

The Effects of Community Circle Meetings on the Perceptions of
Students' Feelings of Respect

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to survey the students' perceptions of feeling respected in the school environment as a result of participation in classroom community circle meetings. The participants in this study were approximately 370 third, fourth, and fifth grade students in a public elementary school in Baltimore, Maryland. This study utilized a descriptive research design method where students were presented with a nine question survey in which they utilized a Likert scale to select a response of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, *strongly disagree*, or *not sure* to express their perception. Students were surveyed at the end of each marking period. Homeroom teachers conducted community circle meetings throughout each marking period. The findings of this study suggest that there was a minimally positive effect on students' perceptions of respect as a result of community circle meetings.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION
Overview

Respect is a word that conjures many definitions, interpretations, and emotions. What exactly does it mean to be respected? What does it look like? What does it sound like? How is it earned? How is it shown? Respect is a pillar of the values we should learn early in life, especially in the early years of education.

In a formal educational setting, behaviors such as raising your hand to speak, taking turns, saying please and thank you, qualify as exhibiting respect. Such behaviors are frequently praised and recognized, but moreover, they are generally expected to be demonstrated and therefore may go uncelebrated. On the contrary, unsafe or inappropriate student behaviors such as name-calling, vandalism, physical violence, etc., are often classified as demonstrating a lack of respect. Further, behaviors such as these are met with a range of consequences that are historically, punitive in nature. According to Allman and Slate (2011), “These problem behaviors exhibited by students have been addressed in schools through school consequences including verbal reprimands, corporal punishment, after-school detention, in-school suspension, out-of school suspension and fines” (p.2). These practices which are exclusionary, are also temporary solutions to potentially on-going issues, and most importantly, they don’t convey, or promote, any positive or restorative definition, interpretation or feeling of respect.

Restorative practices are relatively new approaches being adopted and implemented in elementary and secondary schools. These practices may be the solution to a vital point made by Allman and Slate (2011) “Researchers began to express concern over the removal of students from the general education classroom because it promoted more poor behavior and in fact did

not address the students' behaviors at all" (page 2). Restorative practices are grounded in developing respectful relationships that are reinforced by established norms and agreements, deliberated with affective statements, repaired with restorative discourse, and constantly cultivated with community circle meetings.

Statement of Problem

In recent data analysis, particular statistics retrieved from the Baltimore County Public School's Stakeholder Survey (2016-2017) were a cause for concern. Data revealed that students were not feeling respected by their peers. Realizing that when students feel this way school culture and climate can be negatively impacted, the leadership team in the research site proposed the school-wide implementation of restorative practices as part of our School Progress Plan. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact of restorative practices, community circle meetings specifically, on students' perceptions of feeling respected by their peers. To assess the impact, constructs for the idea of respect were created and communicated, and community circle meetings were conducted.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis for this research suggests that the implementation of community circles will not affect students' perception of respect in the school environment based on a perception survey.

Operational Definitions

Baltimore County Public School's Stakeholder Survey, an online survey administered to students in grade 3-12, parents/caregivers, community members and staff to gain feedback in the four strategic areas of academics, safety, communication, and organizational effectiveness.

Community Circle Meetings, also referred to as class meetings, are meetings in which students in a classroom gather together in a circle daily/weekly to discuss or address identified values, concerns or issues. Community Circle Meetings are also a time for a teacher and peers to simply check-in with each other and share successes, exciting happenings and current classroom events.

Likert Scale, a measurement instrument in which individuals respond to a series of statements by indicating where they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement.

Quarter, also called a Marking Period. Each quarter is approximately eight weeks in length.

Respect for the purpose of this study, was defined for students as the following:

- Not arguing with others
- Sharing feelings with others as well as listen to the feelings of others
- Peacefully resolving conflicts

Teachers were asked and encouraged to address respect in terms of these constructs frequently during the course of the quarter.

Restorative Practices are practices such as classroom meetings, peer mediation, and restorative conferencing that aim to build relationships between individuals. These practices also encourage repairing relationships and forgiving others when harm has been caused.

