

The Effects of Positive Relationships and Restorative Practices for African American Males in
Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if building positive relationships and implementing restorative practices would increase academic success in African American males. The measurement tool used was quarterly assessment scores for Language Arts. This study used a quasi-experimental design to determine if restorative practices increased academic achievement. The researcher analyzed the data in a t chart. According to the results of the study, the difference of the major was lower in school year 19-20 than 18-19, but the difference was not significant. Therefore, this study shows that the implementation of restorative practices and building positive relationships does not significantly increase student achievement. Research in this area should continue because these test results had many threats to the validity and there is very little information available about how restorative practices and positive relationships impact student learning.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

One of the most common debates trending in today's educational systems is whether restorative discipline is more effective than punitive discipline. This brings about one of the largest issues facing public education which is using suspension and expulsion as a means of discipline, in turn increasing the already existing achievement gap across the country. A less traditional approach stemming from the United States justice system of restorative justice is becoming increasingly popular in schools today. If we continue to suspend kids that are breaking the rules, we are creating a vicious cycle of students losing instructional time, which leads to higher failure rates on state assessments and dropout rates. "A report from the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research indicated that the graduation rate for African American students is more than 20% lower than their Caucasian peers" (Rivers, 2010, pg. 5). However, there is a strong correlation between building positive relationships and implementing restorative practices in education with an increase in academic success. Furthermore, African American males is one of the largest demographics being affected by these systemic educational issues, such as failure and dropout rates. African American males typically have disproportionate rates when compared to their peers of behavioral issues, suspension rates, and even dropout rates, but we must get to the root causes of this increase in the achievement gap. Changing the school climate and implementing restorative practices has come to the forefront as a viable process to help close the achievement gap. The goal of using restorative practices is to help build relationships within the classroom in order to decrease disruptive behavior. Restorative practices recognize the importance of building school wide relationships. This includes relationships between students

and the relationships between students and teachers. It is a practice that was built from the belief that we are all connected through a web of relationships and when harm has occurred the relationships becomes disrupted. With this restorative approach to student discipline, the goal is to focus on students' social and emotional health including relationship building and to take ownership of their mistakes and repair the harm done.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to determine if implementing restorative practices and building positive relationships is effective in increasing African American males' academic achievement.

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis is that the achievement level of African American male students who are instructed using restorative practices is not significantly different before and after implementation of restorative practices.

Operational Definitions

Restorative practices procedures- These consist of morning community circles, restorative conversations, restorative circles, relationship building.

Community circles- These are daily ten-minute informal conversations with a talking piece being passed around to students in the circle for the purpose of building student relationships, increasing positive peer interactions, and providing students the opportunity to share their thoughts on various topics.

Restorative conversations- Restorative conversations occur after a disruptive behavior occurs and is between the student and the teacher. This a time for the student and teacher to talk one on

one about the effects of the student's behavior and to talk about strategies the student can use next time to eliminate the disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Restorative circles- These are used when more than one student is involved in a conflict in order to repair harm. Everyone in the circle has an opportunity to speak and to be heard. It is a way to respond to problems that arise and to help build the classroom relationships. The procedures are comparable to that of a restorative conversation except that the circles involve more than one student.

Positive relationship building- This involves earning the student's trust and rapport. This is built by having meaningful conversations and positive interactions with the student.

Academic achievement- The students' numerical score of the pretest prior to implementation of restorative practices and numerical scores of the post test after two months of implementing restorative practices.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this literature review is to display that traditional modes of discipline is not the most effective when working with African American males. Furthermore, to determine if restorative practices is a more successful approach for academic achievement amongst African American males. In section one, this review seeks to explore the achievement gap amongst African Americans and their peers, with subsections including theories of why the achievement gap is widespread and growing and strategies to help improve this gap. Section two discusses the positive implications of restorative practices in education. Section three examines the importance of building positive relationships between staff and students. Finally, section four is a brief conclusion.

