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Middle School Administrators' Perceptions of the Implementation of Restorative Practices

Janis Marie Grace
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education

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Janis Marie Grace

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Middle School Administrators' Perceptions of the Implementation of Restorative
Practices

by

Janis Marie Grace

MEd, University of Texas at Arlington, 2014

BAAS, University of North Texas, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

Public school administrators use restorative practices (RPs) as a discipline intervention to reduce student expulsions and suspensions. The problem addressed in this qualitative study was that despite the implementation of RPs in a school district in the Southwestern United States, student misconduct increased. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the school district. The conceptual framework that grounded this study was Vaandering's critical theory of restorative justice in education, which supports the need for school administrators to implement RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures. Purposive sampling was used to invite eight middle school administrators, two certified RPs coordinators, one coordinator of student services, and one executive director of student services, which totaled 12 participants. Data were collected via semistructured interviews conducted virtually via Zoom; interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using axial coding for emergent themes. The four themes identified were (a) RPs support positive relationships, (b) the implementation of RPs should involve students in the discipline process, (c) RPs reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed, and (d) RPs lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships. The results of this study contribute to positive social change by increasing understanding of how school district personnel see and use RPs, allowing for further development of best practices which eventually will lead to reduced expulsions and suspensions as well as enhanced school climate.

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Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my mother, Jacqueline S. Grace. I dedicate this dissertation to my mother because she is the pillar of strength. In my most challenging moments, she always encouraged me to “keep my head up and don’t give up.” The reoccurring statement my mother always says to me during every journey of my life is that “better days are ahead.!” My mother is my true superhero! I love you, mother.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Public school administrators' traditional discipline practices are widely used to reduce student misconduct. Restorative practice (RP) implementation is a positive discipline intervention process used to reduce student expulsions and suspensions. The research site in this study was a public school district located in the Southwestern United States, where interventions were provided to middle school and district administrators to decrease student expulsions and suspensions. The problem addressed in this basic qualitative research study was that, despite RP implementation, interventions to decrease student expulsions and suspensions in a Southwestern state's school district, student misconduct increased. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions. The conceptual framework that grounded this study was Vaandering's (2010) critical theory of restorative justice (RJ) in education, which supports the need for school administrators' implementation of RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures. Furthermore, the need for school principals' implementation of RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures may build safe school communities (Vaandering, 2010).

Supporting literature indicates that administrators use RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at schools. A positive shift to restorative discipline interventions occurs when administrative support is used to respond to student discipline. Moreover, administrators use RPs to reduce student expulsions and suspensions (Acosta et al., 2019). Additionally, Gregory et al. (2020) reported a lack of knowledge of the use

of RPs regarding student disciplinary practices. School administrators use RPs as a replacement for student suspensions and expulsions in schools (Gregory et al., 2020). According to Lustick (2021), an examination is needed into how principals implement RPs despite conflicting pressures to maintain order and compel student obedience. Disciplinary practices such as student suspensions and expulsions for student misconduct are used in schools (Lustick, 2021).

The findings of this basic qualitative study include strategies for middle school administrators to reduce suspensions and expulsions resulting in positive social change. In this chapter, I describe the conceptual framework, the nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, scope, delimitations, significance, and summary. The background of this study is presented next.

Background

This study was necessary to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the schools under study. RPs are alternatives to exclusionary discipline (Gregory et al., 2020). Sandwick et al. (2019) stated that administrators who use RPs report a decrease in office referrals and an increase in student disciplinary interventions. Also, government leaders have encouraged school discipline reform systems to use alternative strategies such as RPs to address student misbehaviors (Steinberg & Laco, 2017). Finally, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2021) solicited community feedback regarding RPs as alternatives to disciplinary practices for policy guidance.

Problem Statement

The research site was a public school district in the Southwestern United States. Middle school and district administrators were provided with interventions to decrease student expulsions and suspensions. This site was selected for this basic qualitative research study because it serves over 11,977 students, where demographics in 2021—African American 36%, White 32%, Hispanic 26%, two or more races 4% and Asian 2%—have changed the school district from a rural area to a suburban school district. The district has 14 schools, including eight elementary schools serving Grades 1–4, three intermediate schools serving Grades 5 and 6, three middle schools serving Grades 7 and 8, and two high schools serving Grades 9–12.

At the research site, professional development (PD) was provided in the 2016 school year to middle school and district administrators on the use of RPs to reduce student suspensions and expulsions. Despite the PD on interventions, students' expulsions and suspensions continued to increase. The problem addressed in this basic qualitative research study is that despite RP implementation interventions to decrease student expulsions and suspensions in a Southwestern state's school district, student misconduct has increased.

Administrators' use of RPs (a) provides different discipline approaches, (b) develops RJ activities, (c) builds relationships, (d) promotes meaningful consequences, and (e) outlines positive student behavior expectations (Weaver & Swank, 2020). Weaver and Swank (2020) concluded that administrators need ongoing PD on how to use RPs to improve student misconduct. RPs are designed as an approach to building a positive

school environment (Armour, 2018). According to Anyon (2016), school administrators should identify strategies to sustain RPs to replace student conduct from disciplinary to restorative. Barriers to implementing RPs in schools include time, training, old-school disciplinary mentalities, and the lack of one single manual for RP implementation (Gross, 2021). RPs, as an alternative to disciplinary practices, are intended to support a reduction in the number of referrals and suspensions given in schools to reduce student misconduct, which may lead to suspensions and expulsions (Kline, 2016). RPs are alternative disciplinary approaches for administrators to use, preventive and interventive disciplinary activities for student misconduct (Kline, 2016). Moreover, RP interventions allow students to remain in the instructional learning environment, which can enhance student achievement (Kline, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the study site. The phenomena under study, perceptions of middle school administrators regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their schools, was examined. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data for analysis.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was:

RQ: How do middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at one school district in the Southwest United States?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

A review of the literature revealed step-by-step implementation processes for RP discipline interventions that are essential in achieving positive school environments and reducing student suspensions for nonideal behaviors (Garnett et al., 2020). According to Garnett et al. (2020), a school district's implementation process for RPs should include: (a) determining the needs and justification for RPs, (b) instituting ongoing PD of RPs for administrators, (c) the development of initial implementation plans, and (d) conducting follow-up needs assessments of the results for implementation of RP effectiveness. To support this basic qualitative study, the RJ in education critical theory was used (Vaandering, 2010). The logical connection between this conceptual framework is that the critical theory of RPs in education supports a deeper understanding of how school administrators perceive RP implementation's influence on student behavior. Furthermore, this theory supports the need for school principals' implementation of RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures in schools to highlight the significance of building safe school communities. According to Vaandering (2010), RPs address student conflict, behavior challenges, and how each element plays an integral role in principals' perceptions to transform the culture of the school system's discipline approaches. I used this theory to develop an interview protocol containing the interview question.

Nature of the Study

A basic qualitative research design was used to gather data to explore administrators' perceptions regarding RPs to address student misconduct. Moreover, administrators' perceptions were explored in this study using semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews create an in-depth understanding of conversations between the researcher and the interviewees, which may lead to follow-up questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This research approach provided a deeper understanding of how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs as discipline interventions to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions. In this study, I used semistructured interviews and coding guidelines to explore middle school administrators' perceptions of using RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions (see Saldaña, 2016).

I used purposive sampling to recruit administrators in the Southwestern United States. I recruited five certified principals, two certified RP coordinators, one executive director of student services, and one coordinator of student services. The selection criteria included administrators who have been at the research site for a minimum of 3 years. I ensured the privacy and confidentiality of the participants for the semistructured online interviews that lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour.

The interview data were transcribed and digitally recorded with the participants' permission. Member checking was used to review the recorded transcripts for accuracy. According to Brit (2016), member checking is a technique used to validate participant or respondent data to examine the credibility of results in qualitative research. Interview data were organized into first cycle and second cycle coding for emergent themes based

on administrators' perceptions of the use of RPs implementation to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions; a Google Doc was created to record participant responses codes. A basic qualitative study is conducted to address *how* or *why* questions concerning a phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2018). Also, a basic qualitative study reflects the aspects of data collection and analysis in relation to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018).

Definitions

Restorative practices: An alternative disciplinary method to substitute zero-tolerance punitive practices (Lodi et al., 2021).

Student misconduct: Distracting behaviors inside the classroom or outside the classroom that violate a school district's student code of conduct (Dierendonck et al., 2020).

Suspensions and expulsions: Removal of students from classroom instruction for disciplinary reasons (Nishioka et al., 2020).

Zero-tolerance discipline practices: Systems that use punitive and exclusionary practices (e.g., suspensions) to control and manage student behavior (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020).

Assumptions

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), researcher assumptions include their beliefs, values, and experiences of a phenomenon. The conceptual framework is a way to seek out a range of feedback and perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This study was conducted with the following assumptions: (a) administrators' will have perceptions of

the use of RP implementation as a replacement for disciplinary methods, and (b) administrators will agree to describe their perceptions of how their use of RP has affected the reductions in student suspensions and expulsions; furthermore, how RPs discipline interventions influence administrators shift from disciplinary managerial structures in school systems to build better learning communities (Vaandering, 2010). This basic qualitative study supported these assumptions based on the study methodology, interview data collection, and research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

Perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their schools were explored through semistructured interviews. In addition, the topic of study was examined to gain a deeper understanding of how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their school as a replacement for disciplinary approaches for student misconduct.

RPs are promising alternative intervention approaches to discipline in schools that highlight the benefits of promoting communication and expressing thoughts, feelings, and learning opportunities (Skrzypek et al., 2020). RP implementation supporting literature has far exceeded the available research, which is primarily focused on specific outcomes; however, a vital exclusion is student voices. Although there was not a lack of supporting literature on RP implementation to address student discipline, evidence leads to a gap in practice of administrators' perceptions on how to use RPs as a replacement for disciplinary methods. This basic qualitative study was limited to one school district in a

Southwestern state in the United States. The interview question aimed to better understand how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their schools.

The results and information from this study could be shared with other districts to encourage schools to develop step-by-step restorative discipline intervention and evaluation guides that help principals understand disciplinary intervention strategies to increase student achievement and reduce student expulsions and suspensions. In addition, school administrators can use the study data collection, data analysis, and participant outcomes to deepen the facilitation needed for ongoing PD to aid school and district administrators to become transformational leaders. Finally, this study has implications for positive social change in that it may enhance school climates, reduce suspensions, and improve student achievement in underserved populations.

