on students with dis/Abilities, aiming to enhance educational equity and access. It investigated teachers' perceptions of RJPs in inclusive classrooms, exploring their understanding and descriptions of RJPs, the impacts on students with and without dis/Abilities, and the effects on teachers themselves, thereby aiming to inform and improve educational practices and outcomes.

Overview of Participants and Findings

The participants in the study spanned a wide range of grade levels and years of teaching experience. Most of the participants, with a total of seven, had experience teaching at the high school level (grades 9-12). Additionally, four participants had experience teaching across a wider range of grades, from elementary to high school (grades 1-12). The remaining two participants focused on the early education years, teaching from pre-kindergarten to grade 2. The years of teaching experience among the participants varied widely, ranging from a minimum of 3 years to a maximum of 19 years, illustrating a diverse group of educators in terms of both their instructional levels and their tenure in the teaching profession. All of the participants had experience teaching in inclusive settings with students with dis/Abilities in their classrooms.

The central inquiry of this study revolved around educators' perceptions regarding the impact of RJPs within inclusive classroom settings. In speaking with restorative teachers and analyzing their thoughts and words, five major themes emerged: RJ as a Transformative Mindset, Gamechanger for Academic Success, A Space to Be Who They [Students] Are, Connection, and Understanding Who My Students Are. Firstly, the theme "RJ Becomes a Transformative Mindset" suggested that RJPs fostered a significant shift in how educators approached teaching and discipline, promoting a more empathetic and understanding mindset. Secondly, "RJ is a Gamechanger for Academic Success" highlighted the positive effects of RJPs on students' academic achievement, suggesting that these practices contributed to a more conducive learning environment. The third theme, "RJ Gives Students 'A Space to Be Who They Are,'" emphasized the role of RJPs in creating a supportive and accepting classroom atmosphere that allowed students to express themselves freely and authentically. "RJ Builds Connection" pointed to the

enhancement of relationships within the classroom, including those between students and teachers, as well as among peers. Finally, "RJ Helps Teachers with 'Understanding Who My Students Are'" underscored the benefit of RJPs in helping teachers gain deeper insights into their students' lives and backgrounds, facilitating a more personalized and effective teaching approach. Together, these themes illustrated the multifaceted benefits of RJPs in promoting a more inclusive, supportive, and effective educational environment.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

In reflecting and analyzing these themes, the literature takes on a new light. The previous literature review outlined the importance of relationships to students' academic outcomes. The field of literature around this topic emphasized the institutionalization of white behavioral patterns and highlighted the need for awareness of the racially and dis/ability charged context in which teachers, administrators, and students interact (Annamma et al., 2013; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016). The results of this dissertation suggest that RJPs transform teachers' perceptions and understanding of who their students are and what they need, creating a safe space for students and teachers to grow which leads to improved outcomes in teaching and learning.

The relationship between teachers and students is crucial in fostering a learning environment where students feel supported and motivated. Hamre and Pianta (2001) highlight that positive teacher-student interactions are associated with better academic and social outcomes. Such relationships often lead to increased student engagement and a deeper understanding of the material. As well, the role of peers in a student's learning journey is significant. Wentzel and Watkins (2002) argue that peer relationships provide

a context for the development of academic skills like cooperation and emotional regulation. Positive peer interactions can enhance student's academic performance and social skills.

Relationships and their influence extend beyond the classroom, the involvement of parents in a student's academic life is another critical factor. Jeynes (2012) found a strong correlation between parental involvement and improved student academic achievement. This involvement ranges from help with homework to engagement in school activities. The overall school environment, including relationships with administrative staff and the school's culture, also impacts learning. Thapa and colleagues (2013) discussed how a positive school climate, characterized by respectful and supportive relationships, enhances student learning and well-being.