One of the most common debates trending in today's educational systems is whether restorative discipline is more effective than punitive discipline. This brings about one of the largest issues facing public education which is using suspension and expulsion as a means of discipline, in turn increasing the already existing achievement gap across the country. A less traditional approach stemming from the United States justice system of restorative justice is becoming increasingly popular in schools today. African American males are one of the largest demographics being affected by these systemic educational issues, such as failure and dropout rates. African American males typically have disproportionate rates when compared to their peers of behavioral issues, suspension rates, and even dropout rates, but we must get to the root causes of this increase in the achievement gap. Changing the school climate and implementing restorative practices has come to the forefront as a viable process to help close the achievement gap. With this restorative approach to student discipline, the goal is to focus on students' social and emotional health including relationship building and to take ownership of their mistakes and repair the harm done.

African American Males and The Achievement Gap

African American males in today's educational system are often faced with more challenges than the rest of their peers. When analyzing the academic success of African American males there is a plethora of factors contributing to the variance in achievement. Some of these factors include the influence of the teacher, negative African American stereotypes, and peer pressure (Williams, 2010).

Theories for America's Achievement Gap

Historically, being African American has its own set of issues due to the societal perception that Caucasian is the superior race. Due to this skewed societal perception, African

American children often absorb many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that Whites are better, smarter, more beautiful and generally superior (Fordham, 1996; Kunjufu, 1985; Tatum, 1997; Williams, 2010). Furthermore, by the 1950's America was desperate to embrace equality as a nation with the civil rights movement and especially in schools with the Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, however this systemic issue could not be resolved overnight. Society continues to bombard African American males with negative images of their identity and pop culture tells them their identity should be anything but a scholar, which further exacerbates their negative attitudes towards school. Many schools across the nation are experiencing this disconnect of academics not being important to African American males, which is statistically proven in the data of African American males having the highest suspension rates and the lowest achievement levels. Studies show that punitive discipline such as suspensions is negatively affecting our African American males' "levels of achievement, attitudes towards school and perceptions of equity and trust in the educational process" (Robinson, 2014). As this cycle perpetuates, the achievement gap between African American students and their counterparts is becoming more significant. In the American educational system, African American males experience so much disconnect in culture, which makes it hard for them to become academically successful. Not only is there a disconnect between societies expectations for African American males but also with their educators and leaders being predominately Caucasian. According to federal data, in 2016, 80% of the teaching staff in the United States was White (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). In addition, for many of these White educators it is their first experience immersed in an African American culture. According to Rivers' survey of educators:

86.2% of the surveyed population indicated they believed that understanding the culture of a student is essential to academic success, yet 81% of the participants indicated they learned most of what they know about African American males only through professional experiences (Rivers, 2010, p. 28).

Strategies to Address the Achievement Gap

Studies indicate that in order to close this ever-growing achievement gap, educational systems should incorporate culturally relevant teaching and implement restorative practices, and educators should be trained on ways to build positive relationships with their students in order to improve academic success.

Many scholars suggest that schools and educators incorporate culturally relevant teaching practices in order to help minorities feel more connected and see the relevance of their education. Educators should be able to include cultural connections into their curriculum, yet many of them are never taught how or are afraid and or restricted from doing so.

Over two decades ago, Gloria Ladson-Billings introduced the term culturally relevant pedagogy:

to describe a form of teaching that calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings and that teaching must support students' ability to recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities. (New America, "Culturally responsive teaching").

Instead, what often happens is that teachers may develop negative assumptions regarding African American males and their academic potential frequently caused by misinterpretations of culture. Scholars suggest that teachers need more training and professional development in order to become more culturally proficient. Implementing cultural sensitivity and relevance will create a

personal connection between the teacher and the student, which will help dissipate cultural misconceptions and negative stereotypes, which will in turn increase achievement.

One case study included this idea of an Afrocentric curriculum that exposed students to the historical and cultural richness of their African heritage. The findings resulted in a large increase in the self-esteem and achievement of African American males:

The young men stated when teachers believe in their academic abilities, set high expectations, and have systemic support programs such as tutorial and extended day activities in place, it sends the message their school leaders and teachers truly care about them and have systems in place to assist them with concepts they struggle with by providing them with small group and or individualized instructional support (Daaliya, 2019).

