

# Introducing Restorative Practices in a Diverse Elementary School to Build Community and Reduce Exclusionary Discipline: Year One Processes, Facilitators, and Next Steps

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## Abstract

Across the United States, schools are implementing Restorative Practices (RP) in an effort to reduce exclusionary discipline and improve school climate through fostering a relationally driven school community. Emerging research has begun to examine the implementation and efficacy of RP as an alternative to punitive discipline approaches. While most research has focused on middle and secondary school implementation, this mixed method bounded case study adds to the body of knowledge by exploring how an elementary school began RP implementation. The case study specifically describes the RP processes utilized during the first year of RP implementation, structural facilitators, and alignment with Schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support, Second Step, and Responsive Classroom. Data include 19 interviews with teachers, staff, and parents, as well as analysis of administered staff surveys. Findings indicate staff implemented tier one community building RP circles, integrated RP with other behavioral supports, and that staff buy-in was influenced by strong leadership and ongoing professional development. Additionally, we explore ways in which the school integrated RP practices across all facets of the school community, including within classrooms and during staff and parent teacher organization meetings.

Key Words: schoolwide restorative practices, implementation, staff, elementary schools, school community, teachers, parents, principal leadership, PBIS

## Introduction

Restorative Practices (RP) are being implemented in schools across the United States (U.S.) within a multitiered system (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Riestenberg, 2015) in an effort to reduce punitive disciplinary practices and create more positive and relational school cultures. Part of the rationale behind adopting RP in U.S. schools relates to data that suggest youth of color and youth with disabilities continue to experience disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline (González, 2012; Sullivan et al., 2014). Contemporary efforts to address the social/emotional needs of students include implementation of multitiered systems of support (MTSS; Sailor & McCart, 2014), including schoolwide positive behavior intervention and support (SWPBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Many schools have also adopted social/emotional learning curricula (Gregory & Fergus, 2017) to proactively teach social skills. Despite these efforts, the stark reality is that youth with marginalized identities remain at more risk to experience punitive discipline than their peers. Therefore, some schools have begun to integrate RP into existing efforts to support student behavior in order to more fully address exclusionary discipline disparity.

### What Is RP?

RP is rooted in global indigenous traditions that emphasize respect and relationships (Umbreit & Armour, 2010; Vaandering, 2010; Zehr, 2002). Umbreit and Armour (2010) note restorative practices are reflected in multiple cultural traditions centered around resolving conflict through communal and restorative processes (e.g., Navajo peacemaker courts, Maori justice processes, the Afghani tradition of *jirga*). RP circle processes most closely reflect indigenous teachings that value interconnectedness and a belief that “every part of the universe contributes to the whole and is equally valuable” (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p. 28). Additionally, schoolwide RP practices draw from the community-based restorative justice model in criminal justice, utilizing prevention and intervention strategies to build community, strengthen relationships among students and adults, and reduce punitive discipline. While there is not one agreed-upon definition of RP as it relates to applications in schools (Fronius et al., 2019), generally, whole school restorative practices promote positive and healthy school climates focused on relationship building and repairing harm when behavioral infractions occur (Kidde, 2017).

Parallel to other multitiered preventative school-based models, such as SWPBIS, RP is often implemented through tiered levels of intervention that correspond to student behavioral needs. Chafouleas et al. (2016) described this common template as “multitiered prevention logic” anchored by three grounding principles: early identification/prevention, tailored supports for students’ needs and skills, and data-driven practices (p. 144). In the RP context, tier one focuses on prevention and skill building through a focus on community building, tier two introduces intervention to address harm within the community, and tier three provides more intensive intervention for students needing reentry support (Kidde, 2017).

Tier one RP implementation represents the foundational approach of proactively establishing and reaffirming positive relationships between adults and students within a school community. This occurs through various strategies such as community-building talking circles, affective questions, and restorative dialogue. One of the most common features of RP utilized in school settings are restorative circles. Circles can be used for a variety of purposes including, for example, morning check-in, exploring community values, building understanding of expectations, and celebrations (Kidde, 2017). Key components of typical RP circles in school settings include opening and closing ceremonies (which may incorporate a mindfulness moment), centerpieces (to focus attention and encourage speaking and listening), talking pieces (to monitor dialogue and promote effective listening), question or check-in rounds (to engage circle participants in the intent of the circle), and a circle keeper who facilitates the process (Boyes-Watson & Prannis, 2015; Kidde, 2017). Centerpieces are often physical objects which represent the shared values generated by the students. For example, a centerpiece could be a clear jar that holds cards with words that reflect values the class holds important that is placed in the center of the circle as a focal point for circle participants. Talking pieces are typically objects that are passed around the circle that students can hold and manipulate while they are speaking. Examples include a rain stick, a stress ball, a shell, a stuffed animal, or other object that signifies that the person holding it gets to speak while the others listen. The opening, closing, and question rounds are led by the circle keeper through a series of verbal prompts that participants may respond to. Tier one circles are a primary strategy through which classrooms build community in a school implementing multitiered RP.

Tier two RP strategies include peer mediation and responsive circles that address harm through relational accountability, youth agency, and trust. Whereas in tier one, emphasis is placed on prevention and skill building, typically in tier two, RP practices introduce intervention. This includes identifying that harm has occurred and addressing the harm through use of restorative questions

aimed at understanding not only what happened, but how it affected all parties involved and what needs to occur to make things better. Often, restorative questions are embedded within circle processes, restorative conferencing, or peer meditation (Kidde, 2017).