Limitations

This basic qualitative case study included interviews with middle school and district administrators in a school district in one state. High school administrators were not invited to participate in this study. Participants invited to participate in this study only included middle school and central office administrators who had served in their roles for a minimum of 3 years. The interviews lasted about 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Significance

This study is significant in that it provides insights into how administrators perceive the use of RP implementation in their schools to reduce student suspensions and expulsions. Rainbolt et al. (2019) indicated the need for ongoing PD implementation of

RPs. In addition, the study may encourage schools to develop step-by-step restorative discipline intervention and evaluation guides that help principals understand the disciplinary intervention strategies to increase student achievement and reduce student suspensions and expulsions. Finally, this study has potential implications for positive social change because it could decrease student removal from the instructional learning environment, increase student achievement, and promote a positive campus climate.

Summary

The framework used to ground this study was the critical theory of RJ in education (Vaandering, 2010). RJ supports the need for school principals' implementation of RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures in school systems to highlight the significance of repairing relationships to build safe school communities. According to Vaandering (2010), RPs address student conflict and behavior challenges and how each element plays an integral role in principals' perceptions to transform the culture of school systems' discipline approaches. Moreover, the critical theory of RP implementation in education focuses on how principals developed and emphasized the conceptual, analytic framework about the sustainability of power relationships that influence student discipline.

The framework presented in this study is that the critical theory of RPs in education supports a deeper understanding of how school administrators perceive the use of RP implementation influences student behaviors. The critical theory supported the development of the interview protocol and was used to collect and analyze interview data. The critical theory of RPs in education informed the study on how principals

perceive RPs' influence on student conduct, the development of relationships, and the school community to reduce the number of student suspensions and expulsions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

RPs were designed as an effective relational approach to building positive school culture, addressing student behavior, and promoting student achievement (Armour, 2018). The literature suggests that administrators who participate in PD on the use of RPs as a discipline intervention see decreased school misbehaviors and administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of RPs as a disciplinary intervention increase (Acosta et al., 2019). Additionally, administrators' use of RP implementation indicated two main advantages that influence student behavior: (a) a reduction in administrators' disciplinary practices and (b) the creation of a more holistic positive school culture (Garnett et al., 2020).

Implementing RPs as a replacement for student discipline interventions is required in a public school district in the southwestern United States. In 2016, school principals and district administrators were provided PD on using RPs to reduce student suspensions and expulsions; however, despite interventions to decrease the incidence of student expulsions and suspensions, student misconduct increased. The problem addressed in this basic qualitative research study is that despite RP implementation interventions to decrease student expulsions and suspensions in a Southwestern state's school district, student misconduct increased. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions of the use of RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the study site schools. The rest of this chapter will include a literature review of the current research related to the topics

outlined in this study. First, the search process for this topic is described, including the search engines used to obtain scholarly resources related to the study topic and the keywords used to filter content. Second, the literature associated with the key concepts and conceptual framework is explored. Last, a summary ends the chapter and recapitulates the main focal points from the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

This literature review was conducted using multiple sources, including online search engines and the Walden University Library. To find current literature, Google Scholar, Sage Inc., and ProQuest were used to access scholarly, peer-reviewed articles and journals. Search topics included the following: *influence on student behavior*, *traditional student discipline practices*, *professional development*, and *step-by-step implementation of student discipline interventions*. Keywords used in the search engines related to the study topic included *restorative practices*, *restorative justice*, *equity*, *campus climate/culture improvement*, *restorative practice implementation*, and *student disciplinary approaches*.

The literature search process was repetitive, and the search often yielded results from the same journals and scholarly articles. Initially, RP was the main topic searched; however, when I would explore more specific topics, such as *RP implementation in schools*, *RP to replace discipline practices in middle schools*, and *the effectiveness of RP in public schools*, other concepts such as RJ in schools were found. The search engines revealed that RPs and RJ can be used interchangeably. The specific terminology used enhances the quality and rigor of RP literature related to this study.

Conceptual Framework

This basic qualitative case study was grounded on Vaandering's (2010) critical theory of RJ in education. School principals often implement RJ to replace managerial-style disciplinary structures in school systems with methods that support repairing relationships to build safe school communities. Moreover, the critical theory of RJ in education is often used to support school principals in their development of a framework that leverages the power of relationships to influence student discipline. In addition, the critical theory of RJ in education supports the need for sustainability and transformative potential to allow administrators to repair harm and move from the margins to the mainstream of schooling discipline interventions. For example, the critical theory of RJ in education highlights the depth of influence educator approaches to student behavior have on student learning and focuses on a need to reflect critically on institutional structures of rule-based justice in school. The connection between the critical theory of RJ or RPs in education is grounded in the conceptual framework of justice and fairness with two main principles: (a) distributive justice focusing on having equal basic liberties and (b) the difference principle that centers on inequalities that exist within all social systems that were not designed to benefit the least advantaged in education and society.

The literature suggests that the critical theory of RJ in education highlights a misunderstanding of its intent in school systems to address student behaviors. RJ practices in schools should have a clear vision, and pedagogical implications show that the concept's significance is to change rule-based, managerial structures in school systems to relationship-based to strengthen community structures (Vaandering, 2010).

For example, administrators' implementation of the RJ focal point must highlight the overall goal to redirect student misbehavior, emphasizing building a connection with the student based on trust, fairness, and equitable approaches with the absence of punitive methods.

Rather than ignore problem behaviors, as some critics of RJ suggest, educators who implement RJ in schools are focused on shifting from inequitable and harmful practices in school systems that are highly punitive and destructive to more inclusive practices that promote relationship building and community (Garnett et al., 2020). Furthermore, the critical theory of RJ in education describes ways to transform society's perspectives of justice in school systems and discipline methods. This paradigm shift might include the abandonment of widely used exclusionary practices such as student suspensions and expulsions to restorative discipline interventions.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Restorative Practice Implementation

RP in education has evolved from the principles of RJ as interchangeable terminology that refers to processes by which harm is repaired for all stakeholders. RPs were introduced to schools as an alternative means to deter negative behaviors, improve student achievement, and create a positive school climate (Armour, 2018). Former President Barak Obama's administration embarked on several initiatives to encourage schools to move away from suspensions and employ alternative strategies. As a result, the use of alternative approaches to address school suspensions and expulsions decreased by 20% (U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights 2014).

RPs have positively influenced school communities that go beyond the positive implications for student discipline. For example, Moir and MacLeod (2018) determined that, in addition to decreased student suspensions for non-ideal behavior and improved procedures for how administrators and teachers address student disciplinary issues that affect student success, RPs improved student decision-making skills. Implementing restorative circles, a critical practice in RP, empowers students to advocate for justice and positively support diversity, equity, and inclusion (Lustick et al., 2020).

RP has been used to shift school culture, address the limitations of more widely used punitive disciplinary approaches, involve students in the consequences of their actions, and influence the restoration of the community. Administrators who implement RPs must be willing to transform the entire school culture to embrace the RP approach to address students' misbehaviors. As administrators use RP implementation to manage student behavior, build relationships, and reduce punitive discipline approaches, they also must gain staff and community support to sustain RPs. School staff and others within the learning community must imitate the leader's approach and adopt the leader's principles for change to create an environment that supports ongoing RP (Brown et al., 2019). Therefore, school leaders should model transformational leadership principles to focus on bringing about measurable, positive change in their school communities (Shields & Hesbol, 2019).

RPs address student conflict and behavior challenges to promote healing rather than retribution. For example, when harm has been done in a school community, administrators' implementation of RP provides students the opportunities to learn from

their mistakes and understand the importance of classroom rules and expectations. RP promotes prosocial behaviors and positive interpersonal skills (Skrzypek et al., 2020). Additionally, the implementation of RPs requires a whole-school approach to shifting school climate and increasing student awareness of their decision making for ideal behavior (Gregory et al., 2020).

Although many educators regard RPs as simply a tool to address student misbehavior, RP implementation also enhances the development of student social skills, coping skills, resilience, and decision-making skills when faced with adversity (Kehoe et al., 2018). Therefore, RPs implementation has influenced administrators to support and guide teachers in their approaches to classroom and behavior management (Gray, 2021). According to Short et al. (2018), there are core components of effective RP implementation, including a focus on empathic, nonpunitive communication, and ongoing PD for administrators and teachers. When these core components are included as part of an RP implementation plan, there is a decrease in teachers' and administrators' disciplinary communications and an increase in student disciplinary interventions (Short et al., 2018).

Professional Development

PD initiatives are often offered as a school's or district's response to mandates or policies. Policies are developed from legislation such as No Child Left Behind. Within those initiatives, the federal government has advocated the importance of teachers' PD to meet legislative requirements (Martin et al., 2017). PD becoming an effective mechanism for improving student outcomes depends largely on the facilitator's ability to bridge

divides among teachers' and administrators' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Three structural features of PD must be considered: (a) the form in which PD is delivered, (b) the duration of the PD, and (c) the type of collaborative participation that takes place. Facilitators of PD aim to help educators establish a repertoire of skills, knowledge, pedagogical approaches, methods, and appropriate teaching practices (Bălan, 2021).

Ongoing PD, such as PD that occurs within professional learning communities, has specific times dedicated to effectively maintaining and sustaining components that aid educators and administrators in the classroom and the wider school community. For example, without PD centered around school academic and disciplinary practices, opportunities for equitable practices could lead to student misconduct (Garnett et al., 2020). Garnett et al. (2020) found potential challenges and opportunities related to RP implementation. The authors presented implications for staff PD to sustain the implementation of disciplinary interventions to reduce student expulsions and suspensions (Garnett et al., 2020).

