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Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Using Restorative Practices in Bullying Prevention

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Walden University

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College of Social and Behavioral Health

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Janelle H. Brooks

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Using Restorative Practices in Bullying

Prevention

by

Janelle H. Brooks

MS, Mercer University, 2019

BA, Fort Valley State University, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Counselor Education and Supervision

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

Restorative practices provide alternatives to punitive practices, such as exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance policies. Restorative practices are important for elementary school counselors because they help repair the harm students do to one another while building positive relationships between and among students. A lack of understanding exists in the educational community among teachers, parents, and administrators regarding the impact of restorative practices on elementary school bullying. This qualitative study involved addressing that knowledge gap. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to address the research question, which focused on lived experiences of elementary school counselors regarding their experiences with using restorative practices to prevent or address bullying. Eleven certified or licensed elementary school counselors, who worked in a U.S. public elementary school and used restorative practices with students participated in this study. Data collection included Zoom interviews via a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis approach. Five major themes emerged: educating students and teachers about bullying, responding to bullying with a restorative lens, using restorative practices to lead to positive outcomes, barriers affecting implementation of restorative practices, and level of support when implementing restorative practices. Results from the study confirmed while there are many barriers which prevent effective implementation, use of restorative practices produces positive results for students and staff. These findings could lead to positive social change outcomes by guiding training and policy changes and contributing to school counseling literature.

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Dedication

This dissertation is a dedication to my loving family and friends who supported me throughout my education. Thanks for helping me see this journey through to the end. To my mother, who always instilled the value of hard work and education. To my loving husband, who continuously encouraged me never to give up and who stuck by my side through it all. Additional dedication goes to my children (Kymberlie and Lee). I pray you do not ever take education for granted. Continue to be a lifelong learner, no matter what obstacles may arise.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School bullying is the most widespread kind of youth violence that has become a significant concern for students and a global public health issue (Ahmed et al., 2022). Bullying is a form of systematic abuse of power with aggressive behavior and intentional physical and psychological harm done by peers. It is carried out repeatedly and involves a sense of power imbalance, either actual or perceived, between the bully and victim (Bagla & Saxena, 2020). The 1994 Guns Free Schools Act mandated the suspension of any student possessing a firearm or drugs in school, which created a climate for zero tolerance in schools to expand to less severe behaviors such as disrespect and bullying (Warnick & Scribner, 2020). Zero tolerance policies refer to harsh penalties such as suspension and expulsion that are applied regardless of the context of the student's misbehavior (Edber, 2022). These policies resulted in many adverse outcomes for schools and students, such as high dropout rates, criminal justice involvement, substance use, trauma, and low student achievement (Kyere et al., 2020). Many states and districts across the United States have begun to revise their zero tolerance policies in favor of disciplinary responses that aim to keep students in the classroom. They have revised their laws to require or encourage schools to limit use of exclusionary discipline and implement nonpunitive discipline strategies that rely on behavioral interventions such as restorative practices (Ritter, 2018).

According to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2019), school counselors are systemic change agents in terms of developing and delivering comprehensive school counseling programs focused on academic, career, and

social/emotional development (ASCA, 2019). This includes delivery of direct services such as classroom lessons, small groups, and individual sessions. This also provides for delivery of indirect services such as consultation and collaboration with parents, community stakeholders, teachers, and mental health providers (Swank et al., 2018). According to the ASCA (2022), school counselors must provide services to victims and perpetrators when appropriate, including safety plans and reasonable accommodations such as class changes.

Since school counselors have a crucial role in advocating for students' wellbeing and safety, they must address bullying by assisting with the development, implementation, and communication of school bullying policies, increase school faculty and staff awareness of bullying, teach students how to identify bullying, and implement interventions to address it (Su et al., 2021). School counselors can go into classrooms and provide instruction about signs, dangers, and consequences of bullying to enlighten students and create positive and safe school climates. Counselors can also address healthy conflict resolution strategies, problem-solving, emotion regulation, and anger management. They can also facilitate small group or individual counseling for students who are victims or perpetrators of bullying (Paolini, 2018).

Restorative practices are an alternative to punitive traditional disciplinary practices such as suspension or expulsion (Kim et al., 2023). The purpose of restorative practices is to build, maintain, and repair relationships to form healthy, supportive, and inclusive communities that facilitate optimal learning environments (Davison et al., 2022). One of the main features of restorative practices is the focus on proactively

building relationships among individuals. If harm occurs due to a behavior infraction, students can focus on repairing relationships rather than receiving exclusionary discipline (Kervick et al., 2019). Introducing restorative practices improved relationships, promoted empathy, and encouraged positive behavior within schools (Oxley & Holden, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe school counselors' experiences using restorative practices involving bullying prevention. This needed to be conducted to gain knowledge about challenges and successes school counselors encounter as they use restorative practices to prevent bullying. A potential positive social change implication for this study is that this information can guide training and policy changes, which may in turn better prepare future school counselors to use restorative practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs.

In this chapter, I present the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, conceptual framework, and nature of the study. This chapter also includes a discussion of definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study. Through this qualitative study, I investigated restorative practices that elementary school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors among students. The conceptual framework that grounded this study was Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Background of the Study

According to Hannon et al. (2018), about 21% of students between 12 and 18 reported being bullied at school. More specifically, students from marginalized populations such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and female students, as well as

students of color reported higher incidences of being bullied. Bullying is characterized by repeated victimization involving imbalanced power relationships. Bullying can range from teasing and name-calling to physical and social abuse (Armitage, 2021). Bullying causes many psychological maladjustments, such as depression, helplessness, feelings of isolation, risks to academic achievement, and declines in school participation (Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Choi & Park, 2018; Saini & Balda, 2019; Swank et al., 2018).

Administrators usually handle bullying through zero tolerance policies that rely on suspensions and expulsions. The premise of suspensions is that students who receive them will decrease frequency of their behavior. These interventions, however, are potentially counterproductive (Chu & Ready, 2018; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). Suspension or expulsion leads to low academic achievement, incarceration, and dropping out of school. For bullying prevention efforts to be effective, interventions should be universal and involve parents, students, and school staff (Swank et al., 2018).

Restorative practices are a multitiered system of support that school staff can use to develop positive relationships, foster a positive school climate, and build community (Garnett et al., 2020; Kervick et al., 2019b). Many schools across the county look for restorative practices to improve relationships between students. Restorative practices affect student behavior via addressing such social skills as empathy, respect for others, and accountability (Silverman & Mee, 2018). Restorative practices represent a nonpunitive approach to school discipline that involves relationships, respect, and taking ownership of one's actions (Skrzypek et al., 2021).

School counselors have an active role in bullying prevention and intervention. They work collaboratively with victims to address such issues as control, empowerment, identifying strengths, and confidence. They also work with bullies to determine underlying causes of bullying, such as anger, control, and aggression. School counselors facilitate classroom lessons on signs, dangers, and consequences of bullying, and they facilitate small group counseling services for students who are victims and bullies (Paolini, 2018).

Tanrikulu (2020) revealed the most frequent bullying behaviors were rejecting classmates, joining in games and hitting, slapping, punching, pinching, and kicking classmates. Most bullies are boys, have behavioral problems, demonstrate leadership skills, and are good at expressing feelings (Tanrikulu, 2020). School counselors at Turkish preschools encountered three main types of bullying: verbal insults, hitting others, and provoking others, and bullying occurred when and where there was a lack of adult supervision (Uzunboylu et al., 2017).

Bullying is a problem school counselors have to manage through various intervention and prevention programs, as well as student support in response to instances of bullying in schools. One intervention is providing action plans that are prepared by school counselors for students dealing with violence (Tanrikulu, 2020; Uzunboylu et al., 2017). Training for administrators, teachers, counselors, and other support staff is necessary to gain awareness and develop skills to combat bullying and as well as practices to improve policies in order to reduce and prevent bullying in schools (Tanrikulu, 2020; Uzunboylu et al., 2017).

Al-Raqad et al. (2017) indicated bullying affects victims' academic achievement. Bullying exists in almost every school and having a program in place is necessary to mitigate school bullying due to adverse effects it can have on students' academic achievement, regardless of whether they are bullies or victims (Al-Raqad et al., 2017).

Skrzypek et al. (2021) investigated how restorative practices offer nonpunitive approaches to school discipline and can potentially improve overall school climate, decrease suspensions, and reduce disproportionality in student discipline in a mid-sized northeastern city, and indicated younger students reported learning about their behaviors by participating in restorative practice circles. Students argued circles supported their nonviolent problem-solving skills. Restorative practice circles are beneficial for promoting communication, expressing thoughts and feelings, perspective-taking, and learning opportunities (Skrzypek et al., 2021).

Even though implementing restorative practices comes with its own set of challenges involving time constraints, resistance from staff, and lack of implementation fidelity (Smith et al., 2021), restorative practices are an essential learning opportunity that shaped positive social relationships and benefited behavior and academic achievement (Short et al., 2018).

There is a connection between community-building circles and social-emotional learning (Acosta et al., 2019; Garnett et al., 2022). Students' experiences with restorative practices improved school climate and connectedness, peer attachment, and social skills

(Acosta et al., 2019; Garnett et al., 2022). Restorative model can help promote positive behaviors and social development as well as address bullying.

Even though there is research on the benefits of restorative practices as they relate to improved student achievement, improved school climate, and overall social development, there is still a gap in knowledge regarding the impact of restorative practices on school bullying. There is also a lack of information about elementary school counselors assuming roles involved with leading bullying prevention and intervention efforts through restorative practices. Due to this gap, this study was necessary to explore school counselors' experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying in elementary schools. Findings from this can be used to help inform school counselors and school counselor educator programs about better practices to support bullying issues in students, such as restorative practices.

Problem Statement

This hermeneutic phenomenological study involved investigating restorative practices that school counselors have implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. Bullying is a distressing experience for students because it can cause anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep problems, lower academic performance, and dropping out of school (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena, 2020). Types of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions and expulsions are usually used by administrators to deal with bullying and other forms of school violence. These punishments, however, may worsen rather than improve bullying behavior (Ozada Nazim & Duyan, 2021). Exclusionary discipline is associated with dropping out of school, academic failure, and

incarceration (Chu & Ready, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Kupchik, 2022; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022).

As opposed to exclusionary discipline, restorative practices support students by building, maintaining, and repairing relationships to form healthy, supportive, and inclusive communities and repair harm rather than simply punish (Davison et al., 2022; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). These methods give voice to the offended and provide opportunities for offenders to make amends (Mansfield et al., 2018; Morgan, 2021). Restorative practices include nonpunitive approaches to school discipline and can potentially improve overall school climate, decrease suspensions, and reduce disproportionality in terms of who is disciplined (Skrzypek et al., 2021).

A gap in literature exists regarding how school counselors use restorative practices to address bullying. Learning about experiences of these school counselors may help contribute to school counseling literature and inform leaders in school counselor education programs about providing restorative practices in the school setting as well as ways counselor educators can support elementary school counselors' efforts to curb bullying in schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices that school counselors have implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with school counselors working in pre-K through fifth grade United States public schools. This helped determine successes and challenges they have when addressing bullying using

restorative practice. This information can guide training and policy changes, which may in turn better prepare future school counselors to use restorative practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs.

Research Question

What are lived experiences of school counselors in U.S. pre-K through fifth grade public schools who use restorative practices to prevent school bullying?

Conceptual Framework

Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology involves subjective experiences of individuals and groups and unveiling the world as experienced by subjects through their stories. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach has been widely used to understand meanings of participants' lived experiences in health research. This approach involves recognizing the researcher's role in guiding and interpreting questioning to give voice to participants and explore their experiences (Heidegger, 1996). This framework aligned with my study because I focused on firsthand accounts. Since I aimed to understand the essence of school counselors' experiences using restorative practices involving bullying prevention, hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate research methodology. Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design. With this design, researchers try to gain insights regarding meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Heidegger, 1996). People are a fundamental part of a meaningful world, and can only be

adequately understood as a function of their various involvements with that world. The meaningful world is also a fundamental part of humanity, such that it can only be adequately disclosed and understood as a function of one's involvement with it (Van Manen, 1984). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves either perspectives of objective researchers or focus on interactions between interpreters and text (Grbich, 2013). Hermeneutic phenomenology involves subjective experience of individuals and groups and the world as experienced by subjects (Dangal & Joshi, 2020). This design was appropriate for my study because I focused on interpreting meanings regarding experiences of school counselors as they used restorative practices to prevent school bullying and how this meaningful in the context of their work with students. Data were collected from certified school counselors from U.S. public pre-K through fifth grade schools. It was analyzed using Van Manen's process of phenomenological inquiry.

Operational Definitions

This section includes definitions of key terms that were used throughout the study:

Bullying: Any unwanted aggressive behavior that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times (Bass et al., 2019).

Exclusionary Discipline: A disciplinary action that results in a student's removal from the typical educational setting (Samimi et al., 2023).

Restorative Circles: Restorative practices that involve students sitting openly in a circle and speaking one at a time on a variety of topics (Skrzypek et al., 2020).

Restorative Justice: An innovative approach to offending and inappropriate behaviors that puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over assigning blame and punishment (Samimi et al., 2023).

Restorative Practices: Informal and formal practices that build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing while repairing harm (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

School Counselor: Systemic change agents in terms of developing and delivering comprehensive school counseling programs that are focused on academic, career, and social/emotional development (ASCA, 2019).

School-to-Prison Pipeline: A social phenomenon in which students become formally involved with the criminal justice system due to behavior issues that are addressed by law enforcement rather than school-imposed consequences (Jacobs et al., 2022).

Zero Tolerance Policies: A philosophy or policy that mandates application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Assumptions

One assumption was that participants provided accurate credentials and certifications and were eligible to provide information during interviews. Another assumption was that participants were familiar with and experienced using restorative practices in their comprehensive school counseling programs. I also assumed participants were honest and open when speaking about their experiences using restorative practices

and did not feel the need to provide information they thought I wanted to hear.

Awareness of these assumptions is essential to ensuring data accurately represented participants' lived experiences.

Scope and Delimitations

Through individual interviews, I explored participants' experiences regarding using restorative practices to prevent bullying at their school. This study included licensed or certified school counselors at pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public elementary schools. I chose school counselors because their interactions with students, training, and expertise gave them credibility and insights when sharing their experiences involving using restorative practices to combat student bullying. Findings from my research can be generalized to other contexts and other researchers may transfer study results to other environments.

Limitations

Potential barriers included possible difficulty recruiting participants for interviews. My ideal sample comprised of 10 to 12 pre-K through fifth grade public school counselors. According to Sandelowski (1995), qualitative sample sizes of 10 may be adequate for sampling among homogenous populations. Due to the fact that I work in a school district as a school counselor with other school counselors in my district, my role as a researcher involved remaining neutral and not allowing my personal beliefs to affect research. I bracketed my feelings by setting aside any biases I may have had.

Significance of the Study

My research filled a gap in school counseling and school counselor education and supervision literature by showing how school counselors used restorative practices and what challenges and successes they experienced. This information can guide training and policy changes, which may in turn better prepare future school counselors to use restorative practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs to curb bullying in schools and support their students' mental health and wellness. My research also involved addressing changes in school counseling practices so they might have access to professional development and training within their school districts to gain skills that are necessary to provide restorative practices in their schools. Restorative practices are important for school counselors because they help repair the harm that students do to each other while also building positive relationships between students (Garnett et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2021; Morgan, 2021b; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Another social change implication of my proposed research is more funding from legislators to develop additional training and support for school counselors who want to implement restorative practice programs in their schools and districts in order to help support all students' social and emotional wellbeing, academic achievement, and future career self-efficacy. Results of this study may provide much-needed insights regarding how restorative practices can help reduce students' bullying behaviors in elementary schools.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the study. I provided an overview of current studies on the topics of bullying and restorative practices. A gap in school counseling and school

counselor education research was identified involving experiences of school counselors using restorative practices in bullying prevention. I discussed hermeneutic phenomenology as the conceptual framework for the study. I also presented the problem and purpose of the study. The problem was that exclusionary discipline is used frequently for bullying behavior; however, it worsens negative behaviors they seek to address (Chu & Ready, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Kupchik, 2022; O’Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Samimi et al., 2023; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022a; Wahman et al., 2022; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022).

