

The Effects of Using Restorative Practices on Office Discipline Referrals

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of using restorative practices on discipline referrals. Middle school, like many other schools around the world has had a rising problem of disrespect, violence, and bullying among the students. To try and alleviate this growing problem, the administration of a public middle school in Baltimore County decided to use the intervention of restorative practices in addition to the already in place PBIS (Positive Based Intervention System). The main data source for determining discipline decisions in middle schools are office referrals. Research has shown that office discipline referrals are a valid source for determining a school's behavior system. The sampling was the entire middle school population of 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders of a public middle school in Baltimore County. This was a non-random convenience sampling. The results of the study show that the office referrals increased from quarter one to quarter three. There was a significant difference in the results between the quarters. The results did reject the hypothesis that there would be no difference. While there was a significant difference, that difference suggested that restorative practices did not influence office referrals.

# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Middle school, like many other schools around the world has a rising problem of disrespect, violence, and bullying among the students. Students have disrespect towards the teachers and each other, they prefer to handle conflicts with violence and most of the students experience some sort of bullying (Mirsky, 2007). To try and alleviate this growing problem, the administration of a public middle school in Baltimore County decided to use the intervention of restorative practices in addition to the already in place PBIS (Positive Based Intervention System). According to PBIS, there are three tiers of intervention and behavior support methods applied to the students. Tier I is where strategies are universal for all students, Tier II is where there are strategies targeted for some students, and Tier III is where strategies are implemented for a very select few students (Bornstein, 2015). The high occurrences of disrespect, violence, and bullying in this school had pervaded outside of the top tier III students and had begun to affect the tier II students. The overall morale and success of the students and staff had also been affected greatly because of this growing problem. As a teacher of almost 300 of these 719 middle school students, it became clear to the researcher that a resolution was necessary.

The high occurrences of these behaviors led to high referral numbers. Since research shows that referrals are a valid source for determining a school's behavior system and can predict future trends or identify at risk students analyzing referrals seemed the best measurement to evaluate the effectiveness of restorative practices (Irvin, Horner, Ingram, Todd, Sugai, Sampson, & Boland, 2006).

### **Statement of Problem**

This study investigated the effect of using restorative practices on office discipline referrals.

### **Hypothesis**

The use of restorative practices will have no impact on discipline referrals.

### **Operational Definitions**

The independent variable was restorative practices. It was implemented through community meetings, restorative mediations, virtue PowerPoints, morning announcement videos, and “Virtue Gotcha” slips. The community meetings occurred on a daily schedule for an average of 15 minutes in length. Monday, their meeting time was period 1, Tuesday, period 2, Wednesday, period 3, Thursday, period 4, and Friday was as needed. There were PowerPoints that were sent out to the staff that included slides for each day with guidance for implementation. On Monday, the students were to discuss the definition of the virtue word, Tuesday, why having the virtue is important, Wednesday, how can you live that virtue, and Thursday, was to discuss any other aspect of that virtue. On Fridays for the third quarter, there was a video shown on the morning announcements that highlighted the names of all the students who were caught living the virtues for the week. These meetings would consist of various topics where students have opportunities to build relationships and learn how to interact positively with other students and adults. The restorative mediations occurred with guidance counselors, administrators, students, and parents, when a conflict needs to be resolved.

The dependent variable was office discipline referrals. The office discipline referrals were collected and analyzed by amount from quarter one and quarter three of school year 2017-2018.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The main data source for determining discipline decisions in middle schools are office referrals. Research has shown that office discipline referrals are a valid source for determining a school's behavior system (Irvin et al., 2006). The referrals reveal the overall status of student behaviors and how teachers and other school officials are managing those behaviors. There are many factors as to why middle school students struggle with behaviors, but the ways to discipline these behaviors are ever changing. There are not enough conclusions regarding the effectiveness of all the various discipline interventions. One such intervention is restorative practices, where the strategies are still so new that more research is needed to determine effectiveness.

#### **Background on Middle School Discipline**

Office discipline referrals are strong predictors for future discipline throughout the school year. Research has shown through a study that the number of referrals received in the months of September, October, and November were a significant predictor for the amount and types of referrals received by the end of the year. Referrals are given for behaviors such as defiance, disruption, violence, bullying, harassment, weapons, drugs, tardiness, and truancy (Predy, McIntosh, Frank, & Fritchcock, 2014). Referrals can also be an identifying measure for at risk students who need more behavioral support. One study states that early patterns of referrals in Grade 6 for chronic students with problem behaviors depict a correlation for later behavior and school adjustment.