Gregory et al. (2020) indicated a gap in practice results from the lack of educational leaders to advance comprehensive, equity-oriented whole school RP implementation initiatives to reform exclusionary student disciplinary practices. However, this gap may be closed with ongoing PD (Gregory et al., 2020). According to Armour (2018), effective instruction leads to improved student outcomes, and ongoing teacher PD is instrumental in that improvement. However, PD and educational policy take time to design, and ongoing commitment to the desired results yields positive social change.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the proposed schools. The literature review revealed that implementing RPs as a replacement for disciplinary approaches to addressing student misconduct is effective at reducing office referrals, student expulsions, suspensions, and building relationships. In addition, educators who have implemented RPs community circles to address student disciplinary incidents and allow students to express emotions develop positive relationships with their students, and their students perform higher academically and behaviorally (Lenertz, 2018). The next chapter will include the research methodology for this study and provide information about the design, participant recruitment, participant selection, participant data collection, and data analysis. In addition, the next chapter will include ethical procedures used to mitigate threats to the study's trustworthiness, participant privacy and confidentiality, and safety. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the study site schools. Even though RPs were mandated as an approach to building relationships, creating a positive school climate, and reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices, there is minimal understanding of how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student suspensions and expulsions. The study participants included administrators at a public school in the southwestern United States. I used a basic qualitative research design to understand better how administrators perceive and describe their use of RPs to reduce student expulsions and suspensions; my design involved collecting and analyzing data close to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). Vaandering's (2010) critical theory of RJ in education grounded this study.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design for this exploratory study and provide details of how administrators' perceptions were explored using semistructured individual interviews. This discussion will also include the method for participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis process. I also discuss the role of the researcher, including my proximity and positionality relative to the participants, ethical considerations, and ways I plan to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. Finally, this section will conclude with a summary that is an overview of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question that guided this basic qualitative study was designed to provide insight into the problem that there was a minimal understanding about how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student suspensions and expulsions. Steered by the research question, I collected data to explore how administrators describe RPs as a discipline intervention to address student suspensions and expulsions. The following research question guided this study:

RQ: How do middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at one school district in the Southwest United States?

Qualitative research involves the use of interpretive approaches as tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized forms; this research evokes epistemological (knowledge), ontological (reality), and axiological (values) reflection to learn how people perceive and interpret their life experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative research's multifaceted approach allows a researcher's perceptions, meanings, and ideologies to evolve naturally, decreasing a researcher's threat of bias and increasing accurate and ethical reports of the phenomena's outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conversely, researchers use numerical data in quantitative research to study relationships between people and a phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because I was exploring administrators' perceptions and descriptions of their use of RPs to reduce student suspensions and expulsions, I employed a basic qualitative method in this study.

Role of the Researcher

A qualitative approach risks being influenced by a researcher's proximity to the study topic and the researcher's bias or previously held ideas of what they may think they know (Patton, 2015). My role as the researcher in this study was to conduct a study in a manner that would mitigate any threats of researcher bias or assumptions based on my knowledge of and proximity to the research topic. At the time of this study, I had 6 years of experience as a practitioner of RPs. A challenge I anticipated was my unconscious biases associated with my previous experiences implementing RPs. I used purposeful sampling to select participants I had not supervised.

Methodology

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the study site schools. A basic qualitative study design was most aligned with the problem and purpose. I conducted semistructured interviews in this study to collect data from school administrators. To promote consistency and flexibility, I developed and used an interview protocol containing open-ended questions that each participant was asked and a script I used to introduce and conclude the interview.

All interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission, and following the interviews, all collected data were transcribed. Participants were provided a copy of the transcript of their interview to review for accuracy and trustworthiness. In addition, data were organized and prepared for first cycle and second cycle coding for the examination of emerging themes from participants' responses.

Participant Selection

For this basic qualitative study, I used purposeful sampling to recruit 12 participants. To be eligible for this study, participants needed to have served in their role for a minimum of 3 years. Furthermore, they needed to have direct experience actively monitoring the use of RPs as a replacement to address student misconduct. In addition, participants were selected due to their knowledge, reality, and values related to the phenomena of RPs (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The participants were recruited via an emailed invitation, which contained pertinent information regarding the study. In addition, participants were asked to provide informed consent to participate in the study and were notified of ways I would protect their privacy and data.

Instrumentation

I used semistructured interviews to explore how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student suspensions and expulsions. Semistructured interviews involve using a predetermined, consistent set of questions to collect qualitative data; however, the questions may be slightly modified with follow-up questions based on a participant's response (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The follow-up questions I asked supported natural conversations with the study participants, which led to a comfortable data collection environment where the middle school administrators could feel at ease. Qualitative semistructured interview questions empower and amplify participants' life experiences and belief systems through engaging dialogue, interviews, and surveys, making the participants' collected data a vital predictor for real-world implications for social change (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

In this study, an interview protocol was used to ensure consistency during the data collection process, including the methods for obtaining, recording, and reporting what I heard during the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each interview lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. In addition, all collected interview data were digitally recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Qualitative research includes multiple open-ended approaches to exploring individuals' perspectives or perceptions about a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). Therefore, I focused on exploring administrators' perceptions of implementing RPs as a replacement for traditional disciplinary methods as an approach to decrease student suspensions and expulsions. The participants included middle school campus administrators, central office administrators, and restorative coordinators in the southwestern region of the United States, where I was employed at the time of the study.

For this study, participants were recruited based on their proximity and knowledge of their role as restorative practitioners. Purposive sampling was used to select potential school administrators I have not directly supervised. In addition, each participant was required to have served in their role for a minimum of 3 years.

Upon receiving approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school district's IRB (Appendix A) to collect participant data, I invited each potential participant by email with detailed study information. The email invitation to each participant included the study's nature, background, and purpose. In addition, the email asked for participants' consent, and participants were assured the

privacy and confidentiality of their data would be maintained. Also, participants were informed that all collected interview data would be digitally recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to respond to the email invitation to indicate whether they wished to participate in the study. I provided contact information to the participants so they could ask clarifying questions about the study before providing consent to be a part of the study. Additionally, I assured participants their identities would remain anonymous.

After receiving informed consent from the study participants, I provided more in-depth details about the study (Appendix B). Then, I scheduled interviews that lasted approximately 1 hour with each participant. Finally, I sent individual Zoom links based on an agreed-upon time and date convenient for the study participants. Before the semistructured interviews, I created an interview protocol (Appendix C) that included the interview questions. This ensured that I maintained organization.

During the data collection process, I took notes to guide follow-up questions used for any interview questions, for second cycle coding, and for participant debriefing. I informed participants they would receive a copy of their interview transcripts following their interview. I provided all participants with contact information so they could ask questions about the interview process.

Data Analysis Plan

This study was conducted to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at the schools under study. The following research question guided this study:

RQ: How do middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at one school district in the Southwest United States?

Data were collected using individual semistructured interviews. Ravitch and Carl (2021) indicated that research questions are the guide that prepares the structures for the researcher to learn, reflect, and engage with dialogue partners and are essential throughout the research design of a qualitative study. After the data were collected by video recording, journaling, and follow-up questions, participant data were organized and prepared for first and second cycle coding. During the first cycle, I analyzed the data to identify patterns among the data. Patterns are established with the following components in transcript coding: similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation (Hatch, 2002). Then, I grouped codes into categories by organizing multiple coding groups according to similarities, differences, or general concepts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). After the qualitative data analysis of first-round coding and categorizing, I read and reevaluated participants' interview responses to identify recurring patterns and themes that became prevalent after further reviewing the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, I asked a peer reviewer to review the interview transcripts.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and validity ensure credibility and rigor in a qualitative research study. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is used to examine the extent to which a person may have faith in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the

trustworthiness of qualitative research must consider four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is connected to the research design and the researcher's instrument used to collect data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure credibility, I ensured that all study participants had access to the details of the study before conducting the interviews. Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to confirm validity and credibility and reduce researcher bias (Candela, 2019). In addition, member checking helps the researcher to ensure interview transcripts are accurate (Creswell, 2016). I shared the recorded transcripts with each participant.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of a study to a wide range of settings while still maintaining the specific context of the research question (Carminati, 2018). For example, a researcher could ask the same contextual questions to a different participant, and the outcomes would be replicated. To ensure transferability, I used a pre-designed interview protocol to ask participants the same questions. I also used the design alignment tool and dissertation rubrics to adhere to general formats that any research may follow.

Dependability

Qualitative research's dependability refers to the data's consistency and alignment with the research question (Shento, 2004). However, dependability is challenging to predict in a changing social world (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Therefore, I recorded

interviews during the data collection process and immediately downloaded the transcribed responses to mitigate potential researcher bias or inaccuracy of the participants' responses. I was prepared to report any discrepant cases. However, there were none.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research regards whether the data analysis was coherent and whether the interpretations based on that data were fair (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, to assess the confirmability and dependability of a study, different questions should be put forth that are highly similar (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). Therefore, I used an interview protocol to confirm that participants would be asked the same questions.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical issues must be considered when conducting a qualitative study so that the integrity of the study is maintained and participants feel safe. These ethical considerations include the researcher's positionality, unconscious biases, and confidentiality (Bourke, 2014). Positionality may refer to a researcher's identity or role relative to the phenomenon or study site (Bourke, 2014). Although the researcher's positionality can be advantageous to the understanding, shared beliefs, and direct involvement in the study phenomena, it can also pose issues and challenges to the fidelity of the empirical data collected. In addition, the researcher's Positionality can enhance the study's focused goals or create researcher biases (Bourke, 2014).

To ensure the safety of the study and the adherence to ethical guidelines, the IRB must ensure that all research complies with the university's ethical standards and U.S. federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval are required before participant recruitment, data collection, or dataset access. Before conducting the study, I obtained IRB approval to recruit participants, collect and analyze data for the study site, and proceed with my research.

During the recruitment process, I provided each participant with an overview of the study, the purpose of the study, informed consent and agreement forms, and a disclosure form that will indicate the voluntary nature of the study. I assured the study participants that their privacy would be protected with the use of pseudonyms to conceal their identities and permanently destroy their data should they decide to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' data were stored on a flash drive and a folder that required a passcode. The flash drive and folder will be destroyed in 5 years following the completion of the study. In addition, I committed to taking all precautions to protect the identity of the research site by refraining from including any information that might be connected to the site.

Summary

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative research study was that despite RP implementation interventions to decrease students' expulsions and suspensions in a Southwestern state's school district, student misconduct increased. At the study site, administrators received PD using the recorded transcripts for student misbehavior; however, it was unknown how administrators perceived RPs effectiveness. Using a basic

qualitative study design, I explored how administrators describe their perceptions of the recorded transcripts implementation to address student misconduct. I consistently focused on mitigating potential ethical issues. For example, I used purposeful sampling to ensure that I had not previously acted in a supervisory role over any of the participants of this study (Patton, 2015). In addition, I recorded the interviews to ensure that I captured the participants' responses accurately (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Also, to maintain the trustworthiness and confirmability of the participant responses, participants were sent copies of their interview transcripts within one week to review the transcripts for accuracy.

In the next chapter, I will include the results of this study. First, the study site of will be described. Second, details about the data collection process and the study's outcomes will be discussed. Third, evidence of the four elements of trustworthiness will be discussed. Last, a summary of chapter 4 will conclude the chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to reduce suspensions and expulsions in a public school district located in the Southwestern United States. The research question that guided this study sought an understanding of how middle school administrators describe their use of RPs to reduce student suspensions and expulsions. In this chapter, I describe the study setting, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Then, the methodology used for data collection and analysis in this study is presented. Trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformity are suggested. Finally, I conclude with a summary and the results.