I aimed to investigate restorative practices that elementary school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors among students. I included a description of the basic qualitative design as well as methodology. I collected data from 10 to 12 participants via individual interviews with school counselors in pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public elementary schools. Lastly, I included operational definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 includes an exhaustive review of literature regarding restorative practices, punitive disciplinary policies, and bullying, as well as a more detailed description of the conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This hermeneutic phenomenological study involved investigating restorative practices school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. Bullying is a distressing experience for students because it can cause anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep problems, lower academic performance, and dropping out of school (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena, 2020). Types of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions and expulsions are usually used by administrators to deal with bullying and other forms of school violence. These punishments, however, may worsen rather than improve bullying behavior (Ozada Nazim & Duyan, 2021). Exclusionary discipline is associated with dropping out of school, academic failure, and incarceration (Chu & Ready, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Kupchik, 2022; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022).

Restorative practices support students by building, maintaining, and repairing relationships in order to form healthy, supportive, and inclusive communities and repair harm rather than simply punish (Davison et al., 2022; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). These methods involve giving voice to the offended and providing opportunities for offenders to make amends (Mansfield et al., 2018; Morgan, 2021b). Restorative practices are nonpunitive approaches to school discipline and can potentially improve overall school climate, decrease suspensions, and reduce disproportionate student discipline rates (Skrzypek et al., 2021).

School counselors support students by providing individual counseling, consultation with mental health providers, teachers, and parents, facilitating small groups,

and leading classroom and school interventions on many issues (Swank et al., 2018; Yablon, 2020). The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students.

The Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was the first major zero tolerance federal legislation to ensure that schools were free from all weapons and drugs in order to protect students from major threats and harm (Rainbolt et al., 2019). All K-12 public schools in the U.S. were mandated to enforce this policy if they wanted to receive federal funding (Rainbolt et al., 2019). Additionally, many school officials began to employ zero tolerance strategies in response to any student infraction, regardless of the severity of the behavior or situational context (Ritter, 2018). Schools began to suspend or expel students for minor behavioral violations such as disrespect, using a cell phone at school, and bullying (Huang & Cornell, 2021). Although suspensions and expulsion are intended to promote positive behaviors and safety, they are associated with poor student outcomes. These outcomes include adversely impacting school climate, increased dropout rates and school disengagement, and increased youth contact with the juvenile justice system (Samimi et al., 2023). Policymakers and educators have called to do away with exclusionary discipline practices in favor of alternatives, such as restorative practices, that allow students to remain in school (Samimi et al., 2023).

Bullying is repeated victimization involving power-imbalanced relationships comprising various types, frequencies, and aggression levels ranging from teasing and name-calling to verbal, physical, and social abuse (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena,

2020; Bass et al., 2019; Bunnett, 2021; Cañas et al., 2020; D'Urso et al., 2022; Runions et al., 2019). It has been classified as a significant public health problem and increases risks of poor health and negative social and educational outcomes during childhood and adolescence (Armitage, 2021).

Restorative practices involve mending the harm that has been done rather than rule violations, addressing underlying needs of students who have harmed others as well as students who have been hurt, and ways to make provide restitution while preventing recurrence of harmful behaviors (Vincent et al., 2021). Restorative practices help students and staff learn about their behaviors and how they affect others, develop empathy, and build positive relationships (Davison et al., 2022; Kervick et al., 2019; Silverman & Mee, 2018; Skrzypek et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021). This will improve school climate, build community, increase prosocial behavior, and decrease suspensions and expulsions (Skrzypek et al., 2020). I aimed to investigate restorative practices that elementary school counselors have implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students.

This literature review includes a examination of current literature associated with discipline policies and restorative practices in schools and the impact restorative practices have on student behavior. The chapter begins with an introduction and description of methods to complete the literature search. I also further discuss hermeneutical phenomenology.

Literature Search Strategy

To conduct this literature review, I used Walden University Library resources and databases to locate peer-reviewed articles and materials that were published between

2018 and 2023. I used the following databases: EBSCOHost, ERIC, ProQuest Science Database, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect, as well as a multi-database search. The following keywords were: *school counselor, restorative practices, bullying, counseling, restorative justice, bully, phenomenology, hermeneutic, qualitative, student, children, adolescents, youth, child, teenager, experiences, behavior, victim, school, elementary, secondary, discipline, and punitive*. The specific terminology I used was intended to enhance quality and rigor of my searches for restorative practices literature related to this study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Martin Heidegger was the first phenomenologist who used hermeneutics. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences. The lifeworld is the world as individuals immediately experience it rather than as it is conceptualized. Lived experiences refer to immediate prereflexive awareness of life in everyday contexts (Heidegger, 1996).

Phenomenology involves investigating those lived experiences that are essential to understanding human experience (Heidegger et al., 2010). The essence of a phenomenon can be adequately described and understood through a study of the structure of essential meanings (Van Manen, 2016). The purpose of a phenomenological research study is to reach meaningful insights through constant questioning that are characterized as inceptual rather than conceptual (Heidegger, 1999).

Hermeneutics comes from the Greek word *hermeneuin*, which means to interpret. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in general, involves subjective experiences of individuals and groups. It involves addressing experiences of participants through their stories (Heidegger, 1996). Hermeneutic phenomenology is the most appropriate methodology to address meanings school counselors attribute to their restorative practices experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology involves understanding the meaning of individual experiences and encouraging thinking about and engaging with that meaning. In hermeneutic phenomenology studies, researchers investigate the meaning of a particular experience and transcribe the experience as close as possible to how it was lived by participants (Heidegger, 1996).

In hermeneutic phenomenology, researchers gain access to the meaning structures of lived experiences by appropriating them, clarifying them, and reflectively making them explicit (Van Manen, 1984). It is designed to produce detailed textual descriptions of the experience of phenomena where a deeper understanding of the meaning is sought through layered reflection while using rich, descriptive language (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a suitable process when the research is oriented toward questioning rather than getting specific answers or establishing generalizations (Bertomeu & Esteban, 2023).

Hermeneutic phenomenology has been applied to similar studies. Xu et al. (2023) explored the lived experience of Chinese medical tourists receiving cancer care in clinical settings in the United States. In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology was used to interview 11 participants. Ciabatti (2023) conducted a study in Victoria, Australia, that

examined the perceptions and implementation of the intercultural dimension in the language classroom following recent curriculum changes. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used due to the in-depth analysis of the complex ways the participants perceive, conceive of, and experience the phenomenon of intercultural education (Van Manen, 1990). Chan et al. (2020) used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to investigate students' and school counselors' lived experiences of cyberbullying in Malaysia and how they managed these experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate methodology for this study because lived experiences refer to the pre-reflective, immediate consciousness of the experiences, which are then reflected upon and interpreted.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Role of School Counselors

The American School Counselor (ASCA) National Model defines school counselors as systemic change agents who develop and deliver data-informed comprehensive school counseling programs focused on academic, career, and social-emotional development (Hines et al., 2020; King-White, 2019; Swank et al., 2018). School counselors are charged with working with students and other stakeholders to ensure that students are academically successful, socially and personally competent, and college and career-ready (Hines et al., 2020; Paolini, 2018). Another one of the school counselor's responsibilities is providing a safe and inclusive school climate that is accepting, engaging, rigorous, tolerant, and culturally sensitive by taking action to

eliminate or reduce the potential for harm to students through the use of prevention and intervention programs (Arcuri, 2018; Paolini, 2018).

The school setting provides an optimal opportunity for students to develop in social, career, and mental health areas. Many times, students will learn how to process strong emotions and deal with their mental health needs in school. Therefore, it is vital that schools prepare themselves to provide this necessary support (King-White, 2019; Lambie et al., 2019). School counselors implement interventions that promote all students' social/emotional, academic, and career development. They explore students' career interests and values related to real-world problems (e.g., helping others and creating something new) (Limberg et al., 2021).

School counselors, licensed professional counselors, and school-based mental health therapists are usually the only individuals with professional mental health training in K-12 school settings addressing the mental health challenges that are hindering students from succeeding socially, emotionally, academically, and in their career development on a daily basis and who can manage and provide interventions for at-risk concerns (King-White, 2019; Lambie et al., 2019; Pincus et al., 2021). Through their leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change, school counselors have the mental health expertise and training required to serve and support students across a variety of educational settings, including in-person, blended, and virtual formats (King-White, 2019; Pincus et al., 2021). This is why school counselors must look for ways to create safe, trauma-sensitive, and restorative learning environments for students (M. A. Brown, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Velez, 2021).

School counselors implement prevention and intervention programs in different aspects of student systems. These aspects include individual/group level, grade level, schoolwide, family, community, and district-wide (Hines et al., 2020; Pincus et al., 2021). School counselors also implement prevention and intervention programs through a Multi-Tiered System of Support framework (MTSS). MTSS has three tiers, and school counselors must ensure that evidence-based practices are used in each tier to guarantee the most effective, empirically supported practices available are being utilized (King-White, 2019; Pincus et al., 2021).

In tier one, school counselors serve as supporters, interveners, and facilitators who attend and participate in meetings with colleagues to consult and collaborate while referencing observations and data. At this tier, school counselors introduce classroom methods to teachers, administrators, staff, and social-emotional curricula to the student body (King-White, 2019; Pincus et al., 2021). Counselors go into the classrooms to provide instruction on conflict resolution, bullying, problem-solving, appropriate behaviors, emotion regulation, empathy, and anger management (Paolini, 2018).

School counselors collaborate with teachers, administrators, and parents at the tier two level to identify students exhibiting behavioral concerns. School counselors conduct small group and individual counseling sessions based on specific needs that the students are facing, such as depression, mental illness, stress, anxiety, and coping strategies (King-White, 2019; Pincus et al., 2021). According to ASCA, topics for groups and individual counseling should be selected based on need, and school counselors must work within their scope of practice when providing group support in the school setting (King-White,

2019). In tier three, interventions are more intense and longer than in tier two. In this tier, school counselors focus on a more comprehensive process involving key stakeholders in a wraparound process to collaborate and strategize about students' needs (King-White, 2019).

Bullying

Several researchers have defined bullying as repeated, aggressive, intentional, unprovoked harm within a social relationship to someone of less power by a more powerful person or group of persons, whereas the victims typically are unable to defend themselves or escape by their means (Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Bunnett, 2021; Cañas et al., 2020; D'Urso et al., 2022; Runions et al., 2019). Bullies are individuals who assault others without being provoked by the victim (Silva et al., 2020). Bullying can be categorized as either direct or indirect form of aggression (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Bunnett, 2021; Runions et al., 2019; Saini & Balda, 2019). Physical bullying consists of hitting, pushing, kicking, choking, punching, and forcefully taking something from the victim. The most common form of bullying, verbal bullying, consists of name-calling, threatening, taunting, teasing, racial slurs, and cursing (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Bunnett, 2021; Saini & Balda, 2019). Direct Bullying includes physical and verbal aggression, and indirect bullying takes the form of more covert acts consisting of relational aggression such as social exclusion, gossiping, spreading malicious rumors, slandering, sabotage, and convincing peers to exclude victims (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Bunnett, 2021; Saini & Balda, 2019). Cyberbullying uses technology such as text messages, emails, or social media to

ridicule or intimidate others. According to recent studies, boys are at a greater risk of being physically bullied and victimized, while girls are at a greater risk of being emotionally or cyberbullied (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bass et al., 2019; Bunnett, 2021)

Girls learn to respond to anger by acting out in personal relationships and psychological well-being. Boys, on the other hand, deal with their anger through aggression and being physical. Therefore, girls who bully often engage in forms of manipulating relationships and verbal interactions, whereas boys who bully often engage in physical violence (Gomes et al., 2022). Bullies have an aggressive personality pattern coupled with the tendency to act aggressively in situations. They are unable to control their anger and have a positive attitude towards violence (Gomba & Zindonda, 2021). Bullies usually externalize their behavior, which may affect their relationship with peers and teachers even though they are the most popular. They report higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation than those less involved in bullying (Swank et al., 2018).

Several studies (Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Choi & Park, 2018; D'Urso et al., 2022; Runions et al., 2019; Saini & Balda, 2019) have described the negative outcomes of victims of bullying behavior. Victims often experience problems with their physical and psychological health, educational performance, and social and emotional functioning (Saini & Balda, 2019). Bullied youth are at an increased risk of depression, suicide, low self-esteem, sleep problems, loneliness, lower academic achievement, increased externalizing behavior, and dropping out of school (Bagla & Saxena, 2020; Runions et al., 2019). Experiencing bullying can also increase the possibility of the victim becoming a bully later on (Choi & Park, 2018).

Academic Responses to Bullying

Exclusionary Discipline

According to Davison et al. (2022), school discipline practices became increasingly harsh in the 1980s as more schools embraced exclusionary discipline. Exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspensions and expulsions are the cornerstone of zero-tolerance policies (Huang & Cornell, 2021) and are common elements of school discipline plans (Chu & Ready, 2018). Suspension happens when a student is temporarily removed from their classroom, whereas expulsion happens when a student is completely and permanently removed from school (Gilleskie & Li, 2022; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022; Zeng et al., 2021).

Even though a general premise of exclusionary discipline practices is that students who are on the receiving end will decrease the frequency of inappropriate behavior, several studies have shown that there is no evidence to support the claim that suspension and expulsion improves student behavior or increases school safety (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Chu & Ready, 2018; Gerlinger, 2022; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). Not only does suspension and expulsion fail to improve student behavior and safety, but according to many research studies, there are also a number of negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline. Some of these outcomes include adversely impacting school climate, dropping out of school, academic failure, an adverse impact on social and emotional development, lasting trauma, and arrest and incarceration (school-to-prison pipeline) (Chu & Ready, 2018; Kupchik, 2022; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Samimi et al., 2023; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022).

Due to the federal government's zero-tolerance policies developed in the 1990s, students have been tracked from their schools into the juvenile and adult criminal justice system through the school-to-prison pipeline (Basford et al., 2021; Schiff, 2018). The school-to-prison pipeline describes policies and procedures put in place through imposing suspensions and expulsions in which students become involved with the criminal justice system due to behavior issues being addressed through law enforcement-type consequences (Agudelo et al., 2021; S. J. Brown et al., 2020; Davison et al., 2022; Dutil, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2022; Justice, 2018; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Students are pushed out of school, making them vulnerable to increased arrests and referrals to the juvenile justice system (Pesta, 2023; Samimi et al., 2023).

The specific policies that created and sustained the school-to-prison pipeline began with the 1994 Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA), which was a federal mandate under the Improving America's School Act that mandated all educational agencies receiving Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) assistance to adopt a zero-tolerance policy that would automatically expel students caught with firearms (i.e. guns, knives, or other weapons) on school grounds (Muñiz, 2021). The 1994 Safe Schools Act was the first of three policies—followed by the 1998 Amendment to the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act—passed that facilitated and funded school-police partnerships (Muñiz, 2021). Based on these negative outcomes, there has been opposition to exclusionary discipline that has influenced changes in the way schools practice discipline. Many American schools have shifted away from zero-tolerance policies, especially when transgressions are minor and nonviolent (Del Toro & Wang, 2022). Various leaders and advocates have

called for an end to zero-tolerance policies in favor of more nonpunitive, supportive discipline strategies. The Obama administration was the first presidential administration to attempt to eliminate zero-tolerance policies (Kyere et al., 2020; Ritter, 2018; Williams et al., 2023). According to Camacho & Krezmien (2020), The Obama Administration and the U.S. Department of Education and Justice launched the Supportive School Discipline Initiative in 2011 to decrease the high suspension and expulsion rates. Since President Obama left office, several states have limited the use of suspensions and expulsions based on grade level. They do this by changing their code of conduct and discipline policies, such as prohibiting suspensions in lower grades for subjective offenses (Welsh, 2023).