The need for effective interventions in reducing middle school office discipline referrals is evident in the factors impacting youth and the current discipline intervention practices. These

factors are breakdowns in home life, violence, social media, societal and peer pressures etc. The factors impacting youth have become an overwhelming problem and the solution seems difficult to find. The current leading reasons for discipline office referrals with middle school students are a lack of respect for themselves, others, and authority, and the rise of bullying (Mirsky, 2007).

Respect for self, others, and authority is quickly becoming a fading quality in American society, especially in American schools. Students have not gained the connectedness to others or found the sense of community whether at home or in the world around them. In addition to this, schools have become more institutionalized in recent years, further increasing the divide between educators and their students and families. This breakdown in the student/teacher relationship, in addition to the students' loss of identity in their own societies and communities, has resulted in increased dropout rates and disciplinary action against students (Mirsky, 2007).

A large amount of discipline and office discipline referrals are products of bullying whether that be physical, emotional, or verbal (Matthew & Lacoe, 2017). Research has shown that school bullying has been largely influenced by the socio-demographics and ecosystem of the student's life. The study of bullying and peer victimization in Chinese students found that those who were subjected to an ecosystem with low parent involvement, low socio-economics, poor socio-demographics, or less supportive environment were generally more "arrogant" or "unreasonable" towards others through physical actions or verbal aggression. The conclusions of the study were that more research is needed to further develop the answers to solving the socio-ecological issues causing students to develop bullying tendencies (Huang, Jun, & Dorothy, 2013).

## **Needs of the Middle School Student**

To fully understand and determine the most effective discipline interventions for middle schools to be using, there must be understanding of the expectations of the school. There are two questions that arise on the role of the school. What expectations do teachers have for behavior management and are these expectations clear and appropriate for inclusivity and what types of students are more at risk for chronic discipline referrals? Are those students receiving the necessary interventions? Suspensions have been shown to have a negative impact on academic achievement and that must be taken into consideration when teachers and school officials are making decisions out of control or because it is the best thing for the student and will help the student achieve positive changes (Evans & Lester, 2010). Teachers and school officials have a monumental responsibility to provide every student with the ability to learn and succeed in a positive learning environment. The intervention for discipline that is used in a school can dramatically impact the outcomes for students (Lane, Pierson, Stang, & Carter, 2010).

## **Approaches to Discipline**

The current practices in discipline intervention throughout history has shown the pattern of zero tolerance and authoritarian to incentive-based programs like Positive Based Intervention System (PBIS) to now Restorative Practices. There is not enough conclusive confirmation regarding which intervention is most effective. Zero tolerance and authoritarian styles of discipline typically result in an overabundance of suspensions. Research shows that the discipline philosophy of improving students' behavior has shifted to punishing students for offenses that used to be dealt with informally, therefore, creating an atmosphere and mentality that school leaders are in control (Black, 2016). Research has also shown that there are

sometimes areas of discrepancies in a control discipline mentality as evidenced through a study of urban students of color in middle schools. The study showed that the discrepancies were mainly found in exclusionary discipline which is suspensions and expulsions. The students of color were given these types of discipline more often compared to their White student counterparts. The conclusions of the study showed that persistently disciplined students would benefit from a type of discipline intervention that focused on aspects of improving empathy, care, positive relationships, less control in discipline, and a larger focus on culturally relevant and applicable curriculum for the students (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). This study raises the question how effective can zero tolerance and authoritarian methods be with such a high level of control and opportunity for discrepancies and bias?

The next series of interventions in discipline have been incentive-based programs like PBIS. The main purpose of a system like PBIS is to reward and acknowledge certain positive behaviors when observed, therefore, allowing for the school culture to become more positive. This overall plan focuses on the 80% called Tier I. Tier II students are those who need more intensive discipline interventions. Studies analyzing the effectiveness of Tier I and Tier II interventions show that there are breakdowns in implementation and consistency of PBIS in middle school (Hoyle, Marshall, & Yell, 2011). One specific study focused on the problems with PBIS developing good students who are defined as orderly and compliant to the codes of conduct versus students who require more interventions or are deemed as non-compliant. The goal that most leaders were found to be achieving was moving students to become more self-disciplined and intrinsically motivated. The study showed that consistency among leaders and further research is needed to be fully conclusive regarding the effectiveness of PBIS. However, PBIS

leans more to a positivist mentality of inclusion, but it is a step in the right direction compared to a discipline intervention based on control, inequality, and bias (Bornstein, 2015).