Setting

The setting of this study was a public school district. Purposive sampling was used to recruit middle school administrators who had served in their roles for a minimum of 3 years and were knowledgeable about implementing RPs. Nine administrators consented to be interviewed. I contacted these administrators via email. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to provide anonymity during the transcription process. Each participant was interviewed virtually using Zoom on a mutually agreed-upon day and time.

Demographics

Nine participants were interviewed in the study. Three participants were women, and six were men. Table 1 illustrates the participant profiles, including the number of

years they have been administrators, their gender, and the years they implemented RPs.

The average number of years each participant served as an administrator was 7.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

	Years as an administrator	Years implementing RPs	Gender
Participant A	4	4	Female
Participant B	5	4	Female
Participant C	9	4	Male
Participant D	4	3	Male
Participant E	15	10	Male
Participant F	4	15	Male
Participant G	18	5	Male
Participant H	12	3	Female
Participant J	3	21	Male

Data Collection

Semistructured interviews are used to reach an in-depth understanding of conversations between a researcher and an interviewee, which may lead to follow-up questions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, I developed an interview protocol (see Appendix C). The interview protocol included: (a) screener questions, (b) an introduction regarding the study, (c) the interview questions, and (d) a closing statement informing the interviewees that they would receive a copy of the interview transcript for their review in case they had any questions or wanted to add any other information about the interview questions.

I used an audio recording device to store the interview data. I collected data from all participants within 4 weeks. Each study participant was sent an individual Zoom meeting link to join the interview session; links were sent via email to an email address

participants provided. The interview data have been stored on a password-protected laptop computer that is in a locked file cabinet in my home.

As outlined in the data collection process in Chapter 3, and per IRB guidelines, I emailed each potential participant a leader letter of consent form (see Appendix B) requesting their voluntary participation in the study. Participants agreed to participate in the study interview. The email invitation outlined the nature of the study, the study's purpose, and the study's ethical procedures to ensure privacy and confidentiality for those who agreed to participate in the study's interviews. In addition, I provided each participant with my contact information in case they had questions. Middle school administrators who agreed to participate in the study responded to the email invitation: "I consent." I informed each participant that they could withdraw from participation in the interview recording and remove themselves from the study at any time. Before starting each interview, I asked each participant if they had any questions or concerns. I asked their permission to begin recording their interview responses. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent.

I proceeded to record the audio of the interview via Zoom conferencing. After each Zoom interview recording, I saved the participant's responses and uploaded the recording to Otter.ai software (2018), transcribing the recordings to a MS Word document. I read each transcript after listening to the recordings to ensure the responses were described accurately. I used member checking to review the recorded transcripts for accuracy. According to Brit (2016), member checking is a technique used to validate participant or respondent data to examine the credibility of results in qualitative research.

Interview data were organized into the first cycle and second cycle coding to identify emergent themes. Five years after study completion, all interview transcripts will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

I used the inductive approach in my data analysis. The inductive data analysis approach includes exploring, reflecting patterns in building codes, and identifying key themes (O’Kane, 2021). The inductive approach supports the research findings in a step-by-step process to identify similar responses, command common themes, and emerge themes guided by the research question in qualitative data analysis. Pratt (2019) indicated that inductive data analysis entails following specific sequential steps such as data review and coding outcomes. The inductive approach is used in basic qualitative research in which a researcher is exploring a problem, affecting change, or identifying relevant themes (Mihas, 2019). According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), data analysis involves components of the research question that are a guide that prepares the structure for the researcher to learn, reflect, and engage with dialogue with the interview participants, which is essential throughout data collection.

Data were collected using individual semistructured interviews. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I analyzed each participant’s interview transcript. Next, I organized and prepared first and second cycle coding using a Google Doc. According to Hatch (2002), during the first cycle of coding, a researcher identifies patterns among the data. Patterns are established with the following components in transcript coding: similarity, difference, frequency, sequence correspondence, and causation (Hatch, 2002).

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), grouping codes into categories by organizing multiple coding groups according to similarities, differences, or general concepts develops emergent themes in data analysis.

After the qualitative data analysis of first-round coding and categorizing, I read participants' interview responses to identify recurring patterns and themes that became prevalent after further reviewing the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). Next, I requested a peer reviewer who did not have an affiliation with the study participants or the study site to review the interview transcripts to mitigate researcher biases and ensure accuracy. The primary functions of peer review are to conduct quality control and receive peer feedback during the data analysis process in qualitative research to consistency (see Severin & Chataway 2021). Before sending the transcripts to the peer reviewer, I concealed the participants' identities. Participants' data were stored on a password-protected laptop folder that required a passcode, a flash drive, and an audio recording device to back up the participant responses. According to Saldana (2016), the starting point in qualitative data analysis is reviewing transcribed interview text to systematically transform a large amount of text into concise summaries and organize keywords to form categories and themes.

Coding

Coding is described as a label or a name that clearly describes a particular meaning in a unit in a research study, a transcript in the data analysis process. A data code is short and usually one or two words long (Saldaña, 2016). The participant data I collected through interviews were organized into first cycle and second cycle coding for

emergent themes based on administrators' perceptions of the use of RPs to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions.

First Cycle Coding

Coding in qualitative research enables researchers to identify, organize, and build theories. The roles of open, axial, and cycling coding parts are vital to a study's research goals during the data analysis process. In addition, coding provides opportunities for researchers to immerse in the data. Each stage of the coding process progressively integrates the emergent themes acquired during data collection and continually refines the themes (Williams & Moser 2019). I began my first coding cycle by reviewing each participant's transcript, guided by the research question on how administrators described their perceptions and understanding of RPs. As I analyzed the descriptions of the administrators' responses, I identified beliefs, ideas, key phrases, and keywords from each participant's response. Keywords were identified from each participant's answers to the interview questions, such as *relationships, fidelity, root cause, equity, student voice, reflection, problem solving, repair harm, conflict resolution, consistent communication, partner, and community*.

Second Cycle Coding

After completing the analysis of the first cycle in which I assigned a keyword or phrase to each administrator's response, I began the second cycle of coding the individual participant transcript responses. First, I created a Google Doc to review the codes and color code keywords or concepts that were similar or different. For example, keywords that were similar in participant responses and each subsequent response were color coded

a specific color for identification and development of categories. This coding strategy allowed me to record notes as I analyzed the participant responses to connect the relevancy to the research question. For example, in some participant data, the replies did not answer the research question, and I would ask the question to the participant again to navigate the interview back to the original question. In the next step of second cycle coding, I looked for patterns in the data collected.

In qualitative research, the objective is to gather the perceptions of the phenomenon under study (Ravitch & Carl 2019). As I analyzed the perceptions of how administrators described their use of RPs to reduce student expulsions and suspensions, participants' responses were similar, and some were different. Organized codes and categories describe similarities and differences in the contents of a text that belong together (Saldaña, 2016). Therefore, data responses that stated more than three times, whether different or similar, I coded as a pattern and assigned the responses to categories. Based on the research question, nine categories were developed. The keywords were *relationships, community, student involvement, student investment, preventative, sustainable change, social responsibility, behavioral change, and restoration.*

Emergent Themes

After the qualitative data analysis of first-round coding and categorizing, I recorded the emergent themes developed from the coding and categories of the participants' responses. Table 2 includes codes, categories, and themes collected from the participants' semistructured interviews. The following themes are illustrated in Table 2: RPs support positive relationships, the implementation of RPs involves the student in the

discipline process, RPs reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed, and RPs lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships.

Table 2*Overview of Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Codes	Categories	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships • teacher-student partnership • student-student relationship • relational approach • community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships • community 	1. RPs support positive relationships among educational stakeholders.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • equity • process • student voice • engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student involvement • 	2. The implementation of RPs involves students in the discipline process.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • root cause • proactive • accountability • tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventative • sustainable change 	3. RPs reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem-solving • self- reflection • address actions • repair damage • communication • resolve conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social responsibility • behavioral change • restoration 	4. RPs lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships.

After the data collection, transcription of the participant responses, first cycle, second cycle, and the identified data categories, four emergent themes developed. Coding in qualitative research comprises processes that enable collected data to be assembled, categorized, and thematically sorted, providing an organized platform to deepen the meaning of the research question under study (Williams & Moser 2019). The data that I collected and analyzed from the study participants' interview responses regarding the research question developed four themes regarding the research question that included: (a) RPs support positive relationships, (b) the implementation of RPs involves students in the discipline process, (c) restorative practices reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed, and (d) restorative practices lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships.

Theme 1

RPs support positive relationships among educational stakeholders. Participant J explained how, in using RPs, the student, parent, and administrator must be included to build positive relationships. For example, Participant J stated:

You have to understand, the student's language has to be, I felt, it seemed like to me, you know, so it's more than understanding that it's their perception of that situation. And that's the exact same thing that I'll do with parents' situations with parents, generally, when I'm having those conversations with parents. If it's more of a conference, I usually ask the parent before the conference even starts what it is that they would like to achieve from the meeting, and I make sure that that is

what I use to kind of anchor those conversations. And so, when we kind of go off, I use whatever they say they ultimately want to achieve to get back to that.

The effectiveness of RP implementation in schools is influenced by the partnerships and relationships among internal and external stakeholders in schools. The voices and perspectives of students, parents, and administrators must be included to build trust and support the sustainability of lasting positive change (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Participant C further described how RP strengthens relationships, stating, “RPs are vital in building a relationship because there has been damage that needs to be “fixed” to get kids connected to our school and staff by building positive relationships.” Participant D stated, “RP is a relational approach that provides opportunities to decrease student misconduct... to support the school community, and positive relationships with the teacher, student, parent, and administrator.” Participant F expressed, “ you have to be very intentional about building the trust with parents and students with RPs to help the student not respond...well the same way that was not ideal.” Participant B stated, RP was used like a harm circle where we’re going to put somebody who has done harm like an argument to the community in a place to restore positive relationships.”

Gregory and Ward (2021) indicated RP is a broad range of prevention and intervention activities such as community-building circles to repair harm when conflict arises. In this theme, another example is found when Participant A stated, “The intention of RP is so that the students do not continue to respond in the manner that they typically respond that may be inappropriate but to approach the situation by starting to build positive relationships.” Further, administrators described RP as a method to hold students

accountable for misconduct; however, relationships must come first and be part of the progressive process of addressing student misconduct. Participant E stated,

I think RP in education looks very similar to progressive discipline, which is different from dealing with the peer system as far as you want to try to build relationships and, of course, along the way, holding those accountable, but also giving students and campus leaders the necessary tools and resources to try to rectify whatever shortcomings they may have to support positive relationships.