Zero Tolerance Policies

The beginning of state and federal drug enforcement policies under the Clinton Administration started with the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which was authorized under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994. This act required that all U.S. public schools receiving federal funding implement discipline policies that would automatically expel a student for one year if they brought a weapon or drugs to school. As a result of this act, schools adopted zero-tolerance policies in which some policies not only punished students for carrying weapons and drugs to school but also for bringing look-alike weapons or objects constructed as weapons (Alnaim, 2018; Lacoé & Steinberg, 2018; Ritter, 2018).

Unfortunately, after this act, many schools tried to manage, respond, and deal with non-dangerous behaviors by imposing strict punishments for minor infractions regardless of the context of the behavior or mitigating circumstances. These methods,

known as zero-tolerance policies, involve actions of suspension and expulsions (Henry et al., 2022; Lodi et al., 2022; Moreno & Scaletta, 2018; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Alnaim (2018) stated that the primary goal of zero-tolerance policies was, at first, to eliminate students who were a danger to the learning environment.

According to Huang & Cornell (2021), one assumption of zero-tolerance policies is that removing misbehaved students from the school will deter other students from engaging in those same types of dangerous behaviors and create a safer, orderly environment. However, zero-tolerance policies have led to several negative outcomes for students. These include school dropout and grade retention, involvement in the juvenile justice system, antisocial behavior, subsequent suspensions, and low student achievement (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022; Welsh & Little, 2018; Kodelja, 2019; Ritter, 2018).

School Counselors and Bullying

Due to the adverse effects of bullying, school counselors play a critical role in mitigating bullying and advocating for students' well-being and safety (Su et al., 2021). Since school counselors are considered leaders, they collaborate with stakeholders and teachers and provide training and professional development to prevent bullying. School counselors work with students by providing classroom lessons about the signs, dangers, and consequences of bullying to create a safe school environment. School counselors also address healthy ways to resolve conflict, problem-solve, regulate emotions, and manage anger (Paolini, 2018).

The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors state that school counselors should provide services as appropriate, such as facilitating small group counseling to

students who are victims or perpetrators of bullying (ASCA, 2019). School counselors reported bullying concerns as the second most serious issue in schools, behind behavioral, emotional, and mental health issues. However, considerations and tools specific to bullying are often unavailable to school counselors in the school environment despite the prevalence and impact of bullying (Tinstman Jones et al., 2019). When bullying situations arise, school counselors report to appropriate school authorities and guardians since they do not engage in disciplinary action. They do this because they must adhere to federal, state, and local laws as well as the policy of the district regarding bullying (Tinstman Jones et al., 2019).

Restorative Practices

Schools have begun using strategies like restorative practices and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) designed to promote a positive environment, communicate clear behavioral expectations, and create a consistent positive school climate (Elrod et al., 2022). Supportive relationships between students and staff and the fairness of school discipline and rules are related to students' greater engagement in academic activities, sense of connectedness, and belonging to the school. Students are more likely to identify with the norms embedded within the school culture and feel a sense of relatedness with members of the school (R. C. H. Chan & Lam, 2023). Through restorative practices, schools strengthen relationships, teach students the skills to manage conflict, and guide students through conflict resolution (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Inspired by the traditional practices of indigenous communities of North America and New Zealand, restorative practices emphasize respect and relationships and is

centered around resolving conflict through communal and restorative processes (B. Garnett et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2021a; Kervick et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2023; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022). The principles of restorative practices have their origins in restorative justice, which is a way of mediating conflict that allows those who have committed harm to take responsibility for their acts by focusing on the victims and giving them voice (Edber, 2022; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022). Restorative practices represent the methods and specific practices implemented in schools across the United States within a MTSS in which they can provide multiple layers of support to students in an effort to reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices and create a more positive school climate (Joseph et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2019, 2020; Kim et al., 2023). When addressing the harm experienced, practices include an assessment of when and how the harm took place, how many people were impacted, developing steps to heal the harm, and reflecting on the collective process. Rather than focusing on ‘who is to blame’ the focus is on ‘how we can solve the problem’ (Joseph et al., 2021; Warnick & Scribner, 2020)

Restorative practices are encompassed within the three tiers of the MTSS framework. Tier one focuses on the foundational approach of proactive prevention and skill building through a focus on positive relationships and community building (B. Garnett et al., 2020; Kervick et al., 2020; Mansfield et al., 2018). Tier two focuses on interventions (peer mediation and responsive circles) to address harm within the community. During the intervention, individuals identify the harm that has occurred and address the harm through the use of restorative questions aimed at how the harm affected

all individuals involved and what needs to occur to make things right. It includes peer mediation and responsive circles (Kervick et al., 2020; Mansfield et al., 2018). Tier three provides intense interventions for students who need reentry support after being suspended from school. A reentry plan must be developed to make restitution and repair relationships to support a successful transition into the school community (Kervick et al., 2020).

Since restorative practices must be consistent and school-wide, training school personnel and student leaders is essential. The training should be in-depth and include leading community circles, holding restorative one-on-one conferences with students, and mediating conflicts. Training is a way to shift the mindsets of faculty and staff and must be high quality to implement restorative practices successfully within the school. (Huguley et al., 2022; Joseph et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023; Oxley & Holden, 2021).

Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles are important components of restorative practices that address students' developmental needs, proactively build community, and encourage responsibility (Kervick et al., 2019; Silverman & Mee, 2018). They promote supportive relationships and increase student and peer connections (Kervick et al., 2019). Restorative circles have been shown to promote better ways of engaging in conflict and social-emotional growth (Edber, 2022).

In a restorative circle session, students sit in a circle while a trained mediator (in this case, the school counselor) facilitates a group discussion between the victim, offender, and other individuals affected by the situation, such as peers, parents, and

school faculty members (Agudelo et al., 2021; Marcucci, 2021; Morgan, 2021a). The students face one another and have open conversations about academic, emotional, or specific topics. Only one circle member speaks at a time. In the circles, students cooperate with each other to understand what has happened, who has been affected, and what can be done to restore the relationship (Buchanan, 2020; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Silverman & Mee, 2018; Warnick & Scribner, 2020). The goal of restorative circles is to identify issues, discuss their effect, and allow the offender to take responsibility for their actions. These goals promote understanding, accountability, and actions (Agudelo et al., 2021). Another goal is to work with students to solve problems rather than oppress them through punishment (Warnick & Scribner, 2020).

School Counselors and Restorative Practices

ASCA states that school counselors should not give out disciplinary actions. It says that school counselors should promote positive, healthy behaviors in students that create lifelong learners. School counselors can do this by using restorative practices that focus on building positive relationships (Richards, 2018). The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success drive school counselors' work in the school setting. These standards align with restorative practices. When facilitating a peer conference between students, the ASCA mindsets that are likely achieved include a sense of belonging in the community (M3), demonstrating the ability to assume responsibility (B-SMS), and gathering evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions (B-LS 9) (American School Counselor Association, 2014).

Restorative practices involve school counselors using both indirect and direct services. The direct services include facilitating mediations, restorative circles, and responsive circles in small groups. The indirect services include supporting school staff in facilitating responsive and restorative circles. When executed with fidelity, school counselors can use restorative practice techniques to promote the development of critical skills (Boulden, 2021). Positive relationships are key to reducing bullying and maintaining a safe environment for students and staff (Tinstman Jones et al., 2019). School counselors are ideally situated to implement restorative practices in schools since they are trained in the skill sets. Restorative practices are an effective strategy to prevent bullying and peer aggression. Given that a school counselor's role is to foster a positive school climate, restorative practices are an excellent tool for doing this, given their strength in building relationships and promoting a sense of belonging (Smith et al., 2021).

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 included an exhaustive literature review on the extent of the problem of exclusionary discipline, as well as a discussion of the impact of restorative practices on the K-12 U.S. school system. The review began with research on the impact of zero tolerance discipline policies and how they impacted exclusionary discipline practices. The review of literature continued with a review of research that was published between 2018 and 2023 involving exclusionary discipline and its impact on students, the impact of bullying on students, and the role of restorative practices as a response to discipline. I described the conceptual framework on which the study was based. Findings from reviewed literature supported further research on the topic of counselors using restorative

practices. There was a gap in literature regarding the impact of restorative practices on school bullying.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices that school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students through perspectives of school counselors who work in –pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public schools and implement restorative practices as an alternative response to discipline. I used a basic qualitative study to understand perspectives of this population. A basic qualitative approach was used for the interview process.

Chapter 3 includes the methodology for this hermeneutic phenomenological study. This includes a detailed description of the research design and rationale for the study as well as a description of my role as the researcher. Chapter 3 also includes a description of participant selection as well as instrumentation, recruitment, participation, and data collection processes. The chapter concludes with a description of the data analysis plan and issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices that school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. For the purpose of this study, restorative practices are defined as informal and formal practices that build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing while repairing harm (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Participants were certified as school counselors working in pre-K through fifth grade elementary public school and used restorative practices with students. These school counselors offered perspectives regarding their experiences using restorative practices as an alternative to exclusionary discipline in order to prevent bullying behavior.

I restated the research question, defined this study's central concepts, provided a rationale for using a hermeneutic phenomenology qualitative design, and explained why other methodologies were unsuitable. In the methodology section, I describe participants and procedures for selecting and recruiting participants (see Appendix C), data collection procedures with instruments, and the data analysis plan as well as coding techniques. I address credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures to access participants and collect data.

Research Design and Rationale

Through this study, I sought to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of elementary school counselors in U.S. pre-K through fifth grade public schools who use restorative practices to prevent school bullying? The central phenomenon of the study was use of restorative practices as an alternative to

exclusionary discipline practices. Restorative practices promote positive school climates and improved relationships (Edber, 2022; Kervick et al., 2019; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022; Oxley & Holden, 2021; Skrzypek et al., 2021).

I used a qualitative hermeneutical phenomenological design to explore the study phenomena. I used phenomenological methodology to clarify rich descriptions and personal meanings involving lived experiences. A case study approach, which involves observing participants or reconstructing case histories in natural settings, was considered but did not fully meet requirements of focusing only on participants' lived experiences.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role is to establish working relationships with participants to secure meaningful data for analysis (Billups, 2021). My role as the researcher was to interview and interact with participants. I notified participants of their role in the study, shared the purpose of the study, reviewed interview questions (see Appendix A), and answered any questions. I conducted 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with 11 elementary school counselor participants. I remained objective by following the interview protocol (see Appendix A), accurately transcribing participants' interview responses and member checking. I also provided transcript summaries for participants' review. According to Motulsky (2021), member checking has become a requirement for rigorous qualitative research.

All participants were informed about confidentiality of interview responses through pseudonyms. They were assured no identifying information was disclosed to protect their identities and names of schools, students, and districts (see Appendix B).

According to Durdella (2019), using pseudonyms for organizational or institutional names as well as names of cities, counties, and neighborhoods in addition to describing groups in general terms offers protection to individuals who participate in data collection. As the researcher, I was responsible for effectively communicating with participants and informing them that participation was voluntary, with the option of withdrawing from research at any time.

I did not have any professional decision-making powers over any participants. Due to the fact that I work in a school district as a school counselor and work collaboratively with other school counselors in my district, my role as a researcher included remaining neutral and not allowing my personal beliefs to affect research. To minimize the chance for partiality within my research, I bracketed my feelings by setting aside any biases I may have had.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population for this study included 11 elementary school counselors working in U.S. pre-K through fifth grade public elementary schools. All data came from carefully recruited and purposefully selected participants. Purposeful sampling was chosen to ensure participants met criteria for the study. All participants were certified as school counselors, worked in a pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public elementary school, and used restorative practices with students. I also considered using snowball sampling if the school counselors referred colleagues to me. In snowball sampling, participants refer researchers to other participants who meet criteria.

Purposeful sampling also permitted use of small sampling. The rationale for sample size is based on professional literature concerning data saturation. Hennink & Kaiser (2021) posited saturation refers to the point in data collection when no additional issues or insights are identified, and data begins to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached. Gentles et al. (2015) indicated for a hermeneutical phenomenological study, a sample size of 10 to 12 participants is adequate if interviews are conducted intensively, and data are saturated.

I posted an invitation to participate (see Appendix C) on the CESNET listserv that was tailored to individuals in counselor education and supervision to gain access to participants. I also posted invitations to various school counselor groups on Facebook. To arrange suitable times to be interviewed through Zoom, I used email invitations, telephone, in-person meetings, and social media, which contained pertinent information regarding the study. Interested participants contacted me using contact information on advertising materials. I had conversations with them to determine whether they fit eligibility criteria for the study. Participants were asked to provide informed consent (see Appendix B) to participate in the study. Informed consent was given through an electronic form that was provided to eligible participants. Eligible participants received Zoom links for semi-structured interviews. I used a separate device to record audio using the Rev app only during interviews.

Instrumentation

The main instrument used for data collection in this study was an interview protocol (see Appendix A). Interview protocols are tools that are designed to guide,

customize, and standardize the interviewing process, ensuring the same information is collected from each participant (Billups, 2021). I created an interview protocol (see Appendix A) that included interview questions prior to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. I used 45 to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to identify elementary school counselors' experiences. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate an outline of topics or issues that were covered. Interview questions were based on the theoretical framework, research question, and prior literature on restorative practices. This instrument was appropriate for this qualitative study in order to capture individual perspectives, experiences, feelings, and stories. Transcribed interview data were coded to identify themes based on participants' responses. Before asking specific questions, I sent participants links to complete demographic questions (see Appendix D) prior to interviews to gain insights regarding roles and backgrounds of participants.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After gaining approval from the Walden University IRB, I sought participants who fit the eligibility criteria using a variety of communication platforms. Participants were eligible if certified or licensed as a school counselor, worked in a Pre-K through fifth grade elementary public school in the United States, and used restorative practices with students. The communication process included contacting participants via email, telephone, social media, and face-to-face communication. I provided contact information, such as my name, email, and phone number, to the participants so they could ask clarifying questions about the study before giving consent to participate. Once I received

interest from potential participants, I clarified the process for meeting the participation criteria through email. I also provided the participants with my contact information so they could ask questions about the interview process in the email. Once eligible participants were identified, I scheduled interviews via the Zoom platform. I sent an individual Zoom link based on an agreed-upon day and time convenient for the study participants.

The data that was collected were the experiences of elementary school counselors utilizing restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior in students. These individuals were believed to be able to provide qualitative data to answer the research question. I informed participants that they would receive a copy of the summary following the interview. The preliminary individual interviews and any consequent follow-up interviews were the essential methods of collecting data in this study. Another part of the process was member checking, in which I provided the participants with a summary of my findings through email.