Overall, the achievement gap of African American males is a systemic problem in American education due to cultural differences and Americas historical past rooted in racism. However, several strategies such as culturally relevant teaching and restorative practices are becoming increasingly popular to better address this educational gap across the United States.

Restorative Practices

The roots of restorative practices come from the concept of restorative justice that originated in the American Indian culture and later became part of the criminal justice system in order to repair harm done. “Schools using conflict as a teachable moment and an opportunity for growth, rather than a punitive sanction, intentionally use restorative practices to build relationships and community. Improving relationships improves student behavior and school climate which positively impacts academic performance” (Cole, 2013, pg. 96). An integral part of restorative practices in education includes conflict resolution, community circles, and peer

mediation, all which research has shown to be helpful in building relationships and decreasing discipline problems. When schools are implementing restorative practices with fidelity, some of the findings include a bigger sense of accountability on students, a sense of community developing, better communication and listening skills, relationship building skills, and an overall positive change in school climate (Cole, 2013). According to his findings, “one predominantly African American school in an urban setting had a reduction in serious incidents and violent acts of 52% in their first year of Restorative Practices implementation” (Lewis, 2009). After analyzing several case studies completed upon the effectiveness in implementing restorative practices into education, it has been noted that all 3 of them have found success in one form or the other.

After President Bush passed No Child Left Behind, educational systems across America had an urgent need to close the achievement gap and many educators were unsure how to amend this widespread problem. Finally, institutes and programs started emerging. For example, **SafferSannerSchool**, a program associated with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), was developed in response to a perceived crisis in American education and in society as a whole” (Mirsky, 2007). The institutions implemented these restorative practices with the goal to positively affect school climate. With the implementation of restorative practices, most of the studies found an overall positive effect on school climate to include a decrease in negative behaviors, suspensions, and dropout rates. However, this is highly dependent upon many variables, such as school wide implementation with fidelity, teacher training, stakeholder involvement, and accountability and self-efficacy on all parts (Korth, 2016). If these factors are not in place, the implementation of restorative practices becomes much less effective. It is important to first build the overall school morale with a sense of teamwork and community. One

of the most important outcomes of restorative practices is creating an environment conducive to building positive relationships throughout the school, not only between students and teachers but also with staff members. Building these communicative relationships in the school climate is an integral part of increasing students' overall academic success, especially with at risk students.

Relationships

Another contributing factor to the hardships plaguing African American males in the educational system is a lack of school engagement. When you build strong, open teacher-student relationships, it helps students become more engaged and connected to their learning environment. This is especially critical when dealing with at risk students because they often have a negative perception about their learning experiences. "Research indicated that African American males have a more effective learning experience when they are able to make a personal connection with the teacher" (Rivers, 2010). According to the research there are a few key components that are attributed to effectively building positive student-teacher relationships. Schools need to create a culture of setting high standards for all students. Educators must stop perpetuating the cycle of having lower standards for their low achieving population of students because that is a large contributing factor to achievement gap. In order to build an effective classroom culture where students feel safe, respected, and cared for, a teacher must employ relationship building strategies to include engagement techniques, praising students, making real world connections, and overall effective classroom management (Ramos, 2015). According to Marzano, teacher interactions are a pivotal component of classroom management and to building healthy student teacher relationships. These instructional interactions include tone of voice, proximity to students, feedback to students, personal discourse, active listening, and use of humor and praise. This is helpful in bridging the gap with reluctant students and

underperforming students because if they are receiving those things in their educational experiences then they are more likely to build a positive relationship with their teacher and become more engaged, less disruptive and achieve more overall academic success. According to Daaliya, the data collected implied that teachers who truly care about their students and establish positive relationships encourage African American males to achieve at higher levels and with increased self-esteem (Daaliya, 2019, pg. 119). Overall, healthy relationships are a critical part of educational success.