Participant C responded, “We have to build relationships...Repair harm, relationship, the needs to be fixed.” In addition, Participant G said, “As administrators, we have to help students with misconduct when they may not be receiving guidance at home... which begins with building a relationship with the kid.” Participant H responded, “Restorative practice is not just issuing punishment, but to restore the relationship of harm in the classroom or community.”

The overarching theme described by each participant was that RPs are strategies used to build positive relationships among educational stakeholders. Most often, these strategies are used to repair the harm of student misconduct found in the learning community, which includes administrators, teachers, students, or parents.

Theme 2

The implementation of restorative practices must involve students in the discipline process. Participant A indicated:

RPs affect how an administrator can have a coaching and self-reflection conversation of their misconduct, the steps from start to finish, how their

misconduct affects their discipline placement of in-school suspension or expulsion, and how the misconduct will affect others.

Participant A further elaborated on including students in the facilitation of RPs to repair relationships and restore a sense of community:

Man, how do you think what you did affected your teacher? Are the other kids in the classroom? How's this going? ... at the root of restorative practices is to restore something that's broken. I can always think about it, like an old car... you have an old car... someone's gonna come by and go like, man, there's some value in that car, we just got to get it back in running order.

Participant G also stated:

RP gives students opportunities to solve their own problems and to stop accumulating office referrals. Some of our students lack guidance at home because of working parents and single-parent households... Students need to be more involved in the school system discipline code of conduct.

Other participants described RP should include student voice in strategies to address student misconduct. For example, participant D stated, "RP provides opportunities for student voice, which creates value in the implementation of RP in urban areas with high student suspension rates for students of color." To extend how administrators describe RP, student voice should be included in the discipline process with RP strategies. Participant F indicated all staff must engage in conversations with a student, not only to address the misconduct but also to understand the grassroots of the problem/issue. "What is the students' side of the story about the misconduct?" In

addition, participants described that a willingness to allow students to express their point of view of the misconduct is a vital piece of administrator implementation of RP; otherwise, the misconduct will result in direct punitive results. For example, Participant H stated,

RP forces you to reflect and to change your mindset from punitive to restorative by getting to the Root cause of the misconduct.... The only way to get to the root cause of student misconduct or anything is to involve the student's explanation of what happened and how they could have made a better decision; how will they respond to the same issue moving forward? We have to hear the student out before we just issue punishment.

Additionally, Participant B expressed a similar response, "With RPs, as administrators, we have to try to find the root of the student misconduct, what is causing the issue (such as trauma, things we don't see, or know about the student) ... Trying to solve the problem." Participant C added, "I went to a conference to see how RPs worked...but before that, we watched a restorative circle with the kids expressing how they felt about a situation. It seemed to be very successful." Participant E said, "Communication is key in RP...It builds skills; and shifts from punishment to rebuilding community relationships." Participant J added, "Once you start moving into the high impact stuff (fighting, bullying), RP harm repair circles are actually helping people break down (explain)... like if I were going to help a student who's made some habitual bad mistakes."

Most often, students are not included in the discussion about their discipline when parents and teachers are present in the discipline process. In this theme, to address student misconduct effectively, administrators suggested student voice is essential and should be appreciated in the RP process. Doing so will ensure all parties are heard and their perspectives are understood and respected.

Theme 3

Restorative practices reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed. Participant E described the ways RP is rooted in progressive discipline practices:

[RP] has been more embedded into public ed. and of course started out you know, the corrective system as far as the prison system, judicial, and kind of was embedded as far as best practices into the educational sector. Yeah, restorative practices in education look very similar to progressive discipline...as far as you want to try to build relationships and of course, along the way, holding those accountable, but also giving them the necessary tools and resources to try to rectify whatever shortcomings they may have had...we need to be...looking at any type of support and managers and interventions, that would be one, minimize full removal from the classroom, or any distraction or interruption to the instructional day. So restorative practices really do allow for minimal disruption of the learning environment.

Participant H stated:

RP is a buzzword in education to change the mindset of straight discipline to restorative. For every action, there is a reaction...Um. Like, go back to find the root cause before we react to the action of misconduct. Restorative practice is not just issuing punishment but to restore the relationship of harm in the classroom or community.

In addition, to build on the similarities in responses from both Participants E and H of RP as a strategy to prevent negative behavior before it starts, Participant A said "Front load relationships through RP." Check in and communicate with the student, and be proactive to anticipate student misconduct as a campus leader. Pay attention to the student with intent and not just the behavior to get to the root cause. For instance, physical aggression! Why did the student have physical aggression? Was he being bullied? Restorative is placing support around the student with school personnel and involving the parent... making sure to support the student that is removed from class due to misconduct by having conversations about why and how the student could choose a different path to remain in the classroom.

In another perception of RP being used as a method to prevent negative behavior, Participant G stated,

I know that we are trying to push that more early on because our students, in my perspective, come from different households, so we're trying to do a lot more within the school system by using RPs. In that respect, give kids the opportunity to see how the situation may end up beforehand, and to have them fix their

problems, instead of getting into the system. You start getting students into the system, and they start, you know, accumulating office referrals.

Participant B indicated,

If we're simply reacting to the, the outbursts, and the responses to trauma that our students are going through instead of trying to solve the actual issues, then we're not being restorative...we're going to continue being reactive, the student misconduct is going to get worse and we are not going to solve anything, we must be proactive with student misconduct, because it could be trauma, not misconduct.

Participant C provided a concise response, "I know...I have to be proactive with student discipline." Participant D responded, "I attended a state agency conference to learn how to implement RPs with the proper skillset. I learned that for RP to work effectively, I have to have a relational approach and anticipate student misconduct."

Participant F stated,

I have facilitated training for district administrators on the implementation of RPs. In training them, I told them the two important things to know are to build relationships with students, parents, and staff to be consistent, and to be proactive with the implementation so that a system is being created to work with fidelity.

Participant J stated,

I, personally don't think reacting to student misconduct is sustainable to change student behavior... Instead, I use RP with student misconduct as teachable moments with the students to help them make better or different decisions, for better results for the student.

In this theme, administrators emphasized a need to be proactive when handling student misconduct while utilizing RPs strategies. By being proactive, administrators can set guidelines and goals with students to respond appropriately in situations that may occur. Conversely, administrators indicated that being reactionary to student misconduct can lead to unnecessary student removal from the instructional environment.

Theme 4

RPs lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships. Participant D discussed the influence of RPs on the way they interact with students, stating:

Okay, well, I personally use restorative practices quite a bit. But, ultimately, it helps me with how I engage with my kids, and how we see connect I level; the thing about restorative practices that I like, it's about community, and everyone is equal its equity restorative practices. So that provides a great opening, and dynamic to the relationship when a student can come and communicate with me and see that we're equal partners in the relationship. So, I use it as a daily opportunity to, you know, show that we have shared values; I use it as an opportunity for my students to know that I hear them and that I'm willing to listen to them. But then I also use it to try to help my students resolve conflict and find ways to teach them how to, and I teach them to think critically about how to teach people how to treat them. And I use restorative practices for that. But I also use that for them to learn how to treat others. So, it is a... It's actually really a daily practice. It's something I use daily, especially in the conflict resolution area.

Reflection by the administrator and student is a vital to rethink how RPs are designed to repair harm and hold administrators to using RPs with the fidelity of all students. In addition, Participant B responded to the guiding research question with a different perspective on using RPs; however, the concept of restoring relationships and “rethinking the way administrators handle discipline to get to the “root cause” of the student misconduct is key. For example, Participant B said:

I feel that it's, it's something that has come about in the last few years, it's kind of been one of those just kind of buzzwords that have really come around, within education, really going in and changing the mindset of how we do things from straight discipline, you know what every action comes reaction to trying to, while that still is the case, but going back and trying to find the root of it, using restorative practices using the idea of going in and trying not just to issue a punishment, but restore the relationship.

RPs emerged in various communities, such as schools. RPs are a response to conflict and a preventative approach aimed at building relationships and communities. The goal of RPs is to engage in self-reflection to prevent harmful behaviors toward the future of safety, trust, responsibility, decision-making, and well-being for all the parties involved (Lodi, 2021).

Participant E stated that RPs build relationships and still hold students accountable by giving students and campus leaders the necessary tools and resources to try and rectify whatever “shortcomings” the student may have done and how the administrator reacted to the wrongdoing. Participant E shared similar thoughts about the

benefits of RPs, including those administrators using RPs as a prevention tool to anticipate misconduct, resolve conflicts, and hold students accountable for negative behavior while building positive relationships. In addition, the participant stated,

We've had a shift... or attempted to contemplate and reflect on using RP as our first "go to" always, before we even started talking about a punitive consequence. As we need to be exhaustive and looking at any type of support and managers of preventions, interventions, and student misconduct ... minimize the removal from the classroom, or any distraction or interruption to the instructional day. So, RP really does allow for minimal disruption if used with fidelity.

Participants described their perspectives of RP as a way to rethink, critically think, and still maintain and improve positive relationships among educational stakeholders. For example, Participant H empathically stated,

Um, going back to my previous answer of just bringing the student in... having that conversation of coaching them on what could we have done better... talking them through the steps, you know, walking them through even kind of scripting. Hey, use this vocabulary, this sentence, this phrase, rather than the approach they used or, you know, explaining how that could look for them rather than the path they chose in handling that situation. ...Coaching to realizing how the second path would have probably worked out better rather than going with their initial response. And then again, bringing in teachers, bringing other administrators, and parents, to meet in my office, discussing what's going on, things that the child (the student) has expressed to me, and make sure that everyone is fully aware of

those expressions, of whatever those emotions may be, so that we can all be invested in getting to the root of the problem.

Participant F described improving positive relationships by using RP as a strategy to get feedback on how the learning community at each campus feels about RPs to address student misconduct. For example, Participant F indicated,

We need to map out individual campuses, using campus climate surveys, and find teachers who are naturally gifted in building relationships and getting them to engage in the structure of RP. How they used their structured ability to create restorative practices means that you're creating systems that can be utilized, and not just leaning so heavily on the personalities of each administrator; this promotes buy-in to use RP for student misconduct.

Participant A said,

I focus my attention on the issue of the office referral as a point to open up conversation and talk through the student issue with the student. I will set goals with the student. I celebrate the student if they respond differently to a situation than they may have in the past. I celebrate my students for their rethinking process.