Data Analysis Plan

Following the data collection phase, I read and reread the transcripts. I then extensively reviewed, prepared, and organized data by coding the participants' responses and reviewing my researcher journal to mitigate biases and any notes I may have taken during the interview. I kept a reflexive journal in which I recorded notes and memos during the data analysis process and each interview. The coding approach that I used consisted of open coding and axial coding. Open coding is the initial step in analyzing qualitative data and involves developing codes and categories by closely examining the

data (Holton & Walsh, 2017). During this process, a paragraph, phrase, or sentence is examined and given a name or label representing a phenomenon. Axial coding is the process of making connections among the categories identified during the open coding process. Axial coding was the final step in my coding process since I was not interested in developing a theory (Farmer & Farmer, 2021). According to Farmer & Farmer (2021), coding involves reviewing all data, in this case, the interview transcripts, line-by-line, identifying key issues or themes that emerge within individual transcripts and across the transcripts, and then attaching text segments to those codes. After coding, my data analysis included examining my data to identify and construct analytical themes.

I used Van Manen's process of phenomenological inquiry to analyze the data (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Monaro et al., 2022). The first two steps consisted of formulating the research question and methods of collecting data using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Step three focused on analyzing the data and recognizing themes by using thematic analysis of the text segments gained in the coding process and reading all the transcriptions of the interviews to understand the narrative (Eitel, 2014). Step four of the data analysis involved writing and rewriting the phenomenon (Monaro et al., 2022). In step five, the researcher maintained a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon. The final step informed the researcher that the parts of the data must be viewed in light of the whole phenomenon (Eitel, 2014).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness and validity ensure credibility and rigor in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is how researchers ensure that the rigor of the qualitative research is

evident (Sultan, 2019). Four elements comprise the original trustworthiness framework. These elements include credibility (truth), dependability (consistency), transferability (applicability), and confirmability (neutrality) (Billups, 2021).

Credibility

Credibility was established using various strategies such as triangulation and member checking to determine whether the qualitative findings were believable and truthful. According to Billups (2021), triangulation involves using multiple data sources to produce greater depth and breadth of understanding. To achieve triangulation in the current study, I invited elementary school counselors from different Pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public schools to participate in individual interviews.

During the member-checking process, the participants were asked to review their interview summaries and my initial themes, or preliminary analysis, to assess whether those findings reflected what they expressed in their interview (Billups, 2021). After transcribing the data, member checking was performed to support the credibility of the research by ensuring that the findings from the analysis were consistent with the meaning of responses by the participants.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of findings to other contexts (Beck, 2021), such as similar situations, populations, and phenomena (Kviz, 2020). To ensure transferability, I used a predesigned interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure that I asked all participants the same questions. I also described the phenomena in sufficient detail to evaluate how conclusions drawn may have been transferable to other times,

settings, situations, and people. This was best accomplished through the “thick description” strategy. Thick descriptions are the use of notes in a study where the researcher includes extensive detail and explicit descriptions when recording conversations and interpretations during data collection (Billups, 2021). The use of thick descriptions helped me more easily evaluate how the same circumstance of people, place, and phenomenon could be applied in a similar setting, under similar conditions, and with similar participants (Billups, 2021).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the research findings being stable and consistent over time and across conditions (Billups, 2021). A technique that can be used to demonstrate transparency is an audit trail. An audit trail outlines detailed procedural records the primary researcher maintains (Billups, 2021). I documented the decisions made throughout the research process. I also recorded the audio of the participant interviews during the data collection process and immediately downloaded the transcribed responses to mitigate potential researcher bias or inaccuracy of the participants’ responses. Another way I mitigated potential researcher bias was by bracketing. Bracketing is when researchers place aside their previously held knowledge. It allows personal beliefs, values, prior knowledge, and experiences to be bracketed, not influencing the research study (Wadams & Park, 2018).

Confirmability

In a rigorous qualitative study, confirmability parallels objectivity and focuses on the agreement between two or more persons regarding the meaning and accuracy of the

data (Beck, 2021). One critical strategy for enhancing confirmability is researcher reflexivity. Reflexivity involves a particular kind of reflection grounded in qualitative inquiry's in-depth, experiential, and interpersonal nature (Billups, 2021). I kept a reflexive journal to protect the integrity of the participants' perspectives.

Ethical Procedures

Every research study involving humans, regardless of the approach or design, must abide by the standards for protecting human subjects (Billups, 2021). A critical ethical procedure to note is the agreement to gain access to participants. Before undertaking the data collection for this research, I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB to ensure all potential ethical issues were addressed. The treatment of human participants in this research was especially critical to review because the research includes human participants reflecting on restorative practices and bullying.

Ethical considerations in research involve the individual's right to understand the boundaries of voluntary participation, informed consent (see Appendix B), anonymity, privacy, or confidential data treatment, and the researcher's obligations to safeguard their rights and interests and the participants' ability to withdraw from participation in the study at any time (Billups, 2021). Elementary school counselors purposefully selected to participate in the research encountered no perceived harm or threats. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014), counselors who conduct research are responsible for their participants' welfare throughout the research process and should take reasonable precautions to avoid causing emotional, physical, or social harm to participants. Participants were asked to provide informed consent (see

Appendix B) to participate in the study. All participants were informed about the confidentiality of their interview responses through pseudonyms and reassured that no identifying information was disclosed to protect their identities and the names of schools, students, and districts. Information obtained about research participants during research is confidential, and procedures are implemented to protect confidentiality (American Counseling Association, 2014). I communicated with the participants and informed them that participation in the study was voluntary, with the option of withdrawing from the research at any time. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2014), counselors who conduct research involving individuals make it clear in the informed consent process that they are free to choose whether to participate in research activities.

Ethical procedures related to collecting, storing, and ensuring data security were included following protocols for storing and maintaining the participants' confidentiality. I utilized data storage through my personal Google account, which is password-protected, and an external hard drive. After the research has finished, I will wait until Walden has accepted my dissertation, and then, in 5 years, I will destroy all electronic data by removing the information from my Google account, external hard drives, iPad, and laptop.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided a comprehensive review of the qualitative methodology for this study and Van Manen's data analysis process. This chapter began with a discussion of the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices school

counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. Chapter 3 also includes a description of the methodology I used for the study of elementary school counselors' experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying. I discussed how I conducted the study and analyzed data, including a breakdown of topics I included, my role as the researcher, recruitment, and data collection, Van Manen's data analysis process, and ethical considerations. Participants were informed during data collection they had the right to decide what they shared and participation in the study was voluntary. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In Chapter 4, I address results of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. Looking into lived experiences of school counselors provided further insights regarding successes and challenges they had when they addressed bullying using restorative practices. Through the research question, I sought to understand lived experiences of school counselors in U.S. –pre-K through fifth grade public schools who used restorative practices to prevent school bullying. In Chapter 4, I present results and findings of my study and connect findings of the study with hermeneutical phenomenology.

This chapter begins with procedures I used regarding data collection along with demographic and descriptive data from participants. A detailed explanation of methods to ensure the study's trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability follows. In the data analysis section, I describe the process of using Van Manen's process of phenomenological inquiry to discover commonalities among participant responses which in turn led to insightful themes involving experiences of participants involving use of restorative practices.

Finally, results and findings of data analysis, study limitations, and conclusion were discussed.

Setting

After receiving IRB approval, requests were sent to potential participants to interview via Zoom. Each participant was interviewed virtually using Zoom during

mutually agreed-upon days and times. I met with participants via Zoom with their cameras on. One of the participants had their camera off. Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit elementary school counselors who implemented restorative practices with students. Eleven school counselors consented to be interviewed. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to ensure anonymity during the transcription process.

Demographics

After consenting to participate in the study, participants filled out the school counselor demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). The questionnaire included questions about gender, years of experience as a school counselor, if participants worked in pre-K through fifth grade elementary public schools, current use of restorative practices, and racial/ethnic background. All 11 participants were female professional school counselors who were certified or licensed and worked with elementary students. One participant self-identified as African American, six self-identified as Caucasian, three self-identified as Hispanic, and one self-identified as both African American and Hispanic (see Table 1).

Table 1*Demographic Data of Participants*

	Gender	Ethnicity	Location	Years Experience
SC1	Female	Black	GA	1-5 years
SC2	Female	White	OH	20+ years
SC3	Female	Hispanic	CA	1-5 years
SC4	Female	White	KY	1-5 years
SC5	Female	Hispanic	TX	1-5 years
SC6	Female	Black/Hispanic	GA	1-5 years
SC7	Female	White	NC	20+ years
SC8	Female	White	TN	1-5 years
SC9	Female	White	IN	20+ years
SC10	Female	White	MD	11-15 years
SC11	Female	Hispanic	VA	6-10 years

Data Collection

The data collection process began when I obtained Walden University's IRB approval to conduct the study. For this study, purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants in various ways over a span of 2 weeks. Criterion sampling was the best method to identify certified or licensed school counselors working in U.S. pre-K through fifth grade public elementary schools who were using restorative practices with their students. I posted an invitation (see Appendix C) on the CESNET listserv that was tailored to individuals in counselor education and supervision. I posted invitations to various school counselor groups on Facebook. I also sent emailed invitations to various school counselors whose school districts used restorative practices.

Potential participants completed the Qualtrics survey as directed in the research flyers and emailed invitations. The Qualtrics survey included the informed consent and

demographics forms for the study. The informed consent form detailed terms of the study and advised participants to review terms for clarity and acknowledge voluntary participation by typing the words “I consent.” The demographic form included questions about participant eligibility and demographic questions. Participants were identified as school counselors based on their responses on the Qualtrics survey. A total of 11 participants consented via this survey to participate in the study. After consenting, participants were contacted individually via email to determine individual interview dates and times. Each 45 to 60-minute interview was scheduled at participants’ convenience. Each participant was then sent an individual Zoom meeting link to join interview sessions. I used Zoom for all interviews and audio recorded each interview using Rev to assist with data collection and analysis.

The interview protocol (see Appendix A) outlined in Chapter 3 was followed when conducting interviews. The interview protocol included an introduction regarding the study, interview questions, and a closing statement. Interviews began with a welcome, introduction, and review of the signed consent form (see Appendix B). I informed each participant they could withdraw from participating at any time or choose to skip any interview questions they did not want to answer. Before starting each interview, I asked each participant if they had any questions or concerns. I reminded participants that interviews would be audio recorded. After acquiring consent from each participant to participate in the study, interviews began.

Data sources were 11 participants who were elementary school counselors using restorative practices with their students. Each of the 45 to 60-minute interviews were

audio-recorded via Zoom, and names of participants were kept confidential. Use of hermeneutic phenomenology allowed for participants' unique experiences related to use of restorative practices to be narrated and understood. After 11 interviews, data became saturated as information I was given was not significantly different from what was given by other participants in earlier interviews; therefore, data collection stopped.

The process of data collection was completed within 3 weeks of IRB approval. I used the Rev website to transcribe each interview and also read each transcription manually while listening to recordings to ensure accuracy and make sure there were no issues that needed clarifying from participants.

I downloaded Word documents containing interview transcript data and stored it on my password-protected computer and then transferred it to a password-protected flash drive. Data from interviews were retained and stored in a locked safe in my home that only I have access to. No paper copies of any files were stored. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university. Data will then be destroyed after the 5-year requirement. Data disposal will occur by deleting or overwriting data so that information cannot be retrieved. The password-protected flash drive will also be physically destroyed. There were no unusual circumstances during data collection.

Data Analysis

I used Van Manen's process of phenomenological inquiry to analyze data. According to Van Manen (2017), phenomenological inquiry proceeds through a process of reflective wondering, deep questioning, attentive reminiscing, and interpretation of the meanings of human experiences. Van Manen outlined a three-stage process to explore

themes and meanings. This process includes a holistic approach, a selective approach, and a line-by-line approach (Guillen & Elida, 2019). In the holistic approach, texts are viewed as a whole and the researcher inquires about which phrase could encompass the essential meaning of the text as a whole. Next, in the selective approach, the researcher reads a text several times and pulls out phrases that are considered fundamental or revealing of the experience being described. Finally, in the line-by-line approach, the text is analyzed in more detail by reading each phrase or sentence and asking what each phrase seems to reveal about the nature of the event (Guillen & Elida, 2019). Van Manen stated that both the selective approach and the line-by-line approach should be used if possible, to uncover thematic aspects (Manen, 1984).

I coded my data through an inductive process that did not begin until all interviews had been completed. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and listened to the audio recording several times to ensure the interviews were accurately transcribed. For this study, I chose to use manual coding and NVivo 14 software for thematic analysis. After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy by comparing them individually to the audio recording, I manually analyzed each participant's interview transcript. I began this process by following Van Manen's selective reading approach by reading the transcripts several times to gain a better understanding of my participants' lived experiences and to familiarize myself with the data (Manen, 1984). I then looked for the statements or phrases that seemed essential about the experience of using restorative practices. I highlighted these statements in different colors on each participant's transcript paper to identify commonalities and given a name or label representing the phenomenon in

question which was the experiences of using restorative practices. The color coding of the statements and phrases during analysis allowed for easier data recognition and grouping. I then began the line-by-line approach. With this approach, I looked at every single sentence and thought about what the sentence revealed about the experiences of the participants using restorative practices. I used coding to give meanings to the sentences and phrases. I then examined the pattern of the codes and identified and constructed analytical themes.

The transcripts were also analyzed using NVivo 14 coding software. Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) has been seen as aiding the researcher in their search for an accurate and transparent picture of the data while also providing an audit of the data analysis process as a whole (Dalkin et al., 2021). The NVivo software allowed me to easily group common responses in a specific theme. I used NVivo 14 to organize the transcripts and arrange the data using the participants words, phrases, and sentences that stood out in the transcripts and revealed something about the phenomenon. I was able to see how similar phrases and sentences emerged to produce patterns of codes in the data. I identified 113 codes from the 11 transcribed interviews. I was then able to organize those codes into five themes (see Table 2). The following themes emerged from the data analysis including educating students and teachers about bullying, responding to bullying with a restorative lens, using restorative practices to lead to positive outcomes, and level of support when implementing restorative practices. Van Manen's thematic analysis and the use of NVivo 14 software assisted me in gathering phenomenological meaning and addressing the research

question. The identifying themes from the data analysis allowed me to reflect on the meanings presented and more deeply understand the experiences of elementary school counselors using restorative practices to prevent bullying in schools (see Table 3). There were no discrepant cases.