The literature also referenced the impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL programs that focus on building strong, healthy relationships can positively impact academic achievement. Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that SEL not only improves social-emotional skills but also positively influences academic performance. RJ can be considered a form of support for SEL since it builds emotional awareness and connections between participants. The cultural and community context in which a student learns also plays a role in shaping the relationships that influence learning. Gonzalez and colleague (2012) suggested that understanding and integrating the cultural and community assets students bring to school could enhance learning experiences.

The original conceptual framework of this work explored the context of Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) in the school environment and their potential effects in inclusive classrooms. The theoretical framework used a critical lens, acknowledging

the social structure of criminalized and biased school discipline (Ramey, 2015). Harsh discipline policies, intended to deter misbehavior, often exacerbate racial bias, erode trust in the education system, and lead to disengagement.

Drawing on social justice principles, RJ has been perceived as emphasizing fairness for the wider social good, repairing community relationships, and contextualizing individual forces within a critical lens (Winslade, 2018; Zehr, 2002; Zehr, 2002). Implicit bias is pervasive in the educational system, manifesting in systemic bias and colorblind discipline disparities. The literature suggests that RJ, with its focus on building connections and trust through strong relationships, could be instrumental in repairing racial equity and thusly, positively impacting academic achievement.

In summary, relationships in various forms - teacher-student, peer, parental, and communitywide - play a crucial role in shaping a student's learning experience. These relationships provide emotional, social, and academic support, fostering an environment conducive to learning and personal growth.

Given the focus of the themes on strong relationships, Figure 2 maps out a new conceptual framework for how the emerging themes interact around RJ to impact outcomes for students and teachers.

Figure 2

Revised Conceptual Framework: RJ Leads to Academic Changes and Improved Outcomes for Teachers and Students
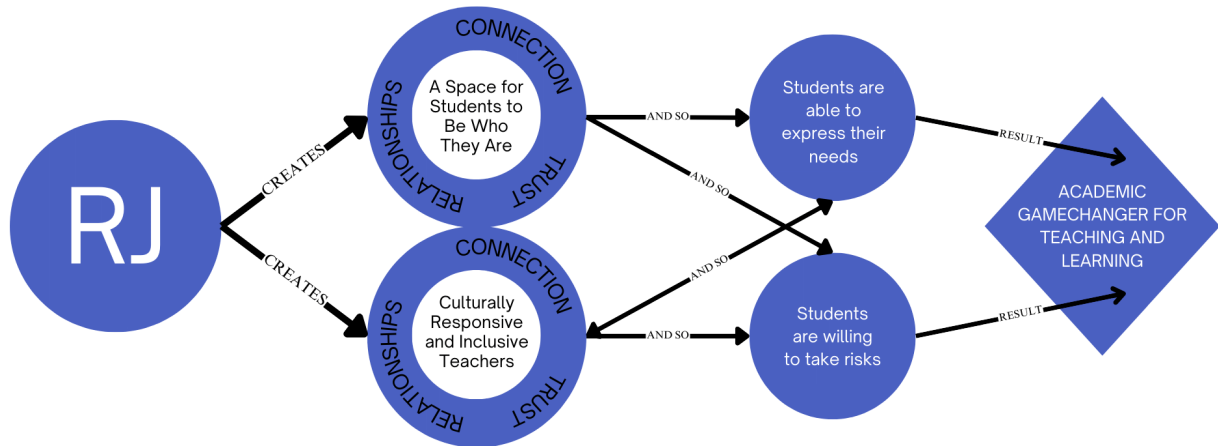
In the realm of teaching and learning, the application of RJ is linked to the cultivation of relationships, trust, and connections within the educational environment. RJ creates a secure space, often symbolized by a circle, where participants—both teachers and students—are encouraged to open up, thereby taking risks and showing vulnerability. This process is transformative; it not only shifts the dynamics of student engagement but also revolutionizes teaching methodologies. The effects of such a transformation could extend beyond the individual classroom if implemented as a school-wide model. In such a model, teachers, traditionally the custodians of classroom order, would experience a shift in their role. The success of this shift hinges on the administration's support, which should empower teachers to embrace risk and accept the possibility of failure as part of their instructional practice, paralleling the way RJ supports students. This evolution promotes a more responsive and potentially more effective form of teaching. Future research could explore this transition in greater depth, examining how a school-wide adoption of RJ principles might alter the educational landscape by involving various stakeholders and reshaping the responsibilities and risks associated with teaching.