Conclusion

The achievement gap between whites and minorities is an existing problem in the U.S. educational system and it is a growing concern. The population at the most risk for failure is African American males, with higher failure rates, suspensions, and dropout rates. Many educational facilities around the world are evolving from the traditional punitive style of discipline to a restorative style of discipline in hopes of closing this achievement gap. In order to address these systemic issues, many educational institutions are placing more emphasis on culturally relevant teaching, building positive student teacher relationships and implementing components of restorative practices. The main reasoning behind the restorative approach is that it reduces suspensions, repairs relationships, builds positive relationships and school climate, which in turn increases academic success, especially for African American males.

Chapter III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing restorative practices and building positive relationships is effective in increasing African American males' academic achievement.

Design

The study uses a quasi-experimental design to determine if restorative practices and positive relationships increase African American males' academic achievement. The intervention used was restorative practices, most specifically community circles, restorative conversations and restorative circles. Achievement will be assessed by looking at students' test scores. The independent variable is the implementation of restorative practices. The dependent variable is academic achievement, which will be numerical test scores. Implementation of restorative practices are mandatory school wide for the first time this school year. The researcher will look at ELA Quarterly Assessment scores from the 2018-2019 school year and compare them to the 2019-2020 scores.

Participants

The participants in this study were seventh grade students from a sixth through eighth grade public school in Annapolis, Maryland. The population of the school includes 1,014 students. Out of these students, 463 are female and 551 are male. Out of 1,014, 62% receive free and reduced meals, 6% receive 504 services, 14% are English language learners, and 5% are homeless. According to Maryland report card, the school earned a 7.4 out of 20 for academic achievement on state tests. The school programs include the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program and the AVID program.

There were 19 African American 7th grade male students who participated in the study. All of whom have received instruction to include restorative practices, AVID strategies, and the international baccalaureate program.

Instrument

In order to assess academic achievement, the researcher analyzed test score data from the 2018-2019 school year in comparison to the 2019-2020 school year. The test analyzed was the quarterly assessment for ELA during the 2nd quarter in January of 2019 and the quarterly assessment for ELA during the 2nd quarter in January of 2020. During the 2019 school year, restorative practices were not implemented school wide however, they were implemented school wide during the 2020 school year. There is no reliability or validity data for these assessments.

Procedure

At my current school, it was the expectation that everyone was implementing restorative practices throughout the building. The mandatory practices included, but not limited to, were community building circles and restorative circles. Community circles are implemented to build a sense of community amongst all staff in the building and restorative circles are implemented to repair harm done in relationships. The target audience was created to include only African American males in all 4 classes. All students were taught equally with the inclusion of restorative practices and the teacher being mindful of building positive relationships amongst all. Each morning for 10 minutes students and teacher participated in community building circles during homeroom. Students would stand in a circle in the back of the classroom and the teacher would begin the circle by posing a question to the students. The students would have a moment to think of a response and then the circle would begin. The teacher would be the first person in the circle to respond. A talking piece was used during this time, which is an object chosen by the teacher. Only the student holding the talking piece shares their answer while the other students listen intently. Students take turns answering the posed question by taking the talking piece from the person standing next to them and then responding and passing the talking piece to the person next to them. If a student does not want to answer for whatever reason, they simply must say

pass. Furthermore, any time a conflict or argument would arise amongst a teacher and student or a student and their peer(s) a meeting would be held, called a restorative circle in order to mend the relationship. Some questions the facilitator asks the student include *What happened, and what were you thinking at the time of the incident?, What have you thought about since?, Who has been affected by what happened and how?, What about this has been the hardest for you? and What do you think needs to be done to make things as right as possible?* These questions are the building blocks for repairing the relationship. Having a conversation with the student(s) helps build and repair relationships and gives the student a chance to reflect on his or her behavior. Student data was analyzed from last year, prior to mandatory implementation of restorative practices and compared to student data from the current school year, when restorative practices were implemented fluidly. Test results of the African American male students were input into a t chart.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to assess data. The data from 2nd quarter was analyzed using a t test. It is looking at the average of both groups in order to find the standard deviation. A t test was conducted with the independent variable being restorative practices and the dependent variable being academic achievement. The mean number from 18-19 school year ELA test (Mean = 77.7, SD = 12.40) was not significantly lower than 19-20 school year (Mean = 70.1, SD = 17.02). The results are presented in table 1 below. The null hypothesis that the achievement

level of African American male students who are instructed using restorative practices is not significantly different than the achievement level of those who did not receive restorative practices is accepted.