Table 2

Categories

Educating students and teachers about bullying	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices	Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices
Bullying Prevention Misinterpreting the Definition of Bullying Teaching Skills	Conflict Resolution Restorative Circles	Culture/Climate Decrease in Discipline	Buy-In Lack of Time	Training Admin Support
Tier One Lessons	Restorative Conversations Investigating Bullying	Having a Voice/Being Heard Repair Relationships	Lack of Sincerity Resistance	Parental Involvement Collaboration
Supporting Teachers Empathy	Making Amends Accountability	Build Community Learning a Lesson	Language Barrier	Clear Understanding Misunderstanding of Restorative Practices
Preventative	Agreeing to Meet	Relieving Admin Responsibilities		

Table 3

Preliminary Meaning Units

Participants	Meaning Units	Examples from Interviews
SC1	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“Seeking to understand are they really being bullied or did someone do or say something that was unkind, still not okay, but a big difference.” “Do we need to figure out could we do a restorative circle or could you in a group that we have,” “When we see the discipline referrals go down”
SC2	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“We spend a lot of time on prevention of bullying” “The kids have to agree that they want to talk with each other and that they want to work it out, and that they're willing to listen with an open mind and hear what the other person says.” “Teachers feel they have more time to teach”

	Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“there's very little time.” “My principal is really big into restorative circles”
SC3	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“Really important to address bullying on a tier one level, making sure that there's classroom lessons that are being preventative, not reactive.” “Me and my co-counselor have done is we have implemented undercover bullying teams, and that's kind of the restorative way that we address bullying.” “Building a positive school climate and culture.” “Having buy-in from teachers to really implement that school-wide has been difficult” “Our admin has backed us up in telling teachers, this is an expectation,”
SC4	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices	“Lot of kids will use the word bully, but whenever it's investigated, it's not legitimate bullying.” “Use restorative circles for groups, but if I use it in a group, I'll always have an ally present, and everyone will have an opportunity to share their experience” “Takes the burden off of the assistant principal who handles a lot of the discipline here at school,” “Lack of buy-in from adults sometimes.”
SC5	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“We have, I Would say an informal bullying prevention program as well. And by that, I mean that it's not a specific curriculum, but I do go over classroom guidance with them on bullying prevention” “I'm able to meet with the students in a group. Sometimes their parents even come as well,” “Build their communication skill” “Buy-in from everyone, the buy-in, from the staff and from parents. And I would say even from peers,” “The administration likes it because then that means less referrals for them”
SC6	Educating students and teachers about bullying Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“I also try to do some education around bullying.” “Two people have to have caused some harm to each other, and both parties have to agree to have this restorative, whether it's a circle or a chat, all participants need to agree to be a part of it.” “The discipline referrals seemed to go down” “There's the whole buy-in” “The principal that hired me was very, very dialed in on restorative practice. So even if a student did something that was harmful and it was one-sided, he would try to use a restorative chat with that student.”
SC7	Educating students and teachers about bullying	“But just educating them on what bullying is,”

	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	“So, circle tier one circles are my go-to when it comes to bullying or any other issues that come up really in the classroom.”
	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“It helps people to feel seen and heard,”
SC8	Educating students and teachers about bullying	“Olweus program, which I think has been pretty beneficial. And just helping our teachers know and understand what real bullying is and our students also to be able to recognize it.”
	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	“We also, a lot of times we'll talk about behaviors that we want to see stopped. What is it that if we were to just squash this one thing, what do you think would help you the most?”
	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“it's made a difference in the culture of the classrooms as well.”
	Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“If it does seem like it's persistent, then yeah, we'll team it with the administration and see if we can't get it knocked out.”
SC9	Educating students and teachers about bullying	“For our bully law here in Indiana, um, we have until October 15th of every year to do the bully prevention lessons.”
	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	“Then I would invite the other student in, and then after both of them have been heard and we kind of process through, you know, this is what we really want to say,”
	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“That gives them a time that they can be heard”
	Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices	“I feel like I don't really have enough time to kind of go through”
	Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“Even my admin are very process and restorative oriented.”
SC10	Educating students and teachers about bullying	“We did a lot of preventative lessons teaching about like how to recognize bullying. They called it the three Rs, recognize, report, and refuse.”
	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	“When harm happens, you can put restorative practices in place.”
	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“They feel more empowered in problem solving. They have more tools in language”
	Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices	“More adult resistance than I feel like there's been kid resistance or student resistance.”
	Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“Most of the administrators I worked with are open to restorative. I mean, they're curious and open to it.”
SC11	Educating students and teachers about bullying	“So, I've tried to do a lot of preventive work,”
	Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens	“Used to restore and to not redo harm. I mean, not redo harm, sorry. It's to restore and repair harm that was done.”
	Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes	“Positive communication”
	Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices	“Teacher buy-in that's 'one, student buy-in.”
	Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices	“I've had some run-ins with staff doing a professional development, I was screamed at, I'm consistently told what to do, questioned a thousand percent.”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

As discussed in chapter 3, trustworthiness ensures credibility and rigor in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is how researchers ensure the rigor of the qualitative research is evident (Sultan, 2019). Four elements comprise the original trustworthiness framework. These elements include credibility (truth), dependability (consistency), transferability (applicability), and confirmability (neutrality) (Billups, 2021).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the meaningfulness of the findings and whether these are well presented (Sundler et al., 2019). To assure that the research findings were credible, I used triangulation to produce greater depth and breadth of understanding. According to Billups (2021), triangulation involves using multiple data sources to produce greater depth and breadth of understanding. To achieve triangulation in the current study, I used multiple data sources including semi structured interviews and audio recording. I invited elementary school counselors from different Pre-K through fifth grade U.S. public schools to participate in individual interviews.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the applicability of findings to other contexts (Beck, 2021), such as similar situations, populations, and phenomena (Kviz, 2020). I used a predesigned interview protocol to ensure that I asked all participants the same questions. I also gathered detailed thick and rich descriptions by using verbatim responses to help evaluate how the same circumstance of people, place, and phenomenon could be applied in a similar setting, under similar conditions, and with similar participants. Themes

emerged from the 11 participants' interviews with consistent content related to their experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior of their students.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the research findings being stable and consistent over time and across conditions (Billups, 2021). A technique that can be used to demonstrate transparency is an audit trail. An audit trail outlines detailed procedural records the primary researcher maintains (Billups, 2021). Dependability was maintained by keeping detailed procedural records so any other research could replicate the study.

Documentation was kept on all decisions made throughout the research process in a researcher journal. I also recorded the audio of the participant interviews during the data collection process and immediately downloaded the transcribed responses to mitigate potential researcher bias or inaccuracy of the participants' responses. Another way that I mitigated potential researcher bias was by bracketing. Bracketing is when researchers place aside their previously held knowledge. It allows personal beliefs, values, prior knowledge, and experiences to be bracketed, not influencing the research study (Wadams & Park, 2018).

Confirmability

Confirmability focuses on the agreement between two or more persons regarding the meaning and accuracy of the data (Beck, 2021). The results of this study reflected the authentic participants' responses. Their responses informed the codes and themes that emerged from the data. To guarantee that the information reported as codes, themes, and experiences of the participants, I provided quotes from participants' transcript to assist

with understanding the themes. Keeping a reflexive journal was an additional process that assisted with confirmability. Reflexivity involves a particular kind of reflection grounded in qualitative inquiry's in-depth, experiential, and interpersonal nature (Billups, 2021). There were no adjustments to the strategies stated in Chapter 3. For this study, confirmability was established using member checking. I recorded each interview to ensure experiences were preserved accurately. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and sent each participant a summary of their transcript and encouraged them to review the materials for accuracy. No changes were required.

Study Results

In this hermeneutical phenomenological study, I explored school counselors' experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior of students. I used 11 open-ended interview questions to collect data during the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) In this section, I discuss the results of the study and a summary of the findings. The research question that guided this study was

RQ: What are lived experiences of school counselors in U.S. Pre-K through fifth grade public schools who use restorative practices to prevent school bullying?

Data coding revealed many shared experiences regarding the use of restorative practices to prevent school bullying. The themes that emerged regarding the experiences of school counselors using restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior included: (a) Educating students and teachers about bullying; (b) Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens; (c) Using Restorative Practices to Lead to Positive Outcomes; (d) Barriers Affecting the Implementation of Restorative Practices.; and (e) Level of Support

When Implementing Restorative Practices. The themes were central to the research question and are presented in this section in order of commonality among the participants. Table 3 provided an overview of the themes and which participant data helped identify the themes.

Theme 1: Educating Students and Teachers about Bullying

The theme “Educating students and teachers about bullying focused on the participants’ experiences as they went into the classroom to perform tier one lessons on bullying prevention and restorative practices. This theme was a significant finding because not only was it important to the 11 school counselors who were interviewed, but it also revealed to me how the school counselors worked to be proactive and informative regarding bullying. A significant aspect during the data analysis phase was that all 11 participants engaged in a form of tier one bullying prevention. All 11 participants discussed their experience with tier one instruction. The participants provided similar connections between (a) misconceptions around the definition of bullying, (b) tier one bullying prevention lessons, and (c) tier one instruction on restorative circles, which emerged as subthemes (see Table 4). They shared that many times students and teachers did not understand when a situation was considered bullying or when it was just a student being mean. This meant they would have to go in and do preventative lessons on bullying. Six of the participants in particular explained the misconceptions that individuals had about the true definition of bullying.

Misconceptions Regarding the Definition of Bullying

SC1 stressed the many misconceptions that students had about what bullying really was and whether they were actually being bullied:

Is this really bullying because, you know, everybody uses bullying right.

Someone looked at me in the cafeteria, I'm being bullied. So, kind of seeking to understand are they really being bullied or did someone do or say something that was unkind, still not okay, but a big difference.

SC4 had a similar experience to SC1 stating that, "lots of kids will use the word bully, but whenever it's investigated, it's not legitimate bullying."

Bullying Prevention Instruction

SC3 also had students who had misconceptions around what bullying really was. However, the difference with her school was that she had an actual curriculum to use for bullying prevention. She utilized the second step program as a form of tier one instruction for bullying prevention:

They like to throw the B word around a lot bullying. So just trying to make sure that it's going on for sure. I know we do second step lessons in one of the lessons that my district has, some of the curriculum they provided is the bullying unit from second Step. Me and my co-counselor have gone into all the classrooms kinder through fifth. We have defined it for them. So, we kind of walk them through that definition to ask them is it ongoing? Is it one-sided, is it two-sided?... we offer teachers to go into their classroom to help them facilitate circles. Some of them are uncomfortable, they're newer teachers. So, we always offer that tier

one support like, hey, we will go and do this work with you so that you can feel more comfortable doing it on your own.

SC10 had the same type of bullying prevention program as SC3. She also used the Second Step program as a curriculum for bullying prevention:

There's a program called Second Step. And so that was the curriculum we used. And they had one unit that really focused on bully prevention. we did a lot of preventative lessons teaching about like how to recognize bullying. They called it the three Rs, recognize, report, and refuse... there's a lot of proactive ways and preventative ways you can build community.

Even though SC8 did not use the Second Step program as her bullying prevention, she still discussed a specific bullying prevention program that she believed to be successful and how she used modeling as a part of her tier one instruction:

Olweus program, which I think has been pretty beneficial. And just helping our teachers know and understand what real bullying is and our students also to be able to recognize it... a lot of times we'll model it together. Well, if I'm Susie, let's just pretend I'm Susie, what would you say to me? And we like, we'll model it out because I think that's important too.

SC6, SC7, and SC9 talked about students who had trouble understanding what bullying was. They both used tier one instruction for bullying prevention; however, they did not name a specific curriculum that they used.

SC6 described her process of educating the students about the true meaning of bullying and what she did during her bullying prevention classroom lessons:

Students are still learning what bullying means, and I try to obviously let them know that it's not okay what the student is doing, but if it's something that has happened once or isn't necessarily repeated, trying to also help them understand what bullying means... I also try to do some education around bullying. So usually once a year, one of my classroom lessons is on bullying and trying to help students understand what bullying is, what it looks like. And I try to emphasize that it's intentional harm that is repeated and it continues even if you ask them to stop. So also trying to help students be able to recognize what bullying is, but also know how they can report it and go from there. So, I also try to educate kids on what it actually is.

SC7 also discussed the misunderstanding that students had regarding the word “bullying” and her thoughts on the tier one work that she did:

So, the word bullying I feel like gets thrown around a whole lot. Anytime somebody's mean with somebody and just really, and again, I'm new to the elementary counselor role, but just educating them on what bullying is... So really focusing your time in on just getting to know kids, getting to know, and letting them get to know the adults as people too. So, there's just so much power in that. What we find out is when we do that tier one work, the tier two and three work decreases.

SC9 reported the type of tier one instruction her school had to do because of the bully law in her state of Indiana:

A lot of educators, teachers really, um, struggle with knowing, you know, is this bullying? Is this something that we should be reporting? Is this, um, is this a trend? Um because we all know, you know, parents, people throw around, oh, well, they're bullying my kids... for our bully law here in Indiana, um, we have until October 15th of every year to do the bully prevention lessons... we're teaching and reteaching and reteaching and modeling and, you know, scaffolding all the stuff all the time... it's important for everybody in the school to be on the same page with understanding the definition of bullying. You know, how do we investigate it? Um, what does it look like to be determined to be bullying?

Restorative Circles Instruction

This lack of understanding about what constituted bullying is what led to the need for preventative and proactive tier one instruction. The other school counselors in this study, including SC2, SC5, and SC11 described their own unique ways that they executed tier one instruction in the form of skills that can be used during restorative circles or restorative conversations.

SC2 described the many ways she utilized tier one instruction to teach skills to utilize in restorative circles:

We intentionally teach social emotional skills in the classroom. We teach a lot of emotion naming, being able to name and define emotions, recognizing what emotions look like in ourselves and what they feel like in ourselves and what they look like in other people. And that leads into empathy, understanding different people's perspectives, understanding how they might feel in different situations...

do a lot of turn and talk practices in those lessons. A lot of reflective, reflective listening, some role-playing kind of situations... I think like any skill kids need to be taught how to use restorative circles. And I think they're great in a classroom setting.

SC11 mentioned the need to do a lot of preventative work due to all the conflict that her fifth graders were having. She said, "So I've tried to do a lot of preventive work, which I need more support with. But in the counseling lessons, I do have them for 30 minutes, 30 minutes a week." SC5 also described what her classroom lessons on restorative circles looked like:

And I do go into the classrooms, and we have circles where we'll talk about certain scenarios and what they can do in certain situations and just how they can act to prevent and to be a good friend and moving forward and stuff to establish that kind of baseline with all of the students. So, I do feel like at our campus we have kind of that tier one, everybody gets information on bullying prevention and just developing those traits to help be good friends and good citizens.

Table 4

Tier One Instruction

Subthemes	Participant Responses
Misconceptions around the definition of bullying	<p>"Seeking to understand are they really being bullied or did someone do or say something that was unkind, still not okay, but a big difference."</p> <p>"a lot of times with our younger kids, it's not really bullying. It's conflict or mean behavior."</p> <p>"They, like to throw the B word around a lot bullying. So just trying to make sure that it's going on for sure."</p> <p>"Lot of kids will use the word bully, but whenever it's investigated, it's not legitimate bullying."</p> <p>"So, the word bullying I feel like gets thrown around a whole lot. Anytime somebody's mean with somebody."</p>

Bullying Prevention Instruction	<p>“a lot of educators, teachers really, um, struggle with knowing, you know, is this bullying? Is this something that we should be reporting?”</p> <p>“Program called Second Step. And so that was the curriculum we used. And they had one unit that really focused on bully prevention.”</p> <p>“We spend a lot of time on prevention of bullying.”</p> <p>“We do second step lessons in one of the lessons that my district has, some of the curriculum they provided is the bullying unit from second Step.”</p> <p>“We have, I Would say an informal bullying prevention program as well.”</p> <p>“One of my classroom lessons is on bullying and trying to help students understand what bullying is, what it looks like.”</p> <p>“But just educating them on what bullying is,”</p> <p>“Olweus program, which I think has been pretty beneficial. And just helping our teachers know and understand what real bullying is and our students also to be able to recognize it.”</p> <p>“For our bully law here in Indiana, um, we have until October 15th of every year to do the bully prevention lessons.”</p>
Restorative Circles Instruction	<p>“But in the counseling lessons, I do have them for 30 minutes, 30 minutes a week.”</p> <p>“We offer teachers to go into their classroom to help them facilitate circles.”</p> <p>“I do go into the classrooms, and we have circles where we'll talk about certain scenarios and what they can do in certain situations.”</p> <p>“We intentionally teach social emotional skills in the classroom. We teach a lot of emotion naming, being able to name and define emotions, recognizing what emotions look like in ourselves and what they feel like in ourselves and what they look like in other people”?</p> <p>“a way to get them to practice these social skills without feeling the pressure of, I'm in trouble.”</p> <p>“To learn how to have a healthy disagreement with someone how to voice your needs, how to apologize if needed, how to accept an apology if needed. So, it's educational in that way.”</p> <p>“We might have to teach that to kids, you know, when we restore it, this is what it actually means.”</p>

Theme 2: Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens

This theme describes the experiences of the participants as they were addressing bullying using restorative practices. Overall, I considered this theme one of the most important findings of the five themes because it described the participants' use of restorative practices to address the harm caused to students, thus positively affecting the culture and climate of the school. All of the participants discussed ways in which they responded to bullying using restorative strategies. SC1, SC4, SC5, and SC7 reported using restorative circles or small groups with students. SC2, SC3, SC8, SC9, and SC10 talked about how they go about using restorative conversations with dialogue, affective

questions, iMessages, and restitution. SC6 only described how she made sure that the victim and the harmed both agreed before having a restorative circle or chat with each other.