<center>**Messages**</center>

Mapping out the interaction of the themes creates an understanding of the perceived influence of RJPs in inclusive classrooms. In contemporary educational discourse, the multifaceted relationship between safe spaces, risk-taking in academic settings, inclusion, culturally responsive teaching, and their collective impact on improved academic outcomes is significant. This points to multiple messages which are explored below.

Through the Cultivation of Relationships, Trust, and Connection, RJ Creates a Space for Students to Be Who They Are

Safe spaces within educational environments refer to physical or psychological settings where individuals, particularly students, feel comfortable expressing their ideas, perspectives, and identities without fear of judgment or discrimination. These spaces are essential for nurturing an environment that fosters risk-taking in academic contexts. When students feel safe, they are more likely to engage in intellectual exploration, take academic risks by challenging conventional wisdom, and venture into unfamiliar territories of knowledge. Such risk-taking is integral to the learning process as it encourages critical thinking, creativity, and the development of problem-solving skills. Consequently, safe spaces promote an inclusive educational culture by accommodating diverse voices and experiences, which in turn aligns with the principles of culturally responsive teaching.

Students Are Able to Express Their Needs

The concept of "safe spaces" in educational settings refers to environments where students feel secure, respected, and free to express their thoughts and needs without fear

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of judgment or repercussions. Safe spaces are crucial for emotional expression and well-being in the classroom. According to Grayson and colleague (2008), a positive school climate, akin to a safe space, significantly impacted students' emotional expression and well-being. In such environments, students feel comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns, which is essential for their emotional and academic development. Establishing a safe space in classrooms builds trust and facilitates open communication (Waggoner, 2018). This trust is foundational for students to express their needs, concerns, and aspirations.

Participants emphasized the significance of discerning and applying different restorative justice strategies to cater to varied needs in the classroom (Interview 1). This approach is crucial given the diverse demographics and abilities typically found in a classroom. One teacher described their classroom as a blend of different learning styles and needs, reflecting the general setup of their school (Interview 12).

The teachers' insights reveal a keen observation and response to individual students' needs. A specific approach for each student is vital, as one educator noted, where talking to each student in a manner that makes them feel comfortable, safe, and protected is part of achieving educational equity. This individualization aims to meet a high standard of learning for all students, despite their diverse needs (Interview 7).

Another teacher highlighted the effectiveness of multi-tiered scaffolds, particularly for students with dis/Abilities. This approach moves beyond a binary understanding of needs, recognizing the varying levels of support different students require, from sentence stems to more advanced assistance (Interview 4).

Further emphasizing the importance of a restorative approach, one educator noted the unique challenges faced by students with dis/Abilities. While some thrive in non-restorative environments, others may feel fearful or shut down, underscoring the need for a sensitive and adaptable educational approach (Interview 6).

A specific case of a student struggling to articulate thoughts in English illustrated the transformative impact of tailored restorative practices. Through consistent engagement and supportive activities, the student gradually increased participation, demonstrating the potential of these practices to significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Interview 12).

In summary, the teachers' words illustrate the critical role of understanding and addressing the diverse learning needs and styles in a classroom. The educators' experiences and observations highlight the effectiveness of restorative justice practices, which, when applied adaptively and sensitively, foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment that cater to the unique needs of each student.

Students Are Willing to Take Risks

In their book "We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools" (2006), Howard suggested that safe spaces allow for vulnerability, which is essential for learning. When students feel safe, they are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and engage in critical thinking, all of which are vital for effective learning.