Survey, a list of questions aimed at extracting data from a particular group of people.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This review of the literature examines past practices and current theories related to behavior management approaches, student relationships, and efforts to create respectful classroom environments, all of which have an effect on overall school climate. Each portion of this review succinctly examines these components and successively builds on the one before in an attempt to establish a connection between the progressive use of Restorative Practices as a way to help students demonstrate respect, as well as feel respected by their peers and teachers, by creating a sense of classroom community, and in promoting a positive school climate for all.

The first section of this review describes past discipline practices that were predominantly punitive and counter-productive to improving student behaviors and promoting a positive school climate. The second section of the review delves into research and findings related to the importance of establishing student relationships. The final section of the review explores Restorative Practices, and class meetings specifically as actions for curative and responsive intervention to hurtful or harmful behavior.

Review of Discipline Practices

A high-quality interpersonal school climate, characterized by support, order, and fairness where members of the school community feel safe, respected, and motivated, is predictive of better school functioning and child adjustment (Berg & Aber, 2015). This relatively recent thinking is far different than the thinking in the 1960's when out-of-school suspension started being used as a way to curb student misbehavior and to preserve the orderliness of schools. (Allman & Slate, 2011). It is a practice that is still in play today, despite research evidencing that

students who were suspended from school were likely to become repeat offenders, rather than remediated. From out-of-school suspensions, other discipline practices grew as well, such as zero-tolerance policies, in-school suspension, and even alternative school placements. All practices are alike in that they attempt to remove, or exclude, a student from other students, to punish, and to ultimately change negative behaviors. These forms of discipline are a direct contradiction to the idea shared first, that support, order, and fairness are keys to students feeling safe, respected, and capable of effectively functioning within a school setting.

Of the discipline practices mentioned above, zero-tolerance policies may have exacerbated the need for in- or out-of school suspensions. In essence, the term zero-tolerance plainly communicates that there is no leniency given for the infraction of identified misbehaviors. Another message that could be received by students is there is no room for error or a second chance. Of course, as educators we understand that zero-tolerance policies in public schools focus on offenses such as possession of drugs, alcohol or firearms, or inflicting physical harm on others. But as with most policies, we recognize that interpretations may vary from school to school, administrator to administrator. We also know, mistakes are made and judgments may lapse. While zero-tolerance policies are ultimately put in place to keep students and schools safe and to reduce misbehavior, excluding students from educators and resource staff trained to support students in learning from mistakes and transgressions, has far more damaging results. As supported by Macready (2009),

“Socially irresponsible attitudes are fostered when individuals experience censure and punishment from people who do not matter to them. When this occurs, distancing in social relationships can lead to a negative cycle in which individuals seek solace and encouragement from those who share similar positions and attitudes.”

In fact, in, *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations* conducted by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) research showed that there was no evidence that zero tolerance has increased the consistency of school discipline. Further, research also revealed that schools with higher rates of suspensions and expulsions appear to have less satisfactory ratings of school climate. This works conversely with the idea that removing students who do not follow school rules will create a better school climate for the students who do.

In Macready's (2009) research, an alternative approach to past discipline practices is proposed. By considering the two following impactful questions, ideas and actions may produce positive outcomes for helping students when rules have been broken or harm has been inflicted. "First, how do we respond to actions that are hurtful or harmful for individuals and relationships? Second, how may we create a school climate where there is a good sense of social connectedness combined with respect for all individuals?" (p.212). It is with this thinking that a high-quality interpersonal school climate, characterized by support, order, and fairness where members of the school community feel safe, respected, and motivated, can be achieved through the development and nurturing of relationships (Berg & Aber, 2015).

The Need for Respectful Relationships

In much of the literature reviewed for this study, there is ample talk about respect in terms of students demonstrating compliance, civility, and deference for adults. This discussion is supported by Miller and Pedro (2006) who stated:

"Respect is a fundamental human value that forms the basis of character and personality. It can be considered a principle or standard and an appropriate way of acting. When you

were growing up did people tell you that you did not have to like everybody but you must respect them? You might have been told you needed to respect teachers and other adults.” (p.293).

In these terms and conditions, it would be reasonable to find a student feeling very disenchanted with the idea of respect. It is virtually glaring what is missing - relationships. Where, in past practices, are the relationships that could develop and nurture a genuine feeling of respect that could benefit students, teachers, classroom environment, and school climate equally?