Finally, tier three RP strategies, or intensive interventions, are often reserved for when a student has been removed from their community. A reentry plan must be built to make restitution and repair relationships in order to support a successful transition back into the community (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015).

### **Aligning RP and SWPBIS**

There is a substantial body of literature on implementation of SWPBIS (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Horner et al., 2010), and it is the dominant school-based system for promoting social/emotional learning and behavior nationwide, particularly among elementary schools. Through a multitiered decision-making framework, SWPBIS supports implementation of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to improve both behavioral and academic outcomes for students. Given the theoretical framework alignment between SWPBIS and RP, recent work has tried to establish conceptual connections between these two prevention-oriented tiered models of schoolwide support (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Vincent et al., 2016; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015), recognizing that both the RP and SWPBIS multitiered frameworks share common goals of reducing exclusionary discipline, building a positive school community, and increasing instructional time. Swain-Bradway et al. (2015) offer an example of a multitiered model that aligns RP and SWPBIS through highlighting the compatible prevention, early intervention, and intensive intervention strategies utilized within each framework. Within tier one, example strategies include community-building circles (RP) and teaching schoolwide expectations (SWPBIS). In tier two, intervention practices might involve restorative conferencing (RP) and check-in/check-out (SWPBIS), while tier three intensive interventions incorporate reentry strategies (RP) and wraparound support (SWPBIS; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Kidde (2017) suggests that RP should not be a substitute for other effective behavioral initiatives in a school, such as SWPBIS; in fact, RP should be viewed as complementary and should be used in conjunction with other efforts to build community and promote healthy school climates.

### **Research on RP Implementation in Schools**

RP is being touted as an approach that can shift inequity in current school disciplinary practices and improve school climate and student outcomes, but

the research literature on the outcomes of implementation is still emerging, particularly within the U.S. (Hurley et al., 2015; Song & Swearer, 2016). In their systematic literature review of RP implementation studies, Mayworm et al. (2016) found only 19 studies related to RP implementation, and the majority (12) were conducted outside the U.S. Recent studies examining RP implementation in schools include ongoing and completed randomized control trials and quasi-experimental designs in Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico (Acosta et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Green et al., 2018; Manassah et al., 2018), and case studies which examine differing outcomes or facets of implementation (Ortega et al., 2016; Wang & Lee, 2018). Utilizing student and teacher survey data from two high schools, Gregory et al. (2015) found that increased use of RP correlated with improved relationships between teachers and students and a reduction in disciplinary referrals. Additionally, Mansfield et al. (2018) examined how RP adoption by a high school's leadership team contributed to reduced suspension rates. With the exception of a study by Ingraham et al. (2016), little research has examined the impact of RP implementation at the elementary level. Ingraham et al. examined RP implementation by school psychologists in a diverse urban elementary school in conjunction with utilization of a multicultural consultation tool. They found that cultural context was critical for effective RP implementation. Across a three-year period of implementation, parent engagement increased and behavioral office disciplinary referrals decreased. Their findings were significant because their examination builds a case for early RP intervention.

Some additional positive reported outcomes from recent studies on RP implementation include improvements in school climate and school connectedness (Brown, 2017; González, 2012; Jain et al., 2014; McMorris et al., 2013), reduction in absenteeism (Baker, 2009; Jain et al., 2014), and reductions in exclusionary discipline rates (Armour, 2013; Gregory & Clawson, 2016; Sumner et al., 2010). To date, there is only one published randomized control trial study (RCT) that takes a broader approach to understanding outcomes of RP implementation (Fronius et al., 2019). Augustine and colleagues (2018) undertook an RCT that found that, when comparing 22 schools implementing restorative justice to 22 control schools, there was a statistically significant reduction in school days lost due to suspension. Despite efforts by scholars in the field to keep pace with the rate at which schools are adopting RP, Fronius and colleagues acknowledge in their 2019 literature review that much of the research emerging to date is descriptive in nature, exploring outcomes within specific school sites and that additional research is needed in order to generate evidence that RP is an effective practice.

## **RP and Elementary School Implementation**

Within research on RP implementation in the U.S., studies have primarily been situated in middle and secondary school settings even though RP implementation occurs across the K–12 spectrum in some schools or districts. An important consideration in RP utilization among elementary-aged children is that challenging behavior in young children often leads to poor postsecondary outcomes. Behavioral challenges among children ages 6–8 has been longitudinally associated with a lower probability of obtaining a high school degree (McLeod & Kaiser, 2004). Similarly, a study by Cleverley et al. (2012) found that aggressive behavior among elementary children predicts depression and delinquency later in adolescence. In addition, recent studies suggest punitive disciplinary practices have increased within elementary and preschool settings (Jacobsen et al., 2019; Meek & Gilliam, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that we evaluate the degree to which RP can effectively address behavioral challenges in elementary age children and thus build prosocial behaviors that promote educational success.

## **Whole School RP Implementation**

The challenges of RP implementation acknowledged in the literature (Fronius et al., 2019; Kidde, 2017) include that there is not a singular definition of RP and there are multiple models for implementation (e.g., Beckman et al., 2012; Berkowitz, 2012; Kidde, 2017; IIRP, 2010; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013; Wachtel et al., 2009). Thorsborne and Blood (2013) considered the process of RP implementation and emphasized a whole school approach whereby RP elements are consistently applied by all staff, students, and the parent community following universal training. They also encouraged alignment between RP and the school curricula to ensure that school values are clearly defined and emphasize positive relationships. Further, Thorsborne and Blood