The findings reveal that RJ contributes to a transformative educational experience by bolstering student engagement, confidence, and ultimately, academic success. A foundational element in this transformation is the establishment of trust within the classroom. Educators recognize the importance of building relationships based on trust,

where students feel cared for, understood, and valued for their unique attributes and challenges. Such relationships encourage students to engage more actively and confidently in their learning processes, also facilitating better communication of their needs (Interview 5).

Moreover, RJ practices are credited with empowering students to express themselves authentically. This empowerment leads to heightened self-confidence, positively impacting their behavior in other classes, at home, and in extracurricular activities. It was observed that when students gain confidence, whether academically or socially, it has a ripple effect across various aspects of their lives (Interview 8).

The transformative power of RJ also lies in its ability to create a safe and supportive classroom environment. An educator emphasized the necessity of feeling connected and safe in a learning space for effective information retention and willingness to explore new concepts. This safe environment is pivotal for students to take academic risks and engage deeply with the learning material (Interview 9).

Further, the sense of safety fostered by RJ practices encourages students to take risks in their learning journey, thereby building academic resilience. A teacher linked this willingness to take risks to the safe atmosphere created by RJ, where students feel comfortable attempting new tasks and are supported by their peers and teachers when they encounter difficulties. This supportive environment enhances classroom morale and encourages a collaborative approach to learning (Interview 13).

From a broader perspective, RJ practices increase student engagement, particularly notable among students with dis/Abilities. This increased engagement, equating to more learning time, is attributed to students feeling valued and secure in their

learning environment. Disciplinary measures that exclude students from the classroom
are discouraged, advocating for keeping students engaged in school to maximize their
learning opportunities (Interview 2).

In summary, my findings present a compelling narrative on the role of RJ in
enhancing academic outcomes. It does so by fostering trust, empowering self-expression,
creating a supportive learning environment, and encouraging academic risk-taking. This
approach not only nurtures academic excellence but also significantly boosts student
engagement and confidence, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, dynamic, and
effective educational experience.

**Through the Cultivation of Relationships, Trust, and Connections, RJ Creates
Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Teachers**

Culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogical approach that acknowledges and
incorporates students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, plays a pivotal role in
creating safe spaces and fostering inclusion. Educators highlighted the importance of
recognizing and respecting the diverse backgrounds of students, especially in dual
immersion settings. Restorative practices were seen as crucial in creating a safe space for
students to express their feelings. One teacher emphasized the importance of engaging in
anti-racist actions and language, particularly in supporting Black students in a dual
language school (Interview 4). This approach involves adapting teaching methods to be
more inclusive and understanding of the students' linguistic challenges.

The teachers underscored the significance of dedicating time to relationship
building that transcends language and cultural barriers. One teacher described using
calming corners, classroom jobs, and one-on-one interactions to build trust and

understanding with ESL and special education students, which are aligned with restorative justice practices (Interview 3).

The inclusive approach was noted to positively influence academic performance. In one instance, a teacher described how a mentoring block, which focused on relationship building and was followed by an English class, led to significant academic growth among students, including language learners. This approach also provided support in the face of external challenges like community violence, helping students cope with personal traumas (Interview 8).

A restorative classroom environment extends to relationships with students' parents, especially those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. One teacher shared her efforts to improve communication with non-English-speaking parents, such as learning Spanish and using interpreters, to ensure they are included and informed. This approach was part of her broader strategy to create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment (Interview 10).

By recognizing and valuing the cultural identities and experiences of students, educators can establish an inclusive learning environment that not only respects diversity but also celebrates it. Arao and colleague (2013) argued that safe spaces in the classroom encouraged students to be authentic and appreciate diversity. This framework allows for a range of perspectives and experiences to be shared, fostering a deeper understanding and respect for diverse viewpoints. In such classrooms, students are more likely to take intellectual risks, as they perceive their experiences as valid and valued. Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching enhances the effectiveness of instruction, making it more relatable and engaging for students from various cultural backgrounds. Research by

Steele and colleague (1995) indicated that safe spaces were particularly important for marginalized and minority students. These spaces help in mitigating the negative effects of stereotype threats, allowing students from diverse backgrounds to express themselves and participate fully in the learning process.