Relationships are the needed foundation. Miller and Pedro (2006), affirm this notion in saying, “A major component of a respectful classroom is the development of relationships” (p.296)

Miller and Pedro’s (2006) research was the single piece of literature that specifically, yet briefly, addressed the importance of mutual respect between members of a classroom community. In their opinion, respect for all persons should permeate a classroom and children should know that all children and adults are valued and equal members of the community (p.296). As a result, a respectful environment and a positive school climate will develop, as will a greater understanding and appreciation for diversity, a greater likelihood for feelings to be shared and heard, and connections and relationships to be made.

Understanding Restorative Practices

“The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is that human beings are happier, more cooperative, and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* or *for* them (Mirsky, 2011). Further, restorative practices are an effective alternative to exclusionary and punitive discipline, which research shows not only fails to reduce negative behaviors but also

exacerbates them (American Psychology Task Force, 2008). Restorative practices are the antonym to many of the discipline practices of the past. Instead of students being separated from a learning community, restorative practices immerse students in an environment where teachers and students work together to prevent harm from being done, or to repair what has been damaged. Restorative practices are practices that are grounded in relationships; relationships between teachers and students, and relationships between students and students, in a safe learning community.

Restorative Practices and Building Respect

Restorative practices are formal and informal processes that teachers and students engage in *together* that encourage relationships and foster respect. Practices include activities such as: working as a whole to create classroom norms, or agreements, utilizing affective statements, responding to questions that address harm to make things right, and participating in restorative circles, also known as class meetings or listening circles. Each practice directly and in-directly strengthens relationships and perceptions of respect when carried out with purpose and meaning. In her article, Morcom (2016) made each of these practices more authentic and understandable for both teachers and students by providing scaffolds for what each practice is, and what it sounds like or looks like in action in a classroom community. In doing such, explicit constructs are in place for creating a safe space where relationships can be built, respect can be given and received, and positive school climate can be cultivated. The following are techniques that Morcom discussed:

Creating class norms/agreements in the beginning of the school year sets the stage and makes the core values of the classroom community explicit (Morcom, 2016). Examples of

norms include: demonstrating mutual respect, appreciating others, attentive listening and participation.

Affective statements are statements that express a feeling rather than a reprimand or a command. Statements begin with stems such as, “I feel disappointed when...” or “When you disrupt the class, I feel ...”. These statements model communication of emotions and allow students to be humanized rather than degraded or embarrassed. Mutual respect can be further built when individuals feel valued.

When harm or hurt is caused, a series of restorative questions are asked in an effort to make repairs, or to restore relationships. Questions include: what happened, what were you thinking at the time, what have you thought about since the incident, who was affected, and what do you think you need to do to make things right? (Mirsky, 2011). These questions allow students to process through what occurred and conceptualize a plan for making amends with the other individual(s) affected. Also, as explained by Macready (2009), the restorative questions referenced above, range from low-level distance questions to high-level distance questions which Vygotsky, a well-known psychologist, “... proposed that the progressive and incremental distancing from the known and familiar, and from the immediacy of one’s experience, is what makes it possible for people to develop new connections and greater complexity in their thinking” (p. 214).

The final restorative practice to discuss is that of restorative circles, also known as class meetings, or listening circles. In the study, *Short-term impacts of student listening circles on student perceptions of school climate and of their own competencies* completed by Hanson, Polik, and Cerna (2017) the researchers defined class meetings/listening circles as a way to encourage students to share with adults their experiences and ideas on an important school topics and to collaborate in planning and implementing school improvement practices. Class meetings

are intended to be a setting where students speak and listen to the thoughts and feelings of classmates with the goal of students getting to know each other better, to build relationships, and develop feelings of mutual respect. The study completed by Hanson et al. (2017) found that there were no short-term impacts of participation in student listening circles, but that didn't mean the circles didn't have any value. The circles were intended to start a process that may lead to improvements in the over-all school climate because students had a platform for sharing their voice, to participate in decision-making, and in having better relationships with classmates and staff. In a study by Kaveney and Drewery (2011), teachers were asked to share their perceptions about class meetings. One teacher reported, "Students were more considerate, there was a more caring nature displayed towards other students and towards myself, as the teacher" (p.9). Kaveney and Drewery's findings indicated that class meetings were not "uniformly successful" in all aspects of their study, but they felt there was enough evidence to suggest that the class meeting and professional development that teachers received and applied, had improved their relationships with their students and that the atmosphere in the classroom was calmer, and more relaxed. Finally, as a result of a three-year grant to implement and assess the use of restorative practices in a Pennsylvania middle school, the principal reported, "...it's changed the way we think about discipline and behavior management. We get along here, and that's because the kids are respected and they know it" (Chmelynski, 2005).