Participant C indicated, "umm. conducting restorative harm circles allows students to reflect on the harm they have done to the teacher and other students with their decision-making." Participant J said, "RP can help me aid the student to reflect on actions and decisions, to break habitual flawed behavior." Participant G extended on the previous response to theme two describing how student voice must be included in the discipline

process. Participant G reiterated, “Give Students opportunities to solve their own problems by allowing them to rethink their decisions and to reflect on whatever guidance they are not getting at home.”

In summary, the participants suggested using RPs to support student self-reflection. Additionally, the participants indicated using RPs as a strategy to promote critical thinking for all stakeholders. Further, relationships are strengthened when all parties contribute to the decision-making process

Discrepant Cases

According to Collins (2018), discrepant cases in qualitative research aid the researcher in reviewing and probing the codes and emergent themes to identify any negations of presuppositions or what were predictions. This approach systematically finds knowledge for data that goes against the dominant concepts. Participant C response indicated that time constraints due to other administrators’ responsibilities and not having clarity on the expectations of RPs, challenged the fidelity and consistency of the use of RPs. In the data analysis, I noted that Participant C reported similar responses to the overarching emergent theme and described their use of RPs to build positive relationships and repair harm to the learning community; therefore, no discrepant cases were found from the data analysis to identify or refute the four emergent themes.

Results

This basic qualitative study aimed to explore middle school administrators’ perceptions regarding using RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions. The research question that guided this study was

RQ: How do middle school administrators describe their use of restorative practices to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions at one school district in the Southwest United States?

The semistructured interviews guided participants to respond to the research question. Data collected from the nine semistructured interview questions assisted me in gathering potential responses and understanding the administrators' perceptions as outlined in my screener questions in the interview guide (see Appendix C). Table 3 illustrates themes, axial codes, categories, and sample excerpts from this study's participants' responses. For example, the interview questions asked to collect participants' perceptions included the following:

- What do you know about the implementation of Restorative Practices (RPs) in education?
- How do you use Restorative Practices at your school?
- How does the implementation of RPs affect student discipline?

Table 3*Research Question Themes, Axial Codes, and Sample Excerpts*

Themes	Axial codes	Sample excerpts
1. Restorative practices support positive relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationships • community 	“...using restorative practices using the idea of going in and trying not just to issue a punishment, but restore the relationship - restoring relationships, rather than strictly being punitive...” (Participant H).
2. The implementation of restorative practices involves students in the discipline process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student involvement • , student investment 	“...Ultimately, it helps me with how I engage with my kids, how we see connect I level, the thing about restorative practices that I like, it’s about community and everyone is equal its equity in restorative practices. So that provides a great open dynamic to the relationship when a student can come and communicate with me and see that we’re equal partners in the relationship. So, I use it as a daily opportunity to, you know, show that we have shared values. I use it as an opportunity for my students to know that I hear them and that I’m willing to listen to them” (Participant D).
3. Restorative practices reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventative • sustainable change 	“...push towards trying to look at the roots of the issues, what is causing these issues? And how do we begin to address the causes because if we’re simply reacting to the, outbursts, and the responses to trauma that our students are going through instead of trying to solve the actual issues, then we’re not? We’re just going to continue...being reactive....” (Participant B)
4. Restorative practices lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social responsibility • behavioral change • restoration 	“...bringing the student in having that conversation or coaching them on what could we have done better, talking them through the steps, you know, walk them through, even kind of scripting...explaining how they could look for [another path] rather than the path that they chose in handling that situation...we can all be invested in getting to the root of the problem....” (Participant H).

The participant's responses described their perceptions of RPs implementation, their use of RPs at their schools, and its effects. For example, Participant D described the use, implementation, and effects of RPs as follows:

Ultimately, it helps me with how I engage with my kids, and how we see and connect at eye level. The thing about restorative practices that I like is that it's about community and everyone is equal; it's equity in restorative practices. So that provides a great open dynamic to the relationship when a student can come and communicate with me and see that we're equal partners in the relationship. So, I use it as a daily opportunity to, you know, show that we have shared values. I use it as an opportunity for my students to know that I hear them and am willing to listen to them.

Different participants' responses described their perceptions of RPs implementation, their use of RPs at their schools, and its effects. For example, Participant H described their use of RP, implementation, and the effects of RPs as follows:

bringing the student in having that conversation or coaching them on what could we have done better, talking them through the steps, you know, walk them through, even kind of scripting...explaining how they could look for [another path] rather than the path that they chose in handling that situation...we can all be invested in getting to the root of the problem...

I was intrigued that the participants' interview responses mirrored my potential answers responses (see Appendix C). However, what was the most intriguing is that I had not asked the study research question specifically. Yet, I asked questions to gain insight

into the study participant's knowledge of RPs in education and their use of RPs without mentioning it as a disciplinary intervention to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions. For example, Participant H continued to expound on their previous response on the use of RPs as a method to address student expulsions and suspension for student misconduct by responding, "using restorative practices using the idea of going in and trying not just to issue a punishment, but restore the relationship - restoring relationships, rather than strictly being punitive."

Participant B described the use, implementation, and effects of RPs as follows:

...push towards trying to look at the roots of the issues; what is causing these issues? And how do we begin to address the causes, because if we're simply reacting to the, outbursts, and the responses to trauma that our students are going through instead of trying to solve the actual issues, then we're not. We're just going to continue...being reactive...

The data analysis of the participant's responses showed evidence of an overarching consensus of how administrators described their use of RPs to reduce expulsions and suspensions in their schools was based on relationship building, student's voice, reflective practices to not directly resort to punitive consequences, and improve relationships for eight study participants responses. On the other hand, the data showed discrepant evidence. For example, one of the administrators in this study, Participant A, stated the administrators did not use RPs at their school in the discipline process of student misconduct. For example, Participant A said:

I haven't used restorative practices in the aftermath of misconduct happening. Well, I haven't done that yet. Like, we haven't used it in a restorative manner. Not on my previous campus, or here. Now, what does that look like next year? That I don't know, either.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and validity are used to evoke the importance of ensuring credibility and rigor in a qualitative research study. Trustworthiness in qualitative research examines the extent to which a person may have faith in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the trustworthiness of qualitative research must consider four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Credibility

In qualitative research, *credibility* is connected to the research design, and the researcher's instrument used to collect data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, I ensured credibility by informing each study participant of the nature of the study and the purpose of the study. The study participants were informed that they would have access to the study details before conducting the interviews. The recorded transcripts were shared with each participant, and all study participants received a copy of their interview transcripts. I emailed all study participants a copy of their transcripts from the recorded Zoom interviews for accuracy and to invite the participants to add any additional information to the initial interview process.

Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to confirm validity and credibility and reduce researcher bias (Candela, 2019). I shared the participant's transcripts with a peer reviewer after I removed any responses that would identify the study participants or the research site. In addition, member checking helps the researcher to ensure interview transcripts are accurate (Creswell, 2016) For this study. I reviewed and debriefed my codes, categories, and emergent themes with a doctoral Walden University graduate to check for alignment, coding procedures, developing categories, and emergent themes accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of a study to a wide range of settings, while still maintaining the specific context of the research question (Carminati, 2018). For example, I asked the same contextual questions to different participants, and the outcomes were replicated. To ensure transferability, I used a pre-designed interview protocol so that each participant was asked the same questions. I also used the design alignment tool and dissertation (DAT) rubrics so that other researchers could adhere to general formats of a similar research phenomenon. Finally, I also used the DAT tool to ensure the alignment of the participant responses to the research question.

Dependability

Qualitative research's dependability refers to the data's consistency and alignment with the research question (Shento, 2004). However, dependability is challenging to predict in a changing social world (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Therefore, for this study, I recorded interviews during the data collection process and immediately downloaded the

transcribed responses to mitigate potential researcher bias or inaccuracy of the participants' responses. I also reported no discrepant cases.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research regards whether the data analysis was coherent and whether the interpretations based on that data were fair (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, to assess the confirmability and dependability of a study, different questions should be put forth that are highly similar (Haven & Van Grootel, 2019). For this study, I used a peer reviewer to debrief on all data analysis, including 1st cycle coding, 2nd cycle coding, and emergent themes, to ensure accuracy transferability and mitigate threats of any biases based on my proximity and positionality knowledge of the implementation of restorative practices in education. According to Tennant et al. (2017), peer review is a scientific appraisal process to evaluate transcripts for quality, originality, and validity.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical issues were considered when I conducted this basic qualitative study so that the integrity of the study was maintained and fostered an environment through natural conversation via Zoom so that the participants felt safe and comfortable to share their true perceptions of the research question. These ethical considerations include the researcher's positionality, unconscious biases, and confidentiality (Bourke, 2014). Positionality may refer to a researcher's identity or role relative to the phenomenon or study site (Bourke, 2014). Although the researcher's positionality can be advantageous to the understanding, shared beliefs, and direct involvement in the study phenomena, it can

also pose issues and challenges to the fidelity of the empirical data collected. The researcher's Positionality can enhance the research study's focused goals, or it can create the researcher's biases (Bourke, 2014).

The ethical guidelines outlined in the institutional review board (IRB) and the local school IRB procedures ensured the safety of the study participants. The guidelines were adhered to by being mindful that the research data compiled must follow the university's ethical standards and U.S. federal regulations. The IRB's ethics review and approval are required before participant recruitment, data collection, or dataset access. Before conducting the study, I obtained IRB approval to recruit participants, collect and analyze data for the study site, and proceed with my research.

During the recruitment process, each participant was provided with an overview of the study, the purpose of the study, and informed leader consent agreement forms (see Appendix B). In addition, each participant was emailed a disclosure form that indicated the voluntary nature of the study. The email also included information that the study participant's identity would not be disclosed to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The study participant's privacy was protected by using pseudonyms that concealed their identities. I informed the participants that permanent destruction of their recorded interview responses and digitally generated transcripts should they decide to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' data was stored on a flash drive, and I created a folder that required a passcode. After I completed the study, the flash drive will be destroyed in 5 years following completion of the study. In addition, I took all precautions

to protect the identity of the research site and refrained from including any information connected to the study site.