In summary, the responses of the teachers illustrate how RJ principles, when applied in educational settings, can effectively address the complexities of racial and cultural diversity, especially in dual immersion contexts. It highlights the importance of anti-racist practices, relationship-building across language barriers, the positive impact on academic performance, and the need for inclusive communication with families. These practices not only enhance the classroom experience but also provide vital support for students facing external challenges. Culturally responsive teaching and restorative justice in education are interconnected in their focus on understanding and respecting cultural diversity, building relationships, addressing issues holistically, promoting equity and social justice, and empowering student voice and agency. These approaches complement each other in creating an inclusive, respectful, and just educational environment.

RJ Has the Potential To Be an Academic Gamechanger

Teachers observed that RJ practices positively influence student performance in the classroom. One teacher noted that RJ enables students to be their authentic selves, which in turn improves their academic performance, including better grades and test scores (Interview 1). This is attributed to the increased understanding between students and teachers regarding learning styles and success strategies.

Several teachers reported that RJ practices have made them better educators. One teacher shared that RJ practices fostered a caring community within the classroom, which

improved her enjoyment and effectiveness in teaching. This improvement was also linked to higher test scores and better student engagement (Interview 6).

RJ was highlighted as a tool for reflective teaching. One teacher described how RJ encourages educators to prioritize connection before content, leading to more effective engagement with students and the material (Interview 9). This reflective approach allows for continuous improvement in teaching methods.

RJ practices, such as using circles and talking pieces, were cited as effective in fostering open dialogue and self-expression in the classroom. This approach encourages students to share their thoughts and delve deeper into the course material, enhancing the overall learning experience (Interview 3).

Teachers emphasized the importance of building relationships and trust with students. One educator shared an experience of how developing a relationship with a student led to significant improvements in the student's engagement and English language practice (Interview 5). Such relationships are seen as key to academic success.

There is a strong connection between the culture of the classroom and academic achievement. When classroom relationships are characterized by respect, empathy, and inclusion, academic achievements naturally follow. One teacher observed positive changes in students' writing which she attributed to strong relationships among students, teachers, and families (Interview 8).

In summary, this research highlights that RJ practices in education not only improve the classroom environment and student-teacher relationships but also significantly enhance academic performance and teaching quality. The teachers'

testimonies demonstrate the holistic impact of RJ on both social and academic dimensions of learning.

Ultimately, this combination of safe spaces, risk-taking, inclusion, and culturally responsive teaching contributes to improved teaching and learning outcomes in the classroom, as students are more likely to be actively engaged, motivated, and successful in their academic pursuits.

Recommendations for Future Practice

In exploring the impact of Restorative Justice (RJ) in classrooms, it becomes necessary to consider comprehensive strategies across various facets of the educational ecosystem. My recommendations for future practice encompass policy formulation, administrative leadership, teacher engagement, student involvement, the role of RJ practitioners, and the structuring of teacher preparation programs.

Policy

Integrating restorative justice (RJ) principles into educational policies at both national and regional levels is crucial for fostering a comprehensive understanding and implementation of RJ practices in schools (Sliva et al., 2020). To achieve this, it is essential that RJ training becomes mandatory for all educators, ensuring they are well-equipped to apply these principles in their teaching and disciplinary methods. Moreover, embedding RJ practices within the curriculum standards guarantees that these approaches are not merely add-ons but are integral to the educational framework (Kim et al., 2023). This systemic integration facilitates a consistent and widespread adoption of RJ methodologies across educational institutions.

To support the effective implementation and sustainability of RJ programs, dedicated funding and resources must be allocated specifically for these initiatives (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Such financial backing should cover all aspects of RJ programs, including training for educators, necessary materials, and ongoing support for the programs' operation. Furthermore, it is imperative that policies include mechanisms for the continuous evaluation and adaptation of RJ programs (Gregory & Evans, 2020). This ensures they remain relevant and effective in addressing the evolving needs of the educational community and its demographics, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of RJ practices in education.