Summary

As supported by the articles and studies presented in this literature review, the Restorative Practices approach, and class meetings specifically, as a way to manage student behavior, has a greater impact on the development of relationships, respect, and positive school climate than those of discipline practices of the past. When students are able to express their

thoughts, listen to the thoughts of others, and perceive themselves as valuable members of a classroom community, there is less need for punitive or exclusionary methods that leave students feeling angry, isolated, and dissatisfied with the school community.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

The design of this study was descriptive. A nine-question survey utilizing a Likert Scale was administered at the end of the first quarter in the fall, and again at the end of the second quarter in the winter, to students in grades 3, 4, and 5. The scale included response choices of *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and Not Sure*. In this study the independent variable was the restorative practice of community circle meetings. The dependent variable in this study was the students' perceived level of respect for self, peers, and teachers. Data collected from the surveys was analyzed to determine if there was a change in students' perceptions from the end of the first quarter to the end of the second quarter.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used when conducting this study at an elementary school in Baltimore County, Maryland. While all students in the school engaged in community circle meetings, it was determined that the survey was most developmentally appropriate to administer to students in grades 3, 4, and 5 in terms of students being able to comprehend what the questions asked and in the ability to reflect and assess. The third grade was comprised of five homerooms, with a total of 126 students, 59 males and 67 females. Further, 26 males were identified as Black, 21 Hispanic, 6 White, 5 Multi-Racial and 1 Asian. The females were identified as 39 being black, 21 Hispanic, and 3 White, 2 Multi-Racial, and 2 Asian. The fourth grade was also comprised of five homerooms, with a total of 115 students, 67 males and 48 females. Further, 41 males were identified as Black, 15 Hispanic, 6 White, 1 Multi-Racial, 2 Asian, and 2 American Indian. The females were identified as 36 being black, 9 Hispanic, and 3

white. Additionally, the fifth grade was comprised of five homerooms, with a total of 129 students, 65 males and 64 females. Further, 43 males were identified as Black, 15 Hispanic, 5 White, 1 Multi-Racial, and 1 Asian. The females were identified as 39 being Black, 14 Hispanic, 2 White, 5 Multi-Racial, 3 Asian, and 1 American Indian. In all, 126 third graders were surveyed, 115 fourth graders were surveyed and 129 fifth graders were surveyed, for an overall total of 370 students.

Table 1

Student Demographics for Grades Three, Four and Five.

	Black	White	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	Asian	American Indian	Total
<hr/>							
Grade 3							
Males	26	6	21	5	1	0	59
Females	39	3	21	2	2	0	67
Total students							126
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Grade 4							
Males	41	6	15	1	2	2	67
Females	36	3	9	0	0	0	48
Total Students							115
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Grade 5							
Males	43	5	15	1	1	0	65
Females	39	2	14	0	3	1	64
Total Students							129
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Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a nine-question survey designed to gauge students' perceptions of respect. The survey questions were carefully crafted in an effort to gain valuable insight into the less than satisfactory ratings in the climate area of the schools BCPS Stakeholder Survey results. The questions were designed in three clusters. A five-point Likert Scale rating was used to gauge students' perceptions. The first cluster of questions, 1, 2, and 3, asked students to gauge their self-perception of demonstrating respect. The second cluster of questions, (4, 5, and 6) asked students to gauge the level of respect demonstrated by their classmates. The third cluster of questions, (7, 8, and 9) asked the students to gauge the level of respect demonstrated by their teachers.

Procedure

In the late spring of the 2016-17 school year, the school leadership team determined the need for implementing a different approach to improve students' perception of respect. As a result, two sessions of professional development were scheduled with a leading expert in the field of restorative practices. In both sessions, teachers were trained in conducting community circle meetings. Following this training, the team determined the constructs of respect that were required for the teachers to communicate to students through the use of community circle meetings such as not arguing with others, expressing feelings to others constructively and listening to feelings and peacefully resolving conflicts. At the onset of the 2017-18 school year, the administration asked teachers to conduct daily community circle meetings.