Summary

In this basic qualitative research study, I explored how administrators described the implementation of RPS to decrease students' expulsions and suspensions in a Southwestern state's school district, despite PD to use RPs as a disciplinary intervention for student misconduct. I will consistently focus on mitigating potential ethical issues. I discovered from the participant transcript responses that the overarching consensus was that RPs are used to foster preventative methods to detour student misconduct, build relationships, promote community, embrace student voices, encourage self-reflection, promote conflict resolution, and identify ways to get to the "root cause" of student misconduct before issuing punitive consequences. I learned that the administrators favored using RPs in their schools to commit to sustainable change, behavioral change, and restoration to repair harm or damage to relationships in the learning environment. All nine participants reported a need for the administrator to include the student in the discipline process to create dialogue for the students to engage in self-reflection, decision making, and how to avoid further misconduct. I have no discrepant case to report in this study's findings. The data analysis specified four themes from the coding of nine participants' transcripts that answered the research question. The themes included:

1. RP support positive relationship among educational stakeholders
2. The implementation of RPs involves students in the discipline process.

3. RPs reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed.
4. RPs lead to reflection and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships.

The themes in this study revealed that the dominant participant perception described how each facet of RP implementation was building positive relationships with students, parents, teachers, and the learning community. Consequently, building positive relationships with RP implementation led to other strategies to manage student misbehavior as outlined in the four themes to implement fidelity. The categories include critical thinking, reflective thinking, engaging in intentional conversations with students to find out the root cause of student misconduct, and progressing student management systems to repair harm to the learning community. In addition, the findings include the importance of receiving feedback on the structures of RP implementation from students, teachers, administrators, parents, and stakeholders to examine the fidelity of implementation on each campus. The results of this study report that fidelity in implementing RP led to repairing harm to the school environment, promoting conflict resolution, improving student decision making, reducing student removals from the class, and improving relational approaches to student misconduct.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the interpretation of the findings, the conclusions, and recommendations for this study and the study site. I will also discuss the limitations of this study. Finally, I will conclude Chapter 5 with implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school administrators' perceptions of using RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions in a public school district in the Southwestern United States. I used a basic qualitative study design to collect and analyze data to examine codes, categories, and emergent themes on middle school administrators' perceptions of how they use RPs in their schools to address student misconduct. According to Ravitch (2021), qualitative research uses interpretive methods to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences. Therefore, I conducted this study to understand better how middle school administrators use restorative practices to reduce student expulsions and suspensions in a public school district in the Southwestern United States.

By gaining a deeper understanding of how administrators describe their use of RPs as a disciplinary intervention to address student misconduct, administrators may be able to support current and future administrators on how to implement RPs to reduce the removal of students from the instructional learning environment. I found that the middle school administrators' study participants described two main strategies regarding perceptions about their RP implementation. Administrators expressed that ongoing PD is imperative to sustain and implement updated strategies of RPs. There is a need to invest in the time to implement RPs as a priority to ensure the fidelity of implementation by all administrators. For example, Participant C indicated that a challenge presented in their

implementation of RPs as a strategy to address misconduct was the time to invest and commit to the process.

The following components of Chapter 5 explain additional results guided by the research question. In addition, Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of the research study findings, study limitations, recommendations based on the findings, and implications for social change based on the study findings—finally, a conclusion of the research study based on the analyzed data.

Interpretation of the Findings

I organized categories in a Google Doc to categorize the data and identify themes. I used first cycle and second cycle coding. The use of RPs is vital to aiding administrators in shifting from immediate punitive practice to a restorative approach to build positive relationships, reflect on discipline strategies of progression to manage student behavior, and avoid administrators assigning immediate disciplinary consequences for student misconduct to create safe school communities. According to Vaandering (2010), the conceptual framework of the critical theory of RJ in education supports a deeper understanding of how school administrators perceive how RP influences student behaviors to reduce student expulsions and suspensions. Vaandering's (2010) critical theory of RJ supports the need for school principals' to implement RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures in schools to highlight the significance of building safe school communities.

Based on the data analysis process, middle school administrators presented a predominant key finding: a need for ongoing PD for administrators to use the

implementation of RPs with fidelity and consistency to address student misconduct.

Tannehill (2021) indicated that continuous PD's effectiveness relies on a leader's interest, ownership, and commitments for personal development and growth to serve students best. Administrators reported that beyond initial PD provided by a school district located in the Southwestern United States to implement administrators' use of RPs to address student expulsions and suspensions, administrators did not attend additional PD.

Administrators reported a need to have access to resources and ongoing PD to extend, sustain, and update strategies of RP implementation to address student misconduct and anticipate prevention strategies to avoid future misconduct. The key characteristics of effective CPD highlight current education trends and serve as a step-by-step guide for educators to better serve the learning environment (Park & Patton, 2017).

The literature indicates there are core components of effective RP implementation, including a focus on empathic, nonpunitive communication and ongoing PD for administrators and teachers. When these core components are included as part of an RP implementation plan, there is a decrease in teachers' and administrators' disciplinary communications and an increase in student disciplinary interventions (Short et al., 2018).

In this study, I identified four emergent themes regarding participants' use of RPs: (a) the need to support positive relationships, (b) including student voice in the discipline process for misconduct, (c) reflects progressive strategies to manage student behavior before negative behaviors are displayed, and (d) promote critical thinking on ways to

improve relationships is key to the effectiveness of RPs as an intervention to reduce the number of student expulsions and suspensions.

Theme 1

The first theme identified was: RPs support positive relationships among educational stakeholders. According to Armour (2018), RPs were designed as an effective relational approach to building positive school culture, addressing student behavior, and promoting student achievement. Additionally, administrators' use of RPs can create two main advantages that influence student behavior: (a) RP discipline interventions can reduce administrators' disciplinary practices, and (b) RP implementation can create a more holistic positive school culture (Garnett et al., 2020). The existing literature supports the findings of this study that RPs that build and sustain positive relationships among educational stakeholders are vital in addressing student misconduct.

Theme 2

RPs involving student voice in the discipline process aid equitable practices and allow students to express their side of the story when addressing student misconduct. The theory of RJ and this study's findings suggest that educators who implement RJ in schools are focused on shifting from inequitable and harmful practices in school systems that are highly punitive and destructive to more inclusive approaches that promote relationship building and community (Garnett et al., 2020). Participant D indicated,

Everyone is equal, and equity is part of RP. Opening dynamics to the relationships that we are equal partners with shared values. Let students know that

I hear them and am willing to listen to their side of the story before acting with punitive methods to address misconduct.

The connection between the critical theory of RJ or RPs (2012) in education is grounded in the conceptual framework of justice and fairness with two main principles: (a) distributive justice focusing on having equal basic liberties and (b) the difference principle that centers on inequalities that exist within all social systems that were not designed to benefit the least advantaged in education and society. In addition, educators who have implemented RPs to address student disciplinary incidents and allow students to express emotions develop positive relationships with their students, and their students perform higher academically and behaviorally (Lenertz, 2018).

Theme 3

RPs reflect a progressive way to manage behavior before negative behaviors are displayed was also a theme that emerged in this study. Participant A expressed, “we need to be proactive with student discipline, which starts with communication with students.” Participant G said, “we need to build prevention systems in RPs that are proactive before students accumulate office referrals.” A positive shift to restorative discipline preventions and interventions occurs when administrative support is used to respond to student discipline. Moreover, RPs are used by administrators to reduce student expulsions and suspensions (Acosta et al., 2019). The literature and this study support the RPs strategies used in anticipation of student misconduct when administrators take the time to implement RPs. Participant E stated, “we have to take the time to ensure that each campus is implementing RPs with fidelity to influence student removal from the

classroom.” The implementation of RPs needs to be examined on how principals implement RPs despite conflicting pressures to maintain order and compel student obedience (Lustick, 2021).

Theme 4

RPs lead to reflection, and critical thinking about ways to improve relationships was a theme in this study. The study findings emphasized reflection and critical thinking in implementing RPs to address student misconduct. RPs address student conflict and behavior challenges in a manner that promotes healing rather than retribution. For example, when harm has been done in a school community, administrators’ implementation of RPs provides students the opportunities to learn from their mistakes and understand the importance of classroom rules and expectations. It promotes prosocial behaviors and positive interpersonal skills (Skrzypek et al., 2020). Participant A said, “you have to help students think and rethink their decisions and how their decisions has impacted the teacher, and other students.” The literature and this study support the implementation of RPs promote critical thinking and reflective thinking with decision-making in student misconduct. For example, Participant J indicated,

We’re going to help a student who’s made some habitual bad mistakes...like to get down and find that root, you know... like root cause analysis of why their thinking is flawed and trying to correct some of that thinking. So, we cannot make this just a punishing moment but also a teaching moment.

In addition, Moir and MacLeod (2018) determined that, in addition to decreased student suspensions for non-ideal behavior and improved procedures for how

administrators and teachers addressed student disciplinary issues that affect student success, RPs improved student decision-making skills. Furthermore, implementing restorative circles, a critical practice in RP, empowered students to advocate for justice and positive support (Lustick et al., 2020). Although many educators regard RPs as simply a tool to address student misbehavior, RPs implementation also enhances the development of students' social skills, coping skills, resilience, and decision-making skills when faced with adversity (Kehoe et al., 2018).

Limitations of the Study

This basic qualitative study had limitations. Although all study designs have limitations, qualitative research design participants are typically selected from purposive sampling, including administrators that have been in their role a minimum of 3 years and are knowledgeable of the use of RPs implementation. Although I collected data from nine administrators beyond the minimum number of participants, the sampling size was small. According to Rijnsoever (2017), a fundamental limitation to qualitative research design is that purposive sampling limits a sample size and population, which lacks the robustness of the research study. Regardless, purposive sampling is a better match for a small sample size of the research objective, therefore, enhancing the rigor of the study for the trustworthiness of the data analysis process and results of the study, such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Campbell et al., 2020).

Another limitation of the study, this study sampling size included middle school administrators in the study site in the Southwestern United States. This study did not have other sampling groups to compare how administrators describe their use of RPs in their

schools to reduce student expulsions and suspension. For example, comparative data were not collected from elementary schools, high schools, or alternative school administrators to examine additional administrators' perspectives at various grade levels. This basic qualitative case study included interviews with administrators in a school district in one state in the US which also prohibited comparative data analysis because the study was open to administrators at the middle school level only. In addition, the number of years each administrator knew RPs implementation varied from 4 to 21 years which may have also influenced a more in-depth understanding of the implementation and use of RPs to address student misconduct based on the number of years. However, all participant's responses to the semistructured interview questions added value to this study by aiding me in developing the analyzed data codes, categories, axial codes, and emergent themes of how administrators described their use of the implantation for RPs to address misconduct.