### **Restorative Practices**

Restorative practices are an intervention that focuses on building up student motivation, empathy, and community through a positive approach on discipline. The foundational purpose is to teach people how to build relationships, resolve conflict, build a sense of community, and teach people to understand their emotions and the emotions of others increasing empathy (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Research has shown that exposing students to a restorative and positive environment has significant improvements on attitudes and behaviors in all types of students regardless of age, gender, race, or past issues (Mirsky, 2007). Building relationships is the key to create mutual respect, open communication, and a balanced structure throughout a school (Black, 2016).

Restorative practices can help students achieve positive changes in behavior and attitude. Students have developed a shift from accepting responsibility to placing blame on others or their situation around them (Mirsky, 2007). Consistency is a crucial element in promoting positive change and improvement in discipline data (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013). Restorative practices are not a discipline replacement, but an addition to an existing discipline structure. The skills learned through an intervention like restorative practices helps students and staff move past that authoritarian mentality of discipline and begin to understand and empathize with other people, creating a more positive, nurturing community. Middle school students, especially, need more support in character skills, conflict resolution, self-confidence, empathy, and relationships (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

There are many benefits of restorative practices, but there are also studies that show there was little impact on behavior when the students were placed back into the school setting (Standing, Fearon, & Dee, 2012). The research that has been conducted thus far regarding the impact of restorative practices reducing the number of office discipline referrals are inconclusive. There are very few studies that research restorative practices and the causal connections to reducing office discipline referrals. Due to the lack of empirical evidence on this matter, the need for further research is necessary to make any implications about the effectiveness of restorative practices with middle school students.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

This study investigated the effect of restorative practices on office discipline referrals in middle school students. The study was a pre-experimental, pre-test, post-test design. The independent variables were community circles and restorative meetings. The dependent variable was office discipline referrals. The independent variables were operationally defined as implementing community meetings through every class period for an average of 15 minutes in length. These meetings would consist of various topics where students have opportunities to build relationships and learn how to interact positively with other students and adults. The other independent variable was restorative meetings defined by meetings that occur with guidance counselors, administrators, students, and parents when a conflict needs to be resolved. The operational definition of the dependent variable collection and analysis of the office discipline referral data from quarter one and quarter three of school year 2017-2018.

The community meeting schedule was established so that all students could build relationships and community in every class setting. On Monday, their meeting time was period 1, Tuesday, period 2, Wednesday, period 3, Thursday, period 4, and Friday was as needed. The PowerPoints that were sent out to the staff had slides for each day. On Monday, the students were to discuss the definition of the virtue word, Tuesday, why having the virtue is important, Wednesday, how can you live that virtue, and Thursday, was to discuss any other aspect of that virtue. On Fridays for the third quarter, there was a video shown on the morning announcements that highlighted the names of all the students who were caught living the virtues for that week. The students and staff each week were given the opportunity to fill out a “Virtue Gotcha” slip

and place it into the collection boxes. Then every Friday those slips were collected and put into a video highlight reel acknowledging all the students and staff who were caught living the virtues.

### **Participants**

The study was conducted with the entire student body of a public middle school in Baltimore County. This school is a 4-8<sup>th</sup> grade school, but for this study only the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders were analyzed. The total population of 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> graders was 719 total students enrolled. There were 251 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, 237 7<sup>th</sup> grade students, and 231 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. The total population was 8 American Indian students, 1%, 21 Asian, 2%, 85 Black, 12%, 1 Pacific Islander, 385 White, 54%, 46 Multicultural 6%, and 173 Hispanic students, which make up 24% of the student population. The 343 female students accounted for 48% of the student population, and the 376 male students accounted for the other 52% of the population. The students were chosen as a non-random convenience sampling to assess the entire population of the middle school more accurately.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in this study was a chart to compare the office discipline referral numbers at the end of quarter one and the office discipline referral numbers at the end of quarter three.

### **Procedure**

Then restorative practices was introduced and implemented officially in the third quarter using virtue language during community meetings. For the third quarter, each week a PowerPoint was created and emailed to all staff members to use as topics for their community meetings. Each day, according to the community meeting schedule, had a different aspect

connected to the virtue of the week that the students were to discuss in their community meeting. The community meeting schedule was established so that all students could build relationships and community in every class setting. On Monday, their meeting time was period 1, Tuesday, period 2, Wednesday, period 3, Thursday, period 4, and Friday was as needed. The PowerPoints that were sent out to the staff had slides for each day. On Monday, the students were to discuss the definition of the virtue word, Tuesday, why having the virtue is important, Wednesday, how can you live that virtue, and Thursday, was to discuss any other aspect of that virtue. On Fridays for the third quarter, there was a video shown on the morning announcements that highlighted the names of all the students who were caught living the virtues for that week. The students and staff each week were given the opportunity to fill out a “Virtue Gotcha” slip and place it into the collection boxes. Then every Friday those slips were collected and put into a video highlight reel acknowledging all the students and staff who were caught living the virtues.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of using restorative practices on discipline referrals. Discipline referrals were counted and analyzed according to their occurrence in quarter one versus quarter three.