To gauge the impact of community circle meetings on the perception of respect, a nine- question survey was created with a Likert Scale to elicit responses from the students. A script for administering the survey was also crafted in an effort to maintain consistency and

reliability among grade levels and from classroom to classroom. The researcher administered the survey to the students identified as the research sample at the end of the fall quarter and again at the end of the winter quarter. The data was collected, organized, and analyzed to determine to what extent, if any, community circle meetings impacted students' perceptions of respect.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Below, are a series of tables that represent the student response data broken down by grades 3, 4, and 5 for the first (fall) quarter and second (winter) quarter administration of the Perception Survey. Reported in the tables, are the combined percent of students responding strongly agree and agree to each specific survey item within the respective survey cluster. The data tables also show the degree to which responses changed between administrations. For each grade level, three tables present each of the clusters and the perception data collected from the students.

As shown in Table 2, the cluster of questions focused on the third grade students' perception of self in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 74% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. Based on the winter administration of the survey 71% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. In regard to question 1, there was a decrease of three percent in agreeable responses. For question 2, 79% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 93% of students agreed or agreed, with a positive increase of 14%. Finally, 64% of third graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 3 in the fall, compared to 75% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 11%.

Table 2:***Third Grade Cluster 1 (Perception of Self) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 1 As a result of community circle meetings I argue less with others.	74%	71%	-3
Question 2 As a result of community circle meetings I listen to other's feelings and share my own.	79%	93%	+14
Question 3 As a result of community circle meetings I peacefully resolve conflicts.	64%	75%	+11

As shown in Table 3, this cluster of questions focused on the third grade students' perception of classmates in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 44% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 4. Based on the winter administration of the survey 54% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. In regard to question 4, there was an increase of 10% in agreeable responses. For question 5, 72% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 65% of students agreed or agreed, with a decrease of seven percent in agreeable responses. Finally, 61% of third graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 6 in the fall, compared to 63% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of two percent.

Table 3:***Third Grade Cluster 2 (Perception of Peers) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 4 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates argue less with others.	44%	54%	+10
Question 5 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates listen to my feelings and share theirs with me.	72%	65%	-7
Question 6 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates peacefully resolve conflicts.	61%	63%	+2

As shown in Table 4, this cluster of questions focused on the third grade students' perception of teachers in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 61% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. Based on the winter administration of the survey, 60% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. In regard to question 7, there was a decrease of one percent in agreeable responses. For question 8, 89% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 96% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with an increase of 7 percent in agreeable responses. Finally, 78% of third graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 9 in the fall, compared to 96% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 18%.

Table 4:***Third Grade Cluster 3 (Perception of Teachers) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 7 As a result of community circle meetings teachers and students argue less with each other.	61%	60%	-1
Question 8 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers listen to other's feelings.	89%	96%	+7
Question 9 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers work with students to peacefully resolve conflicts.	78%	96%	+18

As shown in Table 5, this cluster of questions focused on the fourth grade students' perception of self in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 78% of fourth grade students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. Based on the winter administration of the survey 79% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. In regard to question 1, there was an increase of one percent in agreeable responses. For question 2, 85% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 88% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with a positive increase of 3 percent. Finally, 61% of fourth graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 3 in the fall, compared to 69% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 8 percent.

Table 5:

Fourth Grade Cluster1 (Perception of Self) Survey Results

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 1 As a result of community circle meetings I argue less with others.	78%	79%	+1
Question 2 As a result of community circle meetings I listen to other's feelings and share my own.	85%	88%	+3
Question 3 As a result of community circle meetings I peacefully resolve conflicts.	61%	69%	+8

As shown in Table 6, this cluster of questions focused on the fourth grade students' perception of classmates in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 56% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 4. Based on the winter administration of the survey, 60% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 4. In regard to question 4, there was an increase of 4 percent in agreeable responses. For question 5, 55% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 68% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with an increase of 13% in agreeable responses. Finally, 55% of fourth graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 6 in the fall, compared to 61% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 6 percent.