Recommendations

The recommendations for education leaders should embody continuous training of disciplinary interventions such as RPs to reduce student expulsions and suspensions. In addition, administrator training should be ongoing, including all stakeholders' learning as partners in the process, to better understand RPs implementation to minimize the time students are removed from the instructional environment. In the data collection, I found overarching responses on the importance of implementing RPs with fidelity, sustaining RPs as a disciplinary intervention, the need for more resources regarding RPs, and the critical importance of ongoing PD strategies to prevent misconduct through

communication and community building. For example, study participants confirmed during the data collection process the need to encourage student self-reflection through administrator coaching on decision making, conflict resolution, social responsibilities, and restoration to repair harm or relational damage.

Gregory et al. (2020) indicated a gap in practice results from the lack of educational leaders to advance comprehensive, equity-oriented whole school RP implementation initiatives to reform exclusionary student disciplinary practices. This gap may be closed with ongoing PD (Gregory et al., 2020). Administrators should seek a deeper understanding of RPs implementation to explore the “root cause” of student misconduct. One study participant indicated that PD on using RPs should occur at least five times per school year to ensure consistency with administrators’ implementation of RPs. In addition, the results and information from this study could be shared with other districts to encourage schools to develop step-by-step restorative discipline intervention and evaluation guides that help principals understand disciplinary intervention strategies to increase student achievement and reduce student expulsions and suspensions. Without educators’ PD, school academic, and disciplinary practices, opportunities for equitable practices could lead to student misconduct (Garnett et al., 2020). Garnett et al. (2020) found potential challenges and opportunities related to RP implementation. The participating administrators of this study presented implications for staff PD to sustain the implementation of disciplinary interventions to reduce student expulsions and suspensions.

School Districts

District leaders could consider a commitment to ongoing PD opportunities for administrators to educate campus administrators on new research and strategies for implementing RPs to address student misconduct and build positive relationships. In addition, administrators could empower teachers, students, staff, and other administrators to facilitate PD that has proven success and understanding in the implementation of RPs to build leadership capacity on strategies for discipline intervention and prevention to address student misconduct and reduce student removal from the instructional learning environment.

Future Research

The findings of this qualitative study provide the groundwork for future exploration of this study and other research regarding the implementation of RPs as an approach for administrators to reduce student expulsions and suspension at their schools. Due to the level of the administrative population open to administrators at the middle school level, future researchers could use interview protocol and procedures to duplicate the study in another school district beyond the state of the study. In addition, data could be collected for other grade levels beyond middle school administrators, such as elementary and high school administrators, to compare sampling data regarding how administrators describe their perceptions and outcomes.

Implications

School administrators can use the findings for data collection, data analysis, and participant outcomes to deepen the facilitation needed for ongoing PD to aid school and

district administrators in becoming transformational leaders. Finally, this study has implications for positive social change in that it may enhance school climates, reduce suspensions, and improve student achievement in underserved populations. For example, Participant E expressed, “We must give students and campus leaders the necessary tools and resources to try to rectify their decision and opportunities to repair harm by reflecting and rethinking their part of inappropriate behavior that took away from others learning.” Based on the participant responses, the study findings have further implications for social change by embracing a holistic school approach to disciplinary interventions. For example, administrators are committed to including student voices while directing misconduct, enhancing communication, ensuring sustainable RPs training, encouraging conflict resolution skills, and student investment in administrators use RPs to reduce suspensions and expulsions in their schools. Participant G stated that students have to be given the opportunities to solve their problems and be more involved in the school system discipline process.” Also, using RPs enhances effective instruction, which leads to improved student outcomes, and ongoing teacher PD was instrumental in improving student outcomes in the discipline system. However, PD and educational policy take time to design, and ongoing commitment to the desired results yield positive social change (Armour, 2018).

Conclusion

This basic qualitative study explored middle school administrators’ perceptions of using RP to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their schools. The data literature revealed that implementing RPs as a replacement for disciplinary

approaches to addressing student misconduct effectively reduces office referrals, student expulsions, and suspensions and builds relationships. The need for school principals' implementation of RPs to replace disciplinary managerial structures may build safe school communities (Vaandering, 2010). In addition, educators who have implemented RPs community circles to address student disciplinary incidents and allow students to express emotions develop positive relationships with their students, and their students perform higher academically and behaviorally (Lenertz, 2018).

The data collected and analyzed during this study may transform administrator organizational structures to manage student misconduct to a wholistic equity-based system which includes restoration and repairing harm to the instructional learning environment, school culture, and community relationships.

In conclusion, supporting literature indicated that administrators use RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at schools. A positive shift to restorative discipline interventions occurs when administrative support is used to respond to student discipline. Moreover, administrators use RPs to reduce suspensions and students' expulsions (Acosta et al., 2019). School administrators can utilize the study data collection, data analysis, and participant outcomes to deepen the facilitation needed for ongoing PD to aid school and district administrators in becoming transformational leaders.

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Appendix A: Partner Organization Agreement

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

A higher degree. A higher purpose.

Partner Organization Agreement
for AEAL Dissertation
(content edits not permitted)

May 2022

The doctoral student, **Janis Marie Grace**, will be conducting a dissertation study as part of the AEAL (Education Administration and Leadership for experienced administrators) EdD program. The student will be completing Walden IRB requirements and our organization's research approval processes.

I understand that Walden's IRB has given the student tentative approval to interview leaders (supervisors, board members, PTA leaders, community partners, state department personnel, and similar decision-makers) with whom the student has no power relationship. Details will be created for the final proposal, and the informed consent letter attached will be used. Depending upon the details of the student's study, deidentified organization data* may be requested.

**At the discretion of the organization's leadership, the student may analyze deidentified records including: aggregate personnel or student records that have been deidentified before being provided to the doctoral student, other deidentified operational records, teaching materials, deidentified lesson plans, meeting minutes, digital/audio/video recordings created by the organization for its own purposes, training materials, manuals, reports, partnership agreements, questionnaires that were collected under auspices of the partner organization as part of continuous improvement efforts (SIPs, for example), and other internal documents.*

I understand that, as per doctoral program requirements, the student will publish a dissertation in ProQuest as a doctoral capstone (withholding the names of the organization and participating individuals), as per the following ethical standards:

- a. The student is required to maintain confidentiality by removing names and key pieces of evidence/data that might disclose an organization's or individual's identity.

- b. The student will be responsible for complying with policies and requirements regarding data collection (*including the need for the organization's internal ethics/regulatory approval as applicable*).
- c. Via the Interview Consent Form, the student will describe to interviewees how the data will be used in the dissertation study and how all interviewees' privacy will be protected.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research activities in this setting.

Signed,

Authorization Official Name

Title

This template has been designed by Walden University for the purpose of creating a partnership agreement between an education agency or district/division and a Walden doctoral student in support of that student's dissertation. Walden University will take responsibility for overseeing the data collection and analysis activities described above for the purpose of the student's doctoral dissertation.

Appendix B: Leader Interview Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a leader interview for my doctoral dissertation conducted as part of my EdD in Education Administration and Leadership.

Interview Procedures:

If you agree to be part of this study, you will be invited to take part in audio-recorded interviews about the organization's operations and problem-solving needs. Transcriptions of leader interviews will be analyzed as part of the study, along with any archival data, reports, and documents that the organization's leadership deems fit to share. A copy of your interview recording is available upon request. Opportunities for clarifying your statements will be available through processes of transcript review and member checking. Interviews may take an hour, and each review process may take up to 30 minutes.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. The researcher seeks approximately 8-10 volunteers for this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. My aim is to provide data and insights that could be valuable to this organization and others like it.

Privacy:

I am required to protect your privacy. Interview recordings and full transcripts will be shared with each interviewee, upon request. Transcripts with identifiers redacted may be shared with my university faculty and my peers in class. Any reports, presentations, or publications related to this study will share general patterns from the data, without sharing the identities of individual participants or their employer(s). The interview transcripts will be kept for at least 5 years, as required by my university.

Contacts and Questions:

I am happy to answer any questions you might have about the study's purpose and steps. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is -----. *(The IRB will provide the ethics approval number to the student after the proposal has been fully approved).*

If you agree to be interviewed as described above, please reply to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Date: _____
 Time: _____
 Interviewee Code #: _____
 Location of Interview: Zoom

Parts of the Interview	Interview Questions and Notes
Screener Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you know about the implementation of Restorative Practice (RPs) in education? • How do you use Restorative Practices at your school? • How did you learn about the implementation of RPS? • What do you consider student misconduct? Give examples...
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hi, my name is _____ Thank you very much for participating in this interview today. The purpose of this study is to explore middle school administrators' perceptions regarding the use of RPs to decrease the number of student expulsions and suspensions at their schools. The interview should last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. After the interview, I will be examining your answers for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you in my documents, and no one will be able to identify you with your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. In addition, I need to let you know that this interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. I will send you a copy of the recorded transcript for your review. • Do you have any questions before we begin the interview? • Are you ready to begin the interview?
Question 1	<p>How is the implementation of RPs used as a disciplinary intervention? Possible responses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce student suspensions alternative

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce student expulsions alternative • Build school community • Repair harm • Conflict resolution • Improve communication skills
Question 2	<p>In your school, how has the implementation of RP's been used by you to address student misconduct?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tell me about a time when....
Question 3	<p>How do you think the implementation of RPs in your school has affected student misconduct?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about a time when.... (incident) • Tell me about a time when... (strategy)
Question 4	<p>How do you think the implementation of RPs in your school has not affected student misconduct?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give me an example.... ▪ Tell me why it was challenging....
Question 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ As a school leader, how do you foster a school environment were staff use the implementation or RPs to address student misconduct?
Question 6	<p>What structures do you put in place to sustain the implementation of RPs to address student misconduct?</p>
Question 7	<p>How do you foster relationships with students, staff, parents, and the community to build trust and respect?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tell me about a time when.... ▪ Give me a specific example of a time when... ▪ What did you notice about your relationships with students, staff, parents and the community once trust, and respect were established?
Question 8	<p>What challenges have you faced from staff or parents, as you focused on addressing student misconduct using the implementation of RPs?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Possible responses RP does not hold students accountable

RP is not punitive enough to change student misconduct

- What leadership strategies did you use to manage the challenging situation (if not punitive enough)

Question 9

What resources do you use to learn more about the implementation of RPs as a discipline intervention to address student misconduct?

As a school leader, what are beneficial strategies that you can use to sustain and understand the implementation of RPs in your school?

- Possible responses
 - Professional development (when)
 - Book studies
 - Partnerships with RPs institutes

Close

Thank you for your answers.

Is there anything else you would like for me to know or add to your responses?

You may review your written transcript by sending me an email requesting your transcript.

You will receive the written transcript within 24-48 hours of the request, and you will have a maximum of 72 hours to provide feedback via email.

Thank you for your time, goodbye.