SC1 discussed her love for doing groups and how she compared that to doing restorative circles:

I've always enjoyed doing groups...I did a lot of trauma groups. Groups. And to me that's similar to restorative circles...I think groups in general, I think if you've never done them, I know for me it's like oh, one or two, but a whole group.

SC4 also explained how she used restorative circles for groups as a way for students to resolve conflict:

Restorative practices is a strategy that we can use with conflict between students, staff, staff and students.... everyone's heard and they're able to say what they need to happen or to not happen moving forward so that they can have a peaceful experience... I use restorative practices in conflicts between individuals. I'll also use restorative circles for groups, but if I use it in a group, I'll always have an ally present and everyone will have an opportunity to share their experience, how they felt about the experience, and what they need for peace moving forward,

SC5 had a similar experience to SC1 and SC4 when she used restorative practices to address bullying. She spoke about how she also used small group with restorative conversations to address bullying concerns that she got:

The smaller groups are also when I get referrals for the bullying, for example, I'll have the students meet with me and we'll go through together kind of like what

happened, and they'll each have a chance to even bring somebody in with them, whether that be a peer or a teacher or even a parent sometimes. And then we'll kind of together go through, I'll ask a couple of questions, and then from there they'll kind of go over what they think happened, I suppose. And then we'll go over on how it made them feel and how they were impacted and what they could do moving forward with the goal.

SC2 and SC3 both discussed how they used collaboration with other staff members to help them address bullying using restorative practices.

For instance, SC2 described the collaborative effort in responding to bullying or other types of harm:

Either me, sometimes me and our principal, sometimes it's me and the classroom teacher facilitating that conversation. We also have in our building; we have a peace path. So, we teach students how to use that using iMessages to express their feeling, teaching kids how to use active listening, saying what they need to need from the other person and then being able to let it go and move on... we give them a chance to make some sort of amends or restitution sometimes in the form of a written apology. And then they say the apology, we teach how to make an apology, how to accept an apology or not accept an apology but hear the apology if they're not ready to accept it. And then some sort of way that they can make some sort of restitution. Restitution if they've said been unkind. Then we talk about ways that you can show kindness, giving compliments or spending time together.

SC3 also mentioned a collaborative piece when she explained how her and her co-counselor both used bullying teams as a restorative way to address bullying after it had been reported to them:

I hear about bullying incidents from admin. Sometimes it's teachers, sometimes it's parents. And then from there, usually speak to the student who is being victimized by the bullying to kind of gather their story, see exactly what's going on... me and my co-counselor have done is we have implemented undercover bullying teams, and that's kind of the restorative way that we address bullying... if they both agree, then we facilitate these restorative conversations and we kind of walk them through what was your choice? How were you feeling before the choice? How were you feeling after the choice? What were you trying to get out of that choice that you made? And what could we have done differently?

Both SC6 and SC8 described the process they went through to gather more information from the students when bullying was reported to them. The purpose of gathering more information was so they could decide if the situation was actually bullying or if it was just a conflict situation. SC6 Explained what she did when bullying was reported to her. She also compared bullying to a conflict where harm had been done and how students must agree to have a conversation with each other:

I meet with them and get some more information. Try to figure out who it is that they feel like is bullying them, what is happening? So, like are they physically bullying them? Is it verbal? Is it leaving them out on things on purpose or telling people not to be friends with them? And then how often has it happened? Yeah.

Has this behavior happened?... But as I've learned some more, it really is just an approach of how to resolve conflict. And this year especially, I've learned that it really has, two people have to have caused some harm to each other, and both parties have to agree to have this restorative, whether it's a circle or a chat, all participants need to agree to be a part of it.

Just like SC6, SC8 also described the way she went about gathering information from students when they report a case of bullying:

I typically just interview the child who believes that they're being bullied, get more information about it, talk to them and just see if we can figure out, well, how can you deal with this on an internal level kind of thing, and making sure they know that they're valued... Can you share your side of what's going on now, Susie? Just know that we aren't going to interrupt, so whatever, you'll have your chance to talk as well. So she shares her story with me and then Susie shares her story. Then we have to decide what actions are going to have to take place in order for us to be able to live peacefully together. A lot of times what we'll do is we'll come up with a contract and we come up with some behaviors that some actual, if I were to come into the room and see you doing this, what does it look like? Because a lot of times what they'll say is, well, we'll be nice to each other. Well, tell me what that is.

SC7 described what restorative practices she used when it came to responding to bullying:

So, circle tier one circles are my go-to when it comes to bullying or any other issues that come up really in the classroom... it starts with just the dialogue, the restorative dialogue, which starts with myself and anybody that I interact with...students being able to be invited to sit down with the other person and take accountability for actions, there's power in that.

SC9 described how she worked with students in a bullying situation to use I messages, apologize, and make amends:

Then I would invite the other student in, and then after both of them have been heard and we kind of process through, you know, this is what we really want to say, I felt frustrated when, so I have kind of like a little iMessage template on the back of a clipboard... I went through the bully school with him... when the bully then, you know, apologized and he just said, you know, I shouldn't have done that.

SC10 described how she used restorative practices as a responsive strategy when harm had been done:

When there is harm, there are protocols that we use with restorative practices in place. And I having the affective questions that the IIRP is like, what happened? What are you thinking at the time? What's the hardest thing? And what I really like is the last question, how do we make this right by you having the person who's been impacted by the harm saying this is what I need to feel safe, or this is what I need to feel to restore this relationship.

SC1 explained her understanding of what restorative practices are used for when harm has been done. She stated that, “restorative practices are used to restore and to not redo harm. I mean, not redo harm, sorry. It's to restore and repair harm that was done.”

Theme 3: Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes

The theme “Using Restorative Practices Leads to Positive Outcomes” outlines the positive effects that the participants noticed when they applied restorative practices at their school. This finding was vital because all 11 participants agreed that the use of restorative practices led to positive effects for the students, teachers, and school as a whole. The participants provided similar associations between (a) positive outcomes for students, (b) positive outcomes for staff, and (c) positive outcomes for the whole school. SC1, SC3, SC5, and SC6 all mentioned how they saw a decrease in discipline referrals as one of the positive outcomes to using restorative practices. For example, SC1 described how she saw positive outcomes from using restorative practices in her school with the decrease in discipline referrals:

Seen a decrease in our ED handbook in those grades with students just feeling like they can go to their teachers first and they don't always have to wait for the school counselor or to go to the front office. And so, I think for us, when we see the discipline referrals go down, one, we know that learning is going on in their classroom because we're not having to get called in, but two teachers feeling like they actually are a part of their classroom culture.

SC3 described how using community circles built a positive school climate, trust in the community, and she also mentioned a decrease in suspension rates:

And at least what I've seen most teachers do is do community circles, kind of building those classroom behaviors and building a positive school climate and culture... You can definitely feel a difference in the classrooms that do circles, like community circles. The culture is way different. They feel like a family in the classrooms where they facilitate community circles. The relationship I have with those students feels a little closer when I've been there to participate in circles with them. You can definitely tell that there's a shift in the school climate and culture in those classrooms... builds trust in the community... makes our dashboard data look great because our suspension rates are down because we handled it in a more proactive way.

SC5 described how building communication, rapport, a decrease in behavioral referrals and building relationships were some of the benefits of using restorative practices:

A positive impact in just seeing the rapport with the students building throughout the year... I've seen a lot of relationships building back up even after something has happened... so the administration sees it in the discipline part where there's a slight decrease in the number of referrals that they're getting... building the communications with one another helps. So, I would say overall positive impact on the school climate or culture.

SC6 had a similar experience as SC1, SC3, and SC5. She also talked about a decrease in discipline referrals and the benefit to classroom environments when asked about the successes she has had when using restorative practices. She stated, "the discipline referrals seemed to go down... see the benefits and see how it's worked, and it's been

good for them in their classroom environment.” SC2 discussed how using restorative practices had benefits for not only the students but the teacher also:

It helps kids feel, helps 'em retain their dignity and Their integrity. So, it feels really respectful to kids because we really want to hear them and listen to their point of view... restorative circles are really built on relationships and trust. So, kids feel better in the classroom because they feel better so they can focus more. And I think teachers feel they have more time to teach and that they can understand their students a little bit better, hopefully understand what the student experience is like.

SC4, SC7, and SC9 all had similar experiences when it came to the success of using restorative practices. They discussed how people being seen and heard constituted a positive outcome of using restorative practices. For instance, SC4 described how admin benefited from the positive outcomes of using restorative practices. She also discussed the change in the culture of the school:

Takes the burden off of the assistant principal who handles a lot of the discipline here at school, It takes a lot of burden off her back, cuz she's not having to like divvy out punishment all day... creates a culture of understanding and conversation... everyone's heard, and their experience is validated.

SC7 also explained how she had experienced certain benefits of restorative practices such as people being seen and heard:

So, I think when it comes to people, kids, adults, parents being seen and heard, there's power in that and they feel more comfortable when hard stuff does come

up, you can have those harder conversations... it helps people to feel seen and heard.

SC9, just like SC4 and SC7, discussed how the students being able to be heard as one of the benefits of restorative practices:

That gives them a time that they can be heard. Because I feel like with that restorative practice, so much of the time people are not heard... I think that having the kids, um, both sides, you know, be heard.

SC8 and SC10 both saw positive outcomes in their school after using restorative practices. They talked about how the students became empowered and built relationships with each other. SC8 described how she has helped to make a difference in the classroom, build friendships, and empower students by using restorative practices:

It's made a difference in the culture of the classrooms as well... I think it's made friendships that wouldn't have necessarily lasted... I've helped really empower some children to know their own worth and to realize that they can do this themselves.

SC10 described a similar outcome as SC8. She described how building community, empowering students, and gaining healthy relationships were the different benefits she saw at her school after using restorative practices.:

And then when you do that enough, they start becoming able to do that themselves, which is the goal. So, I feel like they feel more empowered in problem solving. They have more tools in language... And that comradery and respect, I feel like built a lot of really healthy relationships between me and the

teacher specifically because really at the end of the day, they're the ones navigating a lot of the behaviors... Administrators, I feel like it just helps something come off their plate.... it builds a healthier climate across the school... It gives intentional ways to build community and maintain the community, which is what schools are. Right? Really important Communities.

Just like SC5, SC11 discussed how communication being built was one of the benefits of using restorative practices:

At the end of the day is to be able to restore and repair relationships... after the restorative justice circles, right, communication was especially from two different parties when we had the harm party and then the party that was harmed after it, you noticed that the communication was building and understanding had I guess some miscommunication there.

Theme 4: Barriers Affecting Implementation of Restorative Practices

This theme reflects the participants' expressed frustration with the factors that got in the way of effectively using restorative practices at their school. Out of 11 participants, eight shared their experiences with dealing with challenging barriers to them being able to use restorative practices. The participants provided similar connections between (a) lack of time, (b) adult buy-in, and (c) punitive mindsets.

Lack of Time

SC2, SC6, and SC9 all reported that time was a big challenge when trying to use restorative practices. For instance, SC2 discussed how time is a big factor that can get in the way of being able to use restorative practices.

Lack of time to really spend time teaching, practicing going through the process of a restorative circle and then following up with kids. We have big caseloads, and we have limited time... still not a whole lot of time. They just need more because sometimes, well, we got to get through this, we got to get through this novel, or we got to get through this assessment.

SC6 also referred to time as one of the barriers getting in the way of using restorative practices. She also talked about the inconsistencies across the board regarding how some staff support the use of restorative practices and some staff do not:

In my first or second year, having a circle would take forever. It would take so much time because you had to interview each kid, get all the details, get them to agree, and that would just take so much time... some staff members are very comfortable with it. We actually had a restorative coordinator for a long time, and she provided a lot of resources for staff to use. In the moment when you're noticing something at recess or in the classroom or in lunch, there were these little packets that had restorative questions that you could just go through right then and there. Some staff bought into it, others did not.

SC9 went a little further and discussed how not only time but also the buy in from staff members could potential get in the way of using restorative practices:

I feel like I don't really have enough time to kind of go through... having everyone on board, um, and having the teachers accept that restorative piece... it's a buy-in from the whole school starting with admin. Um, because if you don't have that and if they don't understand the importance of it, then it's never gonna work.

Adult Buy-in

Time was not the only barrier getting in the way of implementing effective restorative practices. Some of the participants also had to deal with a lack of buy in from adults and resistance. SC3, SC5, SC10, and SC11 all mentioned that either adult buy-in or resistance, was the challenge they faced when trying to use restorative practices. For instance, SC3 discussed resistance and lack of buy in from teachers as she tried to use restorative practices with her students. She said, “Some teachers don't like me to pull students out for these undercover teams... having buy-in from teachers to really implement that school-wide has been difficult... they don't always welcome me into their classroom to see them happen.” SC5 also described how the buy-in from staff, parents, and students was one of the biggest challenges she faced when implementing restorative practices:

Buy-in from everyone, the buy-in, from the staff and from parents. And I would say even from peers, ... But definitely the buy-in a parent might not be okay with if there was a bullying incident for a restorative justice practice to take place and for that to be it for the other student, not get a consequence of ISS or lunch detention for the week or kicked off the bus, certain things like that... it's just if a teacher's been a teacher for so many years and it's always been done a certain way, kind of having it a different way takes a while to get used to. So, I think buy-in is the number one challenge.

Punitive Mindsets

Participants also mentioned that they experienced staff members or parents who still had a punitive mindset, which made it difficult to implement the use of restorative practices. SC10 discussed the resistance that she got from the adults who still had a punitive mindset. She also discussed time as a type of resistance to the use of restorative practices:

More adult resistance than I feel like there's been kid resistance or student resistance... Many of the parents or even some of the administrators or adults have that punitive mindset in the sense of punishment is X, whatever that is, out of school suspension in school suspension. And when we talk about restorative ways, they feel like that person's gotten off easy... the biggest challenge is always time. Finding the time with everything else that you're doing as a counselor, to take that time to meet with people, one-on-one beforehand... I do feel like there's still resistance around time.

SC11 had a similar experience to SC10 when it came to dealing with adults who could not let go of their punitive mindsets. She discussed how teachers holding on to that punitive mindset created a challenge when trying to use restorative practices:

Teacher buy-in that's 'one, student buy-in...is the buy-in the teacher holding on to this very punitive way of doing things because that's the way they learned it and that's the way that they feel. And they're very resistant to change.

SC4 on the other hand, had a different type of experience when it came to the barrier that affected her ability to use restorative practices. She was inconsistent with her response.

On one hand she describes getting support from her staff but then later on in the interview switched it up to state that a student's lack of sincerity and parents were a challenge when trying to use restorative practices. Unlike the other participants, even though there were some barriers getting in the way of her using restorative practices she still had the support of her staff:

Staff, staff has actually been pretty great here at this school. They'll even say like, hey, can you have a restorative conversation with these two? I think that it's something that could be addressed with one of those conversations. I don't think it's something that they need consequences for, they just need to know better. So, the staff has been really on board with it... sincerity. A lot of times kids will, not a lot of times, but sometimes kids will tell me what I want to hear and they're not being sincere with their needs or with the situation, they're not honest with me. So, a lack of buy-in from the student. But I also see a lack of buy-in sometimes from adults, whether that be parents of a victim that say, hey, I don't want my kid talking to them. I don't want them to be in the same room together ever again. Or I want that kid to hurt. I want that kid to have consequence and punishment and that's the solution to this problem. Or they kind of mock the idea. I've had parents that call back a week later and they're like, that stupid idea, I don't know what you were thinking when you did that with my son kind of thing. I knew that wasn't going to work.