Table 6:

Fourth Grade Cluster 2 (Perception of Peers) Survey Results

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 4 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates argue less with others.	56%	60%	+4
Question 5 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates listen to my feelings and share theirs with me.	55%	68%	+13
Question 6 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates peacefully resolve conflicts.	55%	61%	+6

As shown in Table 7, this cluster of questions focused on the fourth grade students' perception of teachers in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 62% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. Based on the winter administration of the survey 72% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. In regard to question 7, there was an increase of 10% in agreeable responses. For question 8, 93% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration; 95% of students agreed or agreed, with an increase of 2 percent in agreeable responses. Finally, 91% of fourth graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 9 in the fall, compared to 94% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 3 percent.

Table 7:***Fourth Grade Cluster 3 (Perception of Teachers) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 7 As a result of community circle meetings teachers and students argue less with each other.	62%	72%	+10
Question 8 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers listen to other's feelings.	93%	95%	+2
Question 9 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers work with students to peacefully resolve conflicts.	91%	94%	+3

As shown in Table 8, this cluster of questions focused on the fifth grade students' perception of self in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 81% of fifth grade students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. Based on the winter administration of the survey 86% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 1. In regard to question 1, there was an increase of 5 percent in agreeable responses. For question 2, 77% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 88% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with a positive increase of 11%. Finally, 62% of fifth graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 3 in the fall, compared to 83% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 21%.

Table 8:***Fifth Grade Cluster 1 (Perception of Self) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 1 As a result of community circle meetings I argue less with others.	81%	86%	+5
Question 2 As a result of community circle meetings I listen to other's feelings and share my own.	77%	88%	+11
Question 3 As a result of community circle meetings I peacefully resolve conflicts.	62%	83%	+21

As shown in Table 9, this cluster of questions focused on the fifth grade students' perception of classmates in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 51% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 4. Based on the winter administration of the survey, 69% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 4. In regard to question 4, there was an increase of 18% in agreeable responses. For question 5, 49% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 73% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with an increase of 24% in agreeable responses. Finally, 51% of fifth graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 6 in the fall, compared to 62% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 11%.

Table 9:***Fifth Grade Cluster2 (Perception of Peers) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 4 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates argue less with others.	51%	69%	+18
Question 5 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates listen to my feelings and share theirs with me.	49%	73%	+24
Question 6 As a result of community circle meetings my classmates peacefully resolve conflicts.	51%	62%	+11

As shown in Table 10, this cluster of questions focused on the fifth grade students' perception of teachers in demonstrating respect. Based on the fall administration of the survey, 41% of fifth grade students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. Based on the winter administration of the survey 73% of students either strongly agreed or agreed when responding to question 7. In regard to question 7, there was an increase of 32% in agreeable responses. For question 8, 85% of students strongly agreed or agreed in the fall administration, in the winter administration 89% of students strongly agreed or agreed, with an increase of 4 percent in agreeable responses. Finally, 82% of third graders strongly agreed or agreed with question 9 in the fall, compared to 95% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing in the winter administration. This shows an increase change of 13%.

Table 10:***Fifth Grade Cluster 3 (Perception of Teachers) Survey Results***

	Fall Administration	Winter Administration	Change
Question 7 As a result of community circle meetings teachers and students argue less with each other.	41%	73%	+32
Question 8 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers listen to other's feelings.	85%	89%	+4
Question 9 As a result of community circle meetings my teachers work with students to peacefully resolve conflicts.	82%	95%	+13

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of restorative practices, specifically, community circle meetings, on students' perceptions of respect. To assess the impact, three constructs for the idea of respect were operationalized and communicated to students, and community circle meetings were conducted. This descriptive study utilized a nine-question survey with a five-point Likert Scale to prompt student responses. Based on the data collected, quantitative conclusions are drawn and discussed.

The null hypothesis for this descriptive study stated that the implementation of community circles would not have an effect on students' perception of respect. In comparing the data collected from the fall administration to the winter administration, results indicated that community circle meetings did have a favorable impact on students' perception of respect in all three clusters: perception of self, perception of peers, and perception of teachers

Implications of Findings

While the findings of this study imply that community circles did have value in grades three, four, and five, it is important to recognize that fifth grade responses demonstrated the greatest growth in all three clusters of survey questions, 139% total growth, from fall to winter administration. This data indicates that students of this age are capable of, and receptive to, the notion of restorative practices.