Administrators

In the implementation of restorative justice (RJ) in schools, effective school administrators play a crucial role (Weaver & Swank, 2020). They should serve as exemplary role models by embracing RJ principles, fostering an inclusive school culture, and providing unwavering support for RJ initiatives. This leadership role includes advocating for continuous professional development opportunities centered around RJ for both school leaders and teachers. Moreover, administrators must actively engage with the wider community, including parents and local organizations, to establish a supportive and collaborative environment conducive to the successful implementation of RJ practices (Farr et al., 2020).

Teachers

For teachers, comprehensive RJ training focusing on practical techniques and cultural competency is crucial. Teachers should be encouraged and supported by administrators to incorporate RJ practices into everyday classroom management,

transitioning away from punitive approaches (Fishback, 2022). Furthermore, the creation

of support networks for teachers practicing RJ is essential, allowing for the sharing of

experiences and collaborative problem-solving. These actions and opportunities should

be created by the Local Educational Agency (LEA) in conjunction with the school

administrators (Farr et al., 2020).

Teachers must be equipped with an array of pedagogical strategies and skills that

are accessible to a diverse student body, a point that should be emphasized in the training

for teachers, highlighted in the "Teacher Preparation Programs" section below. Such

training must go beyond subject expertise to include the ability to tailor educational

experiences to varied learning needs. This necessitates a deep understanding of how to

foster meaningful relationships with students, an element that research consistently links

to enhanced learning outcomes (Acosta et al., 2019; Agustine et al., 2019; Fishback,

2022). Alongside these relational skills, the capacity for reflective practice is vital as

well, allowing educators to critically evaluate and adjust their teaching methods. By

integrating these components—adaptive teaching strategies, relationship-building, and

reflective practice—teachers can ensure that their approach to education is inclusive,

effective, and continuously evolving in response to their students' needs.

Students

Student involvement in RJ practices is vital. I recommend active student

participation in RJ processes, such as peer mediation programs and student-led circles, to

foster a sense of ownership and responsibility (Marcucci, 2021). These initiatives should

be spearheaded by trained restorative practitioners, either contracted by the school, LEA,

or teacher leaders , but include student voices and leaders (Norris, 2022). The curriculum

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should also educate students about RJ principles, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring RJ practices are inclusive and sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of students.

RJ Practitioners

For RJ practitioners, rigorous training and certification programs are recommended to ensure high standards of practice (Lodi et al., 2021). The training programs should have affiliations with other restorative networks or groups to ensure professional practice standards. These practitioners should work closely with school staff, offering guidance and support in implementing RJ strategies (Pomar & Pinya, 2020). Developing community-based approaches that extend beyond the school, involving families and community members in the RJ process, is also crucial.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher education programs should include comprehensive RJ training in their curriculum (Gray, 2021; Lodi et al., 2021). The decision makers, whether they be a Dean, Associate Dean, or Department Chair, should encourage their teacher preparation program affiliates to include information and training opportunities to pre-service and continuing education teachers around RJPs. Partnerships between teacher education programs and schools practicing RJ can offer practical, real-world training experiences for pre-service teachers. Additionally, these programs should engage in ongoing research on the effectiveness of RJ in education, fostering continuous improvement and innovation.

In summary, RJ is not a cure-all, but it should be included as a tool available to education stakeholders to use to increase equity for students. Individual actors in diverse

education-related professional positions - policy, administrators, teachers, students, RJ practitioners, and teacher preparation programs - play a pivotal role in the effective implementation and sustainability of RJ practices in educational settings. These recommendations aim to create a cohesive and comprehensive approach to integrating RJ in schools, benefiting not just the students but the entire educational community. This approach not only addresses immediate educational needs but also sets a foundation for a more empathetic and restorative future in education.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the intersection of restorative justice and academic outcomes is essential to deepen our understanding of how restorative practices in educational settings influence student learning and achievement. This could be approached from multiple angles.