Theme 5: Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices

The theme “Level of Support When Implementing Restorative Practices” explains the support that participants encountered as they tried to implement the use of restorative practices. Out of the 11 participants, eight discussed the level of support they have received when trying to use restorative practices at their school. The participants provided similarities on the support given to them to use restorative practices. The data analysis of the participants’ responses provided evidence of an overarching agreement of how administrators supported the use of restorative practices. More specifically, SC2, SC3, SC5, SC6, SC9, and SC10 all discussed in detail how supportive their administration was in terms of the use of restorative practices. SC8 focused more on discussing the support she received from staff. SC11 was the only participant out of the eight participants that talked about the lack of support that she received from staff. An example of the support that administration gave towards the use of restorative practices was described by SC2. She was really vocal about how supportive her principal was when it came to restorative practices. She said, “My principal is really big into restorative circles... My principal is super supportive and a big believer in restorative circles.”

SC3 also described how her admin showed their support of restorative practices. She stated that, “All of my administrators have loved it... Our admin has backed us up in telling teachers, this is an expectation... administration is always just happy because they didn't have to suspend students.” SC5 also mentioned admin support but went a little further to discuss parental support as well. She described how parents were supportive of

their students engaging in restorative practices and why admin was so supportive of it. She said, “the parents appreciated it... the parents in that particular case were appreciative over it... the administration likes it because then that means less referrals for them.” SC6 described how her principal was usually supportive of the use of restorative practices but not for bullying. I then asked a follow up question about if her principal would be open to it if the students both agreed to meet. She went on to discuss how her admin would then allow the use of restorative practices for bullying:

The principal that hired me was very, very dialed in on restorative practice. So even if a student did something that was harmful and it was one-sided, he would try to use a restorative chat with that student... if there is a bullying concern happening, our principal has communicated to us that we do not use restorative practice. We don't do circles for students who are being bullied And I think a part of that is if we're thinking about the student's perspective, it can be uncomfortable to sit across from somebody who's done harm to you over and over again. So, I know my principal doesn't really support using a circle to address bullying concerns... I'm sure our admin would be willing to do that. I think one of the reasons why she has said it is because sometimes students weren't given the option... I feel like our admin understand the process too and they use it in their work. I would say our previous admin, I mentioned this before, he was very restorative practice, but our current principal, she's great, but she's not as, this is what you're expected to do as staff, but I feel like she does approach students in a very restorative way and even trying to resolve things in a restorative way too. So

overall, I mean I think it's had a positive impact. Could it be better? Yes. But I think in general it's been good you for everyone... So, the principal who hired me, he was very big on restorative practice, so sometimes our staff meetings would be a restorative pl. We did a book study on restorative practices.

SC9 described the type of support she gets from her admin on using restorative practices:

Even my admin are very process and restorative oriented... But then you have to have that admin buy-in, um, and the admin actually walk the walk, talk the talk, you know, all the things. Um, because if they go to trainings, but then don't facilitate it, then it's not gonna happen, and it's not necessary... so our, my assistant principal has been really diligent about, you know, as things come to her attention or if kids are removed or whatever, then she does a lot of that restorative piece with the kids. You know, one-on-one, or sometimes I'm involved with that, or the other kids are involved with it.

Just like the previous 4 participants, SC10 had a similar experience with the support of her administration. She described how administrators and staff support the use of restorative practices however, there is still a misunderstanding about restorative practices:

I mean I think there's a lot of misunderstanding about restorative practices. What I will say, I think there's a lot of well-intended people who want to do right and use restorative practices, but I think there's this misconception that it's soft discipline... most of the administrators I worked with are open to restorative. I mean, they're curious and open to it. I do feel like there's still resistance around time. There's a sense of efficiency as far as we need to get this done. But I feel

like there's a lot more partnerships between counselors and leaders that I've seen over the years. And if you come to them and say, hey, I have this restorative approach, they're definitely willing to engage.

SC8 experienced support for what she was trying to do with restorative practices. Even though she did not mention support coming from the administration, she still had support that came from the teachers. SC8 gave an example of third grade teachers at her school showing their support for what she did with restorative practices:

Had two third grade teachers say to me just about a week ago, because they've been dealing with kind of girl drama in their room. They said, don't leave. They said, do not leave. You've got to stay. We're going to keep you forever. And I was like, oh yeah, I'm not going anywhere. But they've really been able to appreciate having that timeout kind of situation and an effective timeout where they're sitting and hashing through it rather than just sitting in the ISS room.

SC11 had a completely different experience when it came to the level of support received when using restorative practices. Unlike the other seven participant who experienced support from staff, SC11 discussed her frustrations with the lack of support from staff during staff development surrounding restorative practices:

So, admin and I are trying to figure out ways to do the staff awareness. Okay. I'm going to keep it honest with you. So, I'm the equity lead as well, right? And when I talk about, I've had some run-ins with staff doing a professional development, I was screamed at, I'm consistently told what to do, questioned a thousand percent.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices that school counselors working in U.S. public elementary schools implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. In Chapter 4, I discussed participants that were selected using purposeful and snowball sampling strategies. Participants gave rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences during semi-structured interviews. After 11 participants were interviewed, saturation was met. I discussed and presented data and results from interviews.

I identified five main themes from data analysis. The themes were educating students and teachers about bullying, responding to bullying using a restorative lens, using restorative practices in order to lead to positive outcomes, barriers affecting implementation of restorative practices, and level of support when implementing restorative practices. These themes illustrate lived experiences of school counselors using restorative practices to prevent school bullying.

Findings suggest school counselors create positive environments within schools when using restorative practices to address bullying and other forms of conflict. This includes decreasing discipline referrals, building relationships, building communication skills, gaining trust, developing positive cultures within classrooms, and promoting overall positive school climates. School counselors start by engaging in tier one instruction regarding bullying prevention and restorative skills. This ensures school counselors address bullying in a proactive instead of reactive way. Participants expressed a desire to help students and teachers gain a better understanding of the true definition of

bullying. According to participants, there are misinterpretations regarding what bullying is. They used restorative conversations and restorative circles in order to hold students accountable for the hurt that they have caused another person. They finish by having victims say what they need in order to improve situations and have offenders make amends for the harm they have caused.

Participants emphasized the need for support among students, staff, and administration in order to effectively implement restorative practices. There are, however, barriers that can still affect use of restorative practices. According to participants, these barriers include lack of buy-in from staff, resistance from staff and students, and lack of time. All 11 participants reported having some type of training on restorative practices, whether it was through their graduate program, webinars, professional development, or conferences. In Chapter 5, I present a detailed discussion of interpretations of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications for positive social change, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to investigate restorative practices that school counselors implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. I believe that looking into lived experiences of school counselors may help others better understand successes and challenges they have when addressing bullying using restorative practices. In this research, I used a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design to examine this topic. With this design, researchers gain insights regarding meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Heidegger, 1996). Since the research question involved understanding the essence of school counselors' experiences using restorative practices for bullying prevention, hermeneutic phenomenology was an appropriate methodology. This study confirmed current literature regarding positive aspects of using restorative practices with students as an alternative to exclusionary discipline for students who engage in bullying behavior or other types of conflict.

School bullying is one of the most widespread kinds of youth violence that has become a significant concern for students and global public health issue (Ahmed et al., 2022). Types of exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion are widely used in school systems to combat bullying behavior; however, it worsens negative behaviors they seek to address (Chu & Ready, 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Kupchik, 2022; O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023; Samimi et al., 2023; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022a; Wahman et al., 2022; Wilkerson & Afacan, 2022). School counselors have a crucial role in advocating for students' wellbeing and safety. A part of their role includes addressing bullying by assisting with development, implementation, and communication of school

bullying policies, increasing school faculty and staff awareness of bullying, teaching students how to identify bullying, and implementing interventions such as restorative practices (Su et al., 2021). The purpose of restorative practices is to build, maintain, and repair relationships to form healthy, supportive, and inclusive communities that facilitate optimal learning environments (Davison et al., 2022). A lack of understanding exists among teachers, parents, and administrators about the impact of restorative practices on elementary school bullying. Due to this gap, this study was necessary to explore school counselors' experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying in elementary schools.

During data collection, I conducted semi-structured individual open-ended interviews with 11 public elementary school counselors. Participants had experienced bullying situations and used restorative practices with their students. To organize data, I used Van Manen's process of phenomenological inquiry thematic analysis of familiarization, generating initial codes, identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data, naming and defining themes, and interpreting findings. Data analysis led to five themes regarding participants' experiences using restorative practices to prevent school bullying. The first theme was educating students and teachers about bullying. The second theme was responding to bullying using a restorative lens. The third theme was using restorative practices as a means to lead to positive outcomes. The fourth theme was barriers affecting implementation of restorative practices. The fifth theme was level of support when implementing restorative practices.

This phenomenological research study was an opportunity to address experiences related to use of restorative practices and positive outcomes they have seen at their school. In this chapter, I compare findings from Chapter 4 to the literature review in Chapter 2. I also address limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications for positive social change before ending with a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study involved addressing one central research question:

What are lived experiences of school counselors in U.S. pre-K through fifth grade public schools who use restorative practices to prevent school bullying?

Results from this study provide additional understanding of experiences of elementary school counselors using restorative practices with their students as a response to bullying. School counselors are charged with providing safe and inclusive school climates that are accepting, engaging, rigorous, tolerant, and culturally sensitive by taking action to eliminate or reduce the potential for harm to students through use of prevention and intervention as well as restorative practices (Arcuri, 2018; Paolini, 2018). Results from this study are aligned with existing research regarding effects of exclusionary discipline, bullying prevention, and use of restorative practices.

Findings are organized via five major themes.

Educating Students and Teachers About Bullying

Successful restorative practice implementation should prioritize tier one, which involves prevention of harm through building and fostering strong relationships between students and adults (Garnett et al., 2020). All participants addressed the importance of

providing tier one instruction on bullying prevention and social emotional skills that students can use in restorative circles.

In addition, participants addressed a desire to help students understand what bullying really is and how to identify it. Seven participants specifically stated their experiences dealing with either students or teachers who had misconceptions regarding the definition of bullying. These experiences are what prompted participants to go into classrooms to educate teachers and students via bullying prevention tier one lessons. School counselors go into classrooms and provide instruction on signs, dangers, and consequences of bullying to enlighten students and create positive and safe school climates (Paolini, 2018).

Counselors can address healthy conflict resolution strategies, problem-solving, emotion regulation, and anger management through classroom instruction (Paolini, 2018). This aligned with what participants experienced at their schools. SC2 and SC6 both discussed how they used tier one instruction in their classrooms regarding bullying prevention strategies and social emotional skills that students can use when they engage in restorative conversations or circles.

Participants not only provided bullying prevention to students, but they also provided prevention to teachers. According to SC9, her teachers also received bullying prevention at her school. This aligns with current literature in terms of bullying training and professional development. Since school counselors are considered leaders, they collaborate with stakeholders and teachers and provide training and professional

development to prevent bullying (Paolini, 2018). Based on participants' experiences, bullying prevention is a collaborative effort that involves more than just students.

All participants in this study had similar experiences related to educating students and teachers about bullying. They all identified with the perception that it is beneficial for them to be proactive instead of reactive when it comes to bullying behaviors. Instructing students and teachers on how to identify bullying correctly will help everybody in the school recognize the various aspects of bullying, so they know what to do when they need help. Findings from the study supports the need for school counselors to be preventative in their bullying response and help the students and staff get a full understanding of bullying.

Responding to Bullying with a Restorative Lens

The literature review revealed that bullying can range from teasing and name-calling to physical and social abuse (Armitage, 2021). This was further confirmed through the experiences that the participants went through. SC6 shared her experience of meeting with the students to get further information on types of bullying behaviors they were dealing with. According to current literature, exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, are usually used by administrators to deal with bullying and other forms of school violence. These punishments, however, may worsen rather than improve bullying behavior (Ozada Nazim & Duyan, 2021). Two of the participants (SC2 and SC7) from the study confirmed this when they discussed their experience with how adults or students at their school respond to bullying through punitive measures. Participants shared that some adults still have a punitive mindset and expect a harsh

consequence when bullying behavior occurs. The participants want to address the bullying behavior in a way that allows the student to stay in school or stay in class, thereby not negatively affecting their learning. The participants did share that they still make sure to hold the students accountable for their behavior which is actually harder to deal with than not having to face their actions, which is what would happen if they were suspended. The participants expressed their experience with seeing students get suspended and come back with nothing else happening to repair the harm.

The literature also suggests that since school counselors have a crucial role in advocating for students' well-being and safety, they must address bullying by assisting with the development, implementation, and communication of school bullying policies, increase school faculty and staff awareness of bullying, teach students how to identify bullying and implement interventions to address it (Su et al., 2021). The participants of the study affirmed this by giving various ways in which they use restorative practices as interventions to address bullying. The participants stated that they did restorative circles, restorative conversations, affective statements, small group, teaching students to make amends, and allowed students to be heard and to have a voice. This shows the dedication that the school counselors had when it comes to implementing interventions to address bullying.

Paolini (2018) noted that counselors can also facilitate small group counseling or individual counseling for students who are victims or perpetrators of bullying. This was consistent with one participant's vivid description of how she used restorative practices with as a type of intervention to respond to bullying. Overall participants expressed that

they used restorative practices to address bullying or other forms of conflict when it was reported to them.

Using Restorative Practices to Lead to Positive Outcomes

Participants shared experiences about the impact of using restorative practices similar to those found in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. All participants spoke to their experiences with seeing the positive outcomes that came from using restorative practices with their students. Researchers have shared that given that a school counselor's role is to foster a positive school climate, restorative practices are an excellent tool for doing this, given their strength in building relationships and promoting a sense of belonging (Smith et al., 2021). The participants' experiences confirmed this as they described how they saw relationships being repaired after they implemented restorative practices. This also aligned with the literature from Kervick et al. (2019), who reported that one of the main features of restorative practices is the focus on proactively building relationships among individuals. If harm occurs through a behavior infraction, students can focus on repairing relationships rather than receiving exclusionary discipline. It also supports the research that stated, introducing restorative practices improved relationships promoted empathy and encouraged positive behavior within the school (Oxley & Holden, 2021).

Throughout the interviews, participants described a sense of community building among the students and teachers after implementing the use of restorative practices. This newfound sense of community allows the teacher to spend less time on classroom management and more time on teaching the content. The participants stated that they saw

students supporting each other and noticed a change in the culture of the classroom. Research states that restorative practices are a multi-tiered system of support that school staff can use to develop positive relationships, foster a positive school climate, and build community (B. Garnett et al., 2020; Kervick et al., 2019b). Participants' experiences were similar to what was in the literature regarding building community. Overall, the participants expressed that using restorative practices had different positive outcomes that not only benefited the students and teachers, but also benefited the entire school. One benefit for the entire school was a positive effect on the school climate. The participants shared similar experiences with the research with what they see in their school climate. The participants also noticed a decrease in the number of discipline referrals with the use of restorative practices. This gives a concrete representation of the positive effects of restorative practices. The decrease in discipline referrals also means that the school becomes a safe environment for students to learn and grow which ultimately affects the school climate and achievement of the students.

The participants responses about the decrease in discipline referrals and school climate coincided with the information from a research study by Skrzypek et al. (2021). Skrzypek et al. (2021) who conducted a qualitative study of 90 students from a K-8 school in a mid-sized northeastern city. They investigated how restorative practices offer nonpunitive approaches to school discipline and can potentially improve the overall school climate, decrease suspensions, and reduce disproportionality in student discipline. The results of this study highlighted the benefits of restorative practice circles in promoting communication, expressing thoughts and feelings, perspective-taking, and

learning opportunities. In summary, all participants in this study identified with having a positive experience regarding the outcomes that came from using restorative practices.