Community circles are just one component of the restorative practice approach. With students operating in a heightened, and growing perception of respect, it would be beneficial to layer in additional restorative practices such as creating class norms to maintain the positive

school/classroom climate, and the use of affective statements that would further aid students in sharing their feelings in order to peacefully resolve conflicts.

Perhaps the most promising implication of this study is that restorative justice circles could work as well as community circle meetings. Restorative justice circles address harm caused by student(s) and offers them the opportunity for making repairs to the relationship. Equipped with the skills of expressing personal feelings, the ability to listen to the feelings of others, and aptitude to peacefully resolve conflicts, students in grade five have the potential to be empowered to restore what has been damaged by disrespectful words and actions.

Finally, the overall growth of third grade data was more favorable than fourth grade. Total third grade growth from fall to winter in all three clusters was 62% compared to fourth grade's total growth of 50%. In revisiting the *Developmental Characteristics* from the National Network for Child Care (2018), third grade's growth could be attributed to students of this age range being susceptible to following rules, seeking security in groups, and the desire to perform well and do things right. The data suggests that students responded positively to the ritual of community circle meetings. Community circle meetings should continue in third grade. Fourth grade should also continue with community circle meetings. Specifically, topics should focus on students' perceptions of self, as this cluster had the lowest growth in positive responses from fall to winter administration. Specifically, discussion topics should address ways to reduce/eliminate arguing with others and strategies to utilize for peacefully resolving conflicts with others. Children of this grade level have the capacity to learn such behaviors as children at this age are developing a sense of self and find social acceptance important (National Network for Child Care. 2018).

Relationship to Prior Research

The positive results of this study infer that class meetings had a positive effect on students' perceptions of respect in all three clusters. The data reflected 88% aggregated growth in grades three, four and five in cluster 2 from the fall to winter administration. Specifically, students in the fifth grade had the greatest growth in cluster 2 questions, the perception of respect from peers, with an increase of 53%, compared to 23% in fourth grade, and 12% in third. According to a document titled, *Developmental Characteristics*, (National Network for Child Care. 2018) a compilation of physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development markers by the National Network for Child Care, children in the 5th grade, and age range of 9- 11 years old, demonstrate qualities that may be most receptive to what community circles have to offer. For example, children in this age range are intellectually capable of understanding concepts that are presented to them. Socially and emotionally they are developing a sense of self, they are seeking social acceptance, and they enjoy being members of a club. In certain ways, a classroom community can be considered a club. Successful community circle meetings would promote opportunities for personal growth, to connect with classmates, and provide a healthy and positive community in which to be a member. This study's findings support the research advanced by the National Network for Child Care, and give credence to continuing community circle meetings with students in this age/grade level.

Further, as suggested by Hanson, Polik, Cerna (2017) "Giving students the opportunity to tackle issues important to them, in partnership with supportive adults, can be an instrument of individual and organizational growth" (p.1). This idea is clearly supported by the data collected in cluster 1 (perceptions of self) and cluster 3 (perception of teachers). In grades three, four and five there was aggregated growth of 74% in cluster 1 survey questions (perception of self) in

demonstrating respect, from the fall administration to the winter administration. Specifically, the greatest growth was in the fifth grade with 37%. Of the 37% growth, 21% was attributed to students perceiving themselves as able to peacefully resolve conflicts. Third grade responses revealed 25% of the total growth, with 14% of the favorable responses attached to sharing feelings and listening to those of others. The fourth grade accounted for 12% of the growth, 8% of the growth resulted from students perceiving themselves as able to peacefully resolve conflicts. Finally, most favorable was the overall aggregated 89% growth in grades three, four, and five, in cluster 3 survey questions, (perception of teachers) demonstrating respect. As was the case with clusters 1 and 2, fifth grade student responses represented the greatest share of growth again with 49%. Of the 49% growth from the fall administration to the winter administration, 32% was attached to students and teachers arguing less as a result of community circle meetings. Third grade again represented 25% of the total growth, and fourth grade 15%. This data wholly supports what Hanson et al. (2017) continues on to state, “Growing evidence suggests that students, working together and with adults, can effect change in the school climate” (page 1). Creating a school climate that is based on the operationalized definitions of respect outlined in this study: not arguing with others, sharing your feelings and listening to those of others, and peacefully resolving conflicts, is vital. The findings of this study imply that community circles have value.