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviations for the office referrals for grades 6 through 8. A dependent t-test was used to determine if any significant differences existed between the number of office referrals during quarter one as compared to quarter three. Results showed a significant difference; more office referrals occurred during quarter three than during quarter one [ $t(2) = -8.674, p < .05$ ]. These results and their implications will be discussed in the next chapter.

*Table 1 - t-test for discipline referrals*

Office Referrals	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Quarter One Referrals	44.00 (16.70)
Quarter Three Referrals	267.00 (58.50)

The hypothesis that restorative practices will have no impact on the discipline referrals was rejected by the results.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Results**

The results of the study show that the office referrals did not decrease from quarter one to quarter three. There was a significant difference in the results between the quarters. The results did reject the hypothesis that there would be no difference. While there was a significant difference, that difference suggested that restorative practices did not influence office referrals.

### **Implications**

There is no accurate conclusion that restorative practices had any impact on the discipline referrals. The referrals increased dramatically from quarter one to quarter three, however, that is a normal occurrence during a school year. A more accurate representation for the results would have been to use quarter three from the previous year compared to quarter three of the current year. Unfortunately, that was not available. The results defy the research that restorative practices can improve behaviors and attitudes in students (Mirsky, 2007). It is difficult to make any implications regarding the effectiveness of the restorative practices since the hypothesis was rejected.

### **Threats to Validity**

There were many interactive threats to the validity of this study. The threats to validity of this study were the sample size, non-random sampling, implementation fidelity of the teachers, and data availability. There was also the threat of statistical regression due to the high number of referrals this sampling already produces. The sample size was based upon convenience sampling, which was non-random and may have impacted the results. A non-random sampling does not allow for an accurate representation for a generalization for the study results. The researcher was

confined to a non-random sampling because of convenience. The implementation fidelity of the teachers was one of the largest threats to the validity of this study. The classroom teachers range from non-tenured to veteran with various levels of effective implementation skills. In addition to their levels of experience in implementation, the fidelity was challenged by lack of consistency, resistors to the restorative practices process, behavior management effectiveness, and time spent having the community meetings. The most important threat to the validity of this study was the data availability. Due to the lack of data availability from the previous year's quarter three referrals, the researcher was only able to use the current year's quarter one discipline referrals compared to the current year's quarter three referrals. Usually the trend of discipline referrals during a school year is that quarter three referrals are higher than quarter one on a regular basis. Since, this is the normal trend, the validity of the study was threatened because it was not an accurate representation of the impact restorative practices can have on the discipline referrals. The study would have been accurately tested when quarter three of the current year was compared to quarter three of the previous year. If quarter three was used only it would remove the chance for an invalid representation of the results.

### **Relationship of the Results to the Literature**

Research has shown that office discipline referrals are a valid source for determining a school's behavior system (Irvin, et al., 2006). The factors impacting youth have become an overwhelming problem and the solution seems difficult to find. The current leading reasons for discipline office referrals with middle school students are a lack of respect for themselves, others, and authority, and the rise of bullying. Research has shown that exposing students to a restorative and positive environment has significant improvements on attitudes and behaviors in all types of students regardless of age, gender, race, or past issues (Mirsky, 2007). The

intervention for discipline that is used in a school can dramatically impact the outcomes for students (Lane, et al., 2010). The results showed that there is a definite significance between the two quarters, but the implications are inconclusive due to the above-mentioned factors.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The research that has been conducted thus far regarding the impact of restorative practices reducing the number of office discipline referrals is inconclusive. There are very few studies that research restorative practices and the causal connections to reducing office discipline referrals. Due to the lack of empirical evidence on this matter, the need for further research is necessary to make any implications about the effectiveness of restorative practices with middle school students. This study reinforces the suggestion for future research due to the limitations. Future research should also consider the sample size, non-random sampling, implementation fidelity of the teachers, and especially the data availability. There should be a comparison from previous years and the current year to ensure the most accurate results for the study.

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