Barriers Affecting Implementation of Restorative Practices

According to current research on the topic of implementing restorative practices, schools are faced with challenges of clashing philosophies, lack of time, resources, support leader engagement and conceptual clarity, teacher skepticism, insufficient training, student characteristics, competing demands and institutionalized racism (Hall et al., 2021). In agreement with the current literature on challenges of implementing restorative practices, all of the participants shared their experiences with the different barriers and challenges that they have faced while trying to implement restorative practices. The schools that the participants worked at had some of the same challenges as the schools in the research.

Five of the participants shared the frustration of having a lack of time to implement restorative practices. The participants also experienced issues with staff and student lack of buy in and resistance. According to research on implementing restorative practices, common implementation challenges include lack of will to implement, lack of time, lack of professional development, lack of capacity due to other responsibilities, lack of cohesion between restorative practices and other policies, and lack of leadership and support from school, district, or parents and community (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). Lack of time was described above, however, school counselors also dealt with a lack motivation to implement the restorative practices either from the students or the staff, For instance,

SC10 described how the staff at her school had a hard time changing their punitive mindset. SC5 described her experience with the struggles she had with getting the staff to change their mindset and support the use of restorative practices. However, even though barriers are a concern for school counselors entering the profession who want to implement the use of restorative practices at their school, the participants still agreed that the use of restorative practices benefits students social emotional development, social skills, and academic achievement.

The experiences that these participants had matched the results of a study by both Smith et al. (2021) and Short et al. (2018). They conducted qualitative studies that looked at school staff experiences and views working in a school that has implemented a whole – school approach to restorative practices. The studies also looked at the impact of restorative practices on students and negative behavior when implemented within the entire school. Even though implementing restorative practices comes with its own set of challenges (time constraints, resistance from staff, and lack of implementation fidelity) (Smith et al., 2021), many participants saw restorative practices as an essential learning opportunity that shaped positive social relationships and benefited behavior and academic achievement (Short et al., 2018).

Level of Support when Implementing Restorative Practices

According to Rainbolt et al. (2019), a school’s administration can do much to support the implementation of restorative practices. Administrator’s commitment, modeling, enthusiastic support, as well as investment in strong staff development have been shown to contribute to a successful restorative practice implementation. Just like in

the research, the participants in the study described firsthand experiences of the support admin have given them when it comes to using restorative practices. Two of the participants (SC3 and SC9) described their experiences with their administration setting expectations for the school to use restorative practices.

These responses from SC3 and SC9 align with the research from Rainbolt et al. (2019) which states that school leadership must help staff define a clear vision which includes short-, medium-, and long-term goals that address what the school is trying to achieve and the importance of this change for the entire school community. It shows the leadership qualities and influence that administration has on their school community.

Current research also describes how supportive staff can be when it comes to using restorative practices. When asked about their experiences implementing RP, some educators expressed feeling a strong connection with their students and well positioned to take a lead role in RP (Adorjan et al., 2023). This was evident in the rich description that SC4 gave about her experience with using restorative practices and staff support. She described how teachers would come up to her to ask her to have a restorative conversation with their students. It is evident that the participants understand the importance of having school support when trying to use restorative practices. Overall, the staff was pleased with their administrative support more than they were with teacher support. This means that teachers may need more training or instruction on how to use restorative practices or the benefits that restorative practices would have for their classroom and the entire school.

In summary, the responses that the 11 participants gave regarding their experiences with using restorative practices to prevent school bullying, lines up completely with previous research on the various aspects of using restorative practices. This includes impact of tier one instruction, the positive outcomes to come out of using restorative practices, the barriers that get in the way of using restorative practices, the level of support that administration and staff provide for school counselors using restorative practices, and the specific restorative strategies (affective questions, restorative circles, restorative conversations, and making amends) used when responding to bullying.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation to the study arose in meeting data saturation while also producing a manageable amount of data in a timely manner. Hennink & Kaiser (2021) reported that saturation refers to the point in data collection when no additional issues or insights are identified, and data begins to repeat so that further data collection is redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size is reached. One barrier that affected the timeliness of the data collection that I encountered during the study was having difficulty in recruiting participants for the interviews. My informed consent survey and demographic form was inundated with scam responses and bots. This caused my data collection timeline to be extended until I could reach the appropriate number of eligible participants for data saturation.

Another limitation of my study is related to transferability. According to Skovdal & Cornish (2015), while qualitative research is ideally suited to understanding local

knowledge and perspectives, the knowledge produced from such studies is not easily generalizable to other people or other settings. The results of the study are limited to only certified or licensed school counselors who have experience using restorative practices with elementary students in U.S public schools and may not be applicable to other settings. Although participants resided in multiple states across the United States, this study was limited in the ability to transfer the results to a larger population such as school counselors in middle schools, high schools, or private schools. Also related to transferability is the limitation of the lack of men represented in the sample of the study. This limitation prevents the understanding of how gender may impact the experiences of the use of restorative practices to prevent bullying.

Recommendations

After successful completion of the study and based on the strengths and limitations of this study, it is recommended to conduct further research in the areas of research and resources. The first recommendation is in the area of research. As discussed in Chapter 2, the findings from the reviewed literature supports further research on the topic of school counselors utilizing restorative practices. Those research findings show a gap in the literature about the impact of restorative practices on school bullying (Edber, 2022; Joseph et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2023; Mansfield et al., 2018). In agreement with previous researchers, I think more research is needed to capture the experiences of other school counselors using restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior across other populations. More specifically, one limitation of my study was that there was no representation of males in the sample population. Further research into the

experiences of males using restorative practices to prevent bullying could help the profession to understand how gender may impact those experiences. Further research could also inform the need for discipline policy changes and increased funding for additional training to support the use of restorative practices. Documenting school counselor' use of restorative practices can help in the area of antibullying efforts.

The next recommendation is in the area of resources to help with tier one instruction. Seven participants described their experience with students' and teachers' misinterpretation of the true meaning of what comprises bullying behavior. Participants shared a need for clarifying information on the various features of bullying. According to research, school counselors have a critical role to prevent, identify, and revolutionize the effects of bullying for students who are victimized and those who are engaged in bullying others (Cross et al., 2021). This can best be done with the use of a specific bullying prevention curriculum used alongside restorative practices.

Even though the Olweus' Bullying Prevention Program is one of the most widely disseminated bullying prevention programs in the United States and has consistently demonstrated positive impacts on bullying perpetration and victimization, research involving students in middle schools is limited and has not examined the impacts on bullying when combined with restorative practices (Acosta et al., 2019). In agreement with previous researchers, I believe more research is needed to capture the experiences of school counselors using a bullying prevention curriculum alongside restorative practices to prevent bullying behavior across other populations. Further research could also inform the need for increased funding for resources to support the use of a bullying prevention

curriculum combined with restorative practices. Documenting school counselor' use of a bullying prevention curriculum and restorative practices together can help in the area of antibullying efforts. Overall, the recommendations made would serve to be aimed at reducing the detrimental effects caused by bullying behavior such as low self-esteem, lower academic performance, dropping out of school, anxiety, and depression. It would also serve to strengthen overall bullying prevention and the implementation of restorative practices.

Implications

Through conducting this research, a few implications for positive social change developed. The social change implications would be beneficial to certified and licensed school counselors, counselor educators, school counselors in training, students, and other stakeholders. As shared in Chapter One, I sought to fill the gap in understanding the experience of school counselors using restorative practices to prevent school bullying and the successes and challenges they go through in the process.

This information can guide training and policy changes, which may, in turn, better prepare future school counselors to utilize restorative practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs to curb bullying in schools and support their student's mental health and wellness. My research may also influence changes in school counseling practices so they might have access to professional development and training within their school districts to gain the skills necessary to provide restorative practices in their schools. Restorative practices are so important in school counselors' work because they help repair the harm that students do to each other while also building positive

relationships between the students (B. Garnett et al., 2020; Joseph et al., 2021; Morgan, 2021b; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Additionally, insights from this study can aid counselor educators in better preparing future school counselors to use restorative practices, as well as use the findings to contribute to school counseling literature and inform leaders in school counselor education programs about providing restorative practices in the school setting and ways counselor educators can support elementary school counselors' efforts to curb bullying in schools. A final social implication of my proposed research would be more funding from the local district to develop additional training and support for school counselors who want to implement a restorative practice program in their schools/districts to help support all students' social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and future career self-efficacy. The results of this study may provide much-needed insights into how restorative practices can help reduce students' bullying behaviors at the elementary level.

Conclusion

School bullying is the most widespread kind of youth violence that has become a significant concern for students and a global public health issue (Ahmed et al., 2022). Administrators usually handle bullying through zero-tolerance policies that rely on suspensions and expulsions. Since school counselors have a crucial role in advocating for students' well-being and safety, they must address bullying by assisting with the development, implementation, and communication of school bullying policies, increase school faculty and staff awareness of bullying, teach students how to identify bullying and implement interventions to address it (Su et al., 2021). Restorative practices are an

alternative to punitive traditional disciplinary practices such as suspension or expulsion (Kim et al., 2023). The purpose of restorative practices is to build, maintain, and repair relationships to form healthy, supportive, and inclusive communities that facilitate optimal learning environments (Davison et al., 2022).

Certified and licensed school counselors have found their experience using restorative practices to prevent school bullying to be a valuable and rewarding experience. They have found the use of restorative practices to be important to the social emotional wellbeing of students and positive outcomes for the school. Results from this study highlighted the successes and challenges that the elementary school counselors faced as they worked to prevent and respond to bullying behavior. Results from this study also expanded the understanding of the experiences that elementary school counselors go through as they try to use restorative practices in their schools. The lived experiences shared by participants included rich, detailed descriptions to further the conversation of school counselors' use of restorative practices, increased awareness of the challenges that get in the way of effective implementation and increase awareness of opportunities for support.

Five major themes emerged including educating students and teachers about bullying, responding to bullying with a restorative lens, using restorative practices to lead to positive outcomes, and level of support when implementing restorative practices. The emerging themes explored the experiences of elementary school counselors while they used restorative practices to prevent school bullying. Results from the data confirmed that while there are many barriers that get in the way of effective implementation., it also has

shown that the use of restorative practices produces positive results for students and staff. These findings could lead to a positive social change outcome by guiding training and policy changes. This study was designed out of a curiosity for how elementary school counselors use restorative practices at their school and how that in turn prevents school bullying.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Purpose of the study: The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to investigate the restorative practices that school counselors have implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students.

Length: 45 – 60 minutes

Format: Semi-structured interviews

Opening & Introduction

- Express gratitude to each participant for agreeing to share their story.
- Revisit the purpose and importance of the study.

Interview process overview, review the informed consent, and remind the participant of the recording.

- Ask participants if they have any questions prior to beginning the interview.

Questions

1. Describe your experiences as a school counselor when dealing with student bullying.
2. Describe your understanding of how Restorative Practices are used in educational settings.
3. Tell me about how you implement restorative practices with your students.
4. Describe the impact that the use of restorative practices has had on your students.

5. Please give some examples of the challenges you have faced as you focused on addressing bullying behavior using the implementation of Restorative Practices.
6. Please give some examples of the successes you have had as you focused on addressing bullying using the implementation of Restorative Practices.
7. Describe the impact that the use of restorative practices has had on staff, students, and administration.
8. What types of support or training connected to restorative practices have you received?
9. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences as a school counselor addressing bullying and restorative practices?

Closing

This concludes our interview, and I appreciate your willingness and openness to participate in this study. Your contribution has been invaluable. Bullying within the school is a very serious topic that should not be taken lightly. Please be assured that although verbatim responses will be used, your identity will remain confidential, as your real name will remain anonymous. You will be informed regarding the outcome of the study. In the meantime, if you require additional information, you may contact me via cell phone or email. Thanks again for your valuable input.

Appendix B: Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study about Elementary School Counselors' Experiences Using Restorative Practices in Bullying Prevention. You were selected as a possible participant due to your knowledge and experience of the topic being studied. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 10 - 12 volunteers who are:

- Licensed or certified as a school counselor.
- Working in a Pre-K through fifth grade elementary public school
- Using restorative practices with students

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Janelle Brooks, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Study Purpose:

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to investigate the restorative practices that school counselors have implemented to prevent bullying behaviors of students. Looking into the lived experiences of school counselors may help better understand the successes and challenges they have when addressing bullying using restorative practices.

Procedures:

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- Complete a short electronic demographic form (5-10 minutes)
- Participate in an audio recorded interview (45-60 minutes)
- Review a summary of your interview transcript by email (5-10 minutes)

Here are some sample questions:

1. Talk about your role as a school counselor when it comes to addressing bullying.
2. Describe your understanding of how Restorative Practices are used in education.
3. Describe the impact that the use of restorative practices has had on your students.
4. Please give some examples of the successes you have had as you focused on addressing bullying using the implementation of Restorative Practices.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. If you decide to join the study now, you can change your mind later. You may stop at any time. You are welcome to skip any interview questions you prefer not to answer.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study would not pose any risks beyond those of typical daily life. I aim to provide data and insights that could be valuable to those in professional roles related to

yours. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing. Any participant who would like additional support are encouraged to access the following resource: 1+800-273-8255 (TALK) US-based, 24-hour, Counseling Hotline

This study aims to benefit society by contributing to school counseling literature and inform leaders in school counselor education programs about providing restorative practices in the school setting and ways counselor educators can support elementary school counselors' efforts to curb bullying in schools. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by emailing you a summary.

Payment:

You will receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank you for your participation in this study.

Privacy:

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. Be aware that the researcher's professional role as a certified school counselor requires her to report any possible instances of imminent danger to self or others, including reported or suspected child or elder abuse. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with

another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers, so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by password protection. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You can ask questions of the researcher via email. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB, which will enter approval number here**. It expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by responding to this email with 'I consent.'

Appendix C: Call For Participants



Interview study seeks school counselors using restorative practices

Caption: There is a new study about the experiences of school counselors using restorative practices to prevent bullying at their school that could help care providers, like school counselors and counselor educators, better understand the successes and challenges they have when addressing bullying using restorative practices. It can also guide training and policy changes, which may, in turn, better prepare future school counselors to utilize restorative practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences using restorative practices to prevent bullying behaviors of students.

About the study:

- One 45–60-minute interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Licensed or certified as a school counselor.
- Working in a Pre-K through fifth grade elementary public school
- Using restorative practices with students

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Janelle Brooks, student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during February.

Please message Janelle Brooks privately to let them know of your interest.

Appendix D: Demographic Sheet

Please respond to the demographic questionnaire only if you consent to participate in the study and select responses that most closely fit your background:

1. Are you a licensed or certified school counselor? Yes/no

2. Do you currently work in a Pre-K through fifth grade elementary public school?

Yes/no

3. How long have you been a school counselor?

1 – 5 years

6 – 10 years

11 – 15 years

20+ years

4. How long have you been a school counselor in your current school?

1 – 5 years

6 – 10 years

11 – 15 years

20+ years

5. Are you currently using restorative practices with students? Yes/no

6. What is your racial/ethnic background? (select all that apply)

White (Not of Hispanic origin):

All persons having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East.

Black (Not of Hispanic origin):

All persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

Hispanic: All persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

Asian or Pacific Islander: All persons having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, or the Pacific Islands. This area includes, for example, China, India, Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Samoa. 233

American Indian or Alaskan Native: All persons having origins in any of the original peoples of North America and who maintain cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community recognition.

Other (Not classified)

▪ What is your gender status?

Female

Male

Transgender

Non-binary/non-conforming