Threats to Validity

With closer reflection of the fall and winter quarter administrations, there are limitations to consider that, with refinement and consistency, implementation of community circles could be far more effective and advantageous to students.

There are several limitations to this study's validity. First, the cognitive, social and emotional ability of students to accurately interpret a survey question and choose a rating on the Likert Scale poses a threat to this study's validity. Students in third grade specifically had difficulty in either understanding what the question was asking or in discerning between *strongly agree*, *agree* and *not sure*. In considering the future use of the survey used for this study, it would be advised to frequently discuss the language and syntax of the survey questions with all students, but especially the third grade students, prior to administration.

Another threat to internal validity was the challenge of a having a long-term substitute as a classroom teacher in the 5th grade. For the first full quarter of the school year, one fifth-grade homeroom had a long-term substitute. Community circles were not implemented on a consistent basis. Also, key components of norms and expectations were not set which limited the success and effectiveness of what community circle meetings intended to accomplish. The experienced fifth grade classroom teacher returned at the beginning of the second quarter. Community circle meeting norms and expectations were established and meetings were held daily.

Finally, it is important to state that effective community circle meeting implementation varied from classroom to classroom which also created a limitation. While community circle routines and procedures were demonstrated in the professional development sessions teachers received in the spring of 2017, community circle meetings were not conducted school-wide in a standardized manner.

In terms of external validity, this study has several threats to consider. First, the definition of respect cannot be assumed to be the same at other elementary schools. Because of the operationalized constructs of respect at this particular urban, Title I school, generalized findings for this study may not be applicable or appropriate for other elementary schools.

Additionally, factors such as professional development provided to teachers in regard to conducting community circle meetings, community circle meeting topics, and community circle meeting frequency, also create threats to external validity. In this particular study, the faculty and staff of this school received the same training and instructions pertaining to facilitating effective community circle meetings in efforts to ensure consistency. Schools not receiving professional development from the same trained expert in the field of Restorative Practices may receive a different theory or approach, which may affect the generalizability of results in another elementary school setting.

Implications for Future Research

Several recommendations can be made based on the data that was collected and analyzed. First, community circle meetings have the potential to influence a positive effect on students' perceptions of respect. In Chapter II of this research study, reviewed literature, *Creating a Respectful Classroom Environment*, expressed that respect for all persons should permeate a classroom and children should know that all children and adults are valued and equal members of the community (Miller & Pedro. 2016. p. 296). The responses elicited from survey cluster questions 2 and 3 show that this permeation is taking place, as perceptions of respect are trending in a positive direction. To continue with this growth, effective community circle meetings should happen regularly, with structure, with purpose, and with fidelity, which leads to another critical recommendation. Community circle implementation is an area that should be considered and refined for future research. In this particular study, the focus was on students' perceptions of respect only. One recommendation would include gathering data on teachers' perceptions of respect by administering the same survey to staff members. It would also be recommended to collect data related to the number of community circle meetings held per quarter. It would be

insightful to compare the number of community circle meetings with the response results of students' perceptions of respect. Finally, it would also be recommended to implement a consistent structure to the community circle meetings. Frequent professional development opportunities should continue to be held for the staff. Classroom teachers and students should have a clear understanding of the routine of a community circle meeting. While the topics may vary, the procedural expectations should not. It would be recommended that community circle meetings continue, and in doing so further research could be conducted that explores differentiating community circle approaches and topics that are appropriate for the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of each grade level. Future research could also be tied to students' perceptions of respect and behavior. Office referrals or Incident slips could be collected and analyzed to explore where and how frequently the operationalized constructs of respect were violated.

Conclusion

The researcher found the results of this study to be encouraging. One of the primary goals of restorative practices is to build positive, respectful relationships that sustain a positive, respectful school climate and culture. Based on this study's findings, one could imply that community circle meetings are helping to reach this goal at this particular elementary school. Students are perceiving themselves and their teachers as being the leading participants in demonstrating the identified constructs of respect. Further research should be conducted to better understand the students' perceptions of respect demonstrated by peers.

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