Longitudinal Studies

I recommend that researchers conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term effects of restorative justice practices on academic outcomes. This approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustainability and evolution of these outcomes over time, as suggested by Fronius et al. (2016).

Focus on Specific Academic Outcomes

Future research should focus on specific academic outcomes such as literacy rates, math proficiency, graduation rates, and college readiness. This specificity can help in understanding the direct impact of restorative practices on particular areas of learning. Currently, there is very little research in this area.

Examining Equity and Inclusion

Researchers could investigate how restorative justice practices impact educational equity and inclusion, particularly for marginalized student groups. Research should explore if and how restorative justice contributes to closing achievement gaps, as discussed by Skiba et al. (2014) in "More Than a Metaphor: The Contribution of Exclusionary Discipline to a School-to-Prison Pipeline." Specifically, I recommend that researchers prioritize RJ's impact on outcomes for students with dis/abilities as there is still a lack of literature around this topic that goes beyond a focus on discipline (Kervick et al., 2019).

Interdisciplinary Approaches

I recommend that researchers continue to employ interdisciplinary research methods (Huguley et al., 2020; Molloy et al., 2023; Sawin et al., 2023), integrating insights from education, psychology, sociology, and criminology, to understand the multifaceted impacts of restorative justice on academic outcomes. I, again, recommend that the interdisciplinary research focus the intersection of dis/Ability, race, and culture in its approach.

True advocates of restorative practices grapple with the idea of imposing these methods, as those deeply engaged in the work are often too invested in their students to dedicate time to broader dissemination. Therefore, embedding restorative justice in teacher preparation programs and linking new teachers with mentors could be an effective way to get RJ into teachers toolkits and into classrooms. Collaborations between academia for research and teacher training can help propagate these practices. Mandating restorative justice in teacher training is feasible, yet extending it beyond that scope seems unlikely. Skepticism about restorative practices often stems from a lack of witnessed

effectiveness, suggesting a need for research and educational collaborations to address this gap.

Furthermore, this work has revealed that teachers' understanding of their own and their students' diverse needs deepens through restorative practices, which also aids in acknowledging that 'different' does not equate to 'less'. Building trust is pivotal, as restorative justice fosters relationships and safe spaces for authenticity. This is especially beneficial for students with dis/Abilities, who often feel marginalized. Trust can embolden them to take risks and explore new directions in their learning. Additionally, the interviews conducted at the tail end of COVID-19 highlight how restorative practices equipped teachers with tools to foster engagement and expression in an online setting, indicating its adaptability and relevance in various educational contexts.

In conclusion, future research should aim to provide a more detailed, contextual, and longitudinal understanding of how restorative justice practices in schools affect various aspects of academic achievement and student development. This research is crucial for informing educators, policymakers, and stakeholders about the most effective strategies for implementing restorative practices in educational settings.

Limitations of the Study

A basic interpretive design study that utilizes interviews and thematic coding to gather and analyze data presents several limitations that can impact the validity and generalizability of the research findings. One primary limitation is the potential for researcher bias, which can influence both the data collection and analysis processes (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Since interpretive research relies heavily on the researcher's perspectives to frame the study, design the interview questions, and interpret responses,

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there is a risk that the researcher's preconceptions and subjective interpretations may skew the data analysis, leading to findings that reflect the researcher's biases rather than the participants' actual experiences (Lamont & Thevenot, 2000). While I took this into consideration by including reflexive memo-ing and multiple sources (professional development and community of practice sessions), it cannot go without mentioning.

Furthermore, the process of thematic coding in an interpretive design study, while useful for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, is inherently subjective and can vary significantly depending on the researcher's skill, experience, and interpretive lens (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This subjectivity can lead to inconsistencies in data interpretation and coding, potentially affecting the reliability and replicability of the study. Often, a limitation of interpretive research is the study's generalizability; because interpretive research typically involves a smaller, more specific sample population, the findings may not be applicable or transferable to broader contexts or different educational settings (Carminati, 2018). In this particular field of inquiry, RJPs, the rigor and trustworthiness of the study stands. However, the study is limited by the selection of the participants and the participants that I was able to include. The participants were selected by an organization that works in local schools to implement RJ and so their philosophy of RJ would be highlighted and emphasized in this work.

Call to Action

Join me in transforming the future of education through restorative justice! I call upon policymakers, educational administrators, teachers, students, RJ practitioners, and teacher preparation programs to unite in the mission of fully integrating RJ practices into our schools. Your involvement is critical in shaping a sustainable and effective

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implementation of RJ, ensuring that our educational environments are inclusive, culturally responsive, and restorative.

Specifically, I believe that teacher preparation programs have the opportunity to make an impact by adding RJ to the toolkit for teachers. Every teacher should be aware of RJPs and their potential impact on student outcomes, as well as the inequities in discipline and practices for students of color with dis/Abilities.

By embracing RJ principles, we can address the immediate needs of our students and lay the groundwork for a future where every member of the educational community thrives. This is your opportunity to contribute to a movement that values every voice, fosters deep understanding, and cultivates a culture of care and respect. Whether you're influencing policy, educating the next generation, or supporting the infrastructure of RJ programs, your role is pivotal.

Let us commit to making restorative justice a cornerstone of education. Together, we can build a more inclusive and understanding world, starting with our schools. Take action today—advocate for RJ integration, support training programs, and embody restorative practices. Your contribution will pave the way for a transformative and restorative educational landscape.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you so much for your interest in this study. Is it okay with you if I record

this? *(Allow time for response.)* How are you doing? *(Allow time for informal*

conversation.)

Before we get started, I wanted to give you a little more information about myself. I'm a

student at George Washington University, working on a degree in special education.

Before I went back to school at George Washington, I was a teacher in New York,

Connecticut, Mexico and Rhode Island. I'd like to learn more about your experiences

with restorative justice and especially for students with dis/Abilities. I'm so happy to be

talking to you! Do you have any questions about my background or why I'm doing this

study? *(Allow time for questions and discussion.)*

I will also transcribe our interview – so it will be written down word for word. If you like,

I can give you a copy so that you can read it and let me know if there is anything else that

you would like to add.

When I write up this work, I might use examples from your interview but I will be using

pseudonyms so that you cannot be identified. Do you have any questions about what I'll

be doing with this interview? *(Allow time for questions and discussion.)*

Of course, you are welcome to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

Are you still interested in participating? *(Allow time for response.)*

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Research Questions	**What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs in inclusive classrooms?**
Sub Questions	Interview Questions
Participant Background	1. **Tell me a little bit about your teaching background; when did you start teaching?** 2. **Tell me about your classes this year; how many students in your classes have dis/Abilities?**
How do teachers define Restorative Justice Practices?	1. **What does restorative justice mean to you?** 2. **Tell me an example or a story about using Restorative Justice in your classroom? What was it like? What made it "restorative?"**
How do teachers understand and describe the practices around RJPs in their school?	1. **How does your school implement RJPs?** 2. **Who uses RJPs in your school?** 3. **Tell me about how prepared you feel about using RJPs in your class: how prepared do you feel you are? What factors influence your preparedness?** 4. **What does Restorative Justice look like in your school? In your classroom? Tell me an example of each.** 5. **Describe your classroom climate before and after implementing RJPs.**
What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on students with and without dis/Abilities?	1. **What are the benefits of RJPs for students? For students with a dis/ability?** 2. **Describe an example of a student benefiting from RJPs. And the opposite?** 3. **How have you seen RJPs effect students' academic performance? (positively or negatively)** 4. **Imagine your classroom without RJPs. How would it be different? And for students with dis/Abilities?**
What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of RJPs on teachers?	1. **How have RJPs impacted your understanding of your students' abilities? Dis/Abilities?** 2. **How has RJ affected you as a teacher?** 3. **Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experience using RJPs? Especially as it relates to students with dis/Abilities?**