Table 1: Quarterly Assessments 7th grade ELA students from 18-19 and 19-20

School year	Mean	N	Standard Dev.	t	Significance
2018-2019	77.7	19	12.40	1.99.	0.062*
2019-2020	70.1	19	17.02		

*p = 0.062

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing restorative practices and building positive relationships is effective in increasing African American males' academic achievement.

The null hypothesis that the achievement level of African American male students who are instructed using restorative practices is not significantly different than the achievement level of those who did not receive restorative practices is accepted.

Implications

There is no known accurate conclusion that restorative practices and building positive relationships increased academic success in African American males. The difference of the major was lower in 19-20 than 18-19, but the difference was not significant. A more accurate representation of the results would have been to compare test results from the same school year with half the participants receiving restorative practices and the other half not receiving them,

but that was not possible due to the mandate that restorative practices would be implemented school wide.

Theoretical Consequences

Even though the results were not significantly different there is evidence that restorative practices and building positive relationships do in fact make a positive difference when educating the whole child. The researcher observed many academic gains in several of the African American male students. Some of these positive changes included their class engagement, attitude, and attendance; all of which are not indicated in test results yet improve overall student achievement. Several African American male students made a large gain due to restorative practices and relationship building. Restorative practices are a great way for students to learn from their mistakes, while staying in school and not missing additional time, versus traditional punishments that often include removing the student from their learning environment.

Threats to Validity

During this study, there were many threats to validity that may have impacted the results. For example, a threat to validity was the small population of students used. This reduced the power of the study. Although the researcher was able to obtain significant results despite the limited power of the study, it is possible that the sample of students was not adequately representative of all African American males. This creates a threat to external validity. Furthermore, comparing these students' test results is not truly a fair comparison because you are comparing one from last year versus this year, which means the students have grown, matured, and learned more over time. Also, the tests were similar but not truly equivalent to one another, which is a threat of internal validity. Another threat to validity was the short time frame of the implementation of restorative practices. The results can be generalized to the impact of the intervention only over a

short duration. This is a threat to external validity. Lastly, when comparing the students' test results, you must recognize the fact that when students took these tests, they had two different teachers. This could impact their test results and success factors, which is an external threat to validity.

Connections to previous Studies

Current results are similar to a study that was done in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2013. This study was also focused on African American males in an urban school. Cole (2013), discussed how both students and staff responded positively to the implementation of restorative practices. Research indicated that suspension rates had dropped, and attendance rates had increased, as well as overall academic success. The Wisconsin study also focused on building positive relationships, similarly to this one and found a positive correlation with student success. One major difference in the two studies were the grade level of students studied. The Wisconsin study was for 12th graders and this study was for 7th graders. Furthermore, the duration of the Wisconsin study was done over the entire school year, versus just a few months. Even though the research of the students' tests did not show a major difference, there were several positive differences noted in other areas of academic achievement. Overall, the findings were very similar between these two cases where both showed a positive correlation between restorative practices and student success.

Implications for Future Research

A review of the current study could result in the conclusion that more research should be conducted on (a) how to properly and effectively measure the effect of restorative practices in schools and (b) which interventions will prove an increase in academic success. As the research states, more schools all over the world are beginning to push for restorative practices in their

schools, resulting in the need for more research and data. Furthermore, the study would be more effective if there was more time to assess and gather student data. Due to the lack of evidence on this matter, the need for further research is necessary to make any implications about the effectiveness of restorative practices on African American males.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementing restorative practices and building positive relationships is effective in increasing African American males' academic achievement. The null hypothesis is that the achievement level of African American male students who are instructed using restorative practices is not significantly different before and after implementation of restorative practices. With the implementation of restorative practices, the researcher noticed several overall academic improvements in African American males such as an increase in attention and attendance, however, the test results were not indicative to an increase in academic achievement. Finally, results are inconclusive since the differences in the data were not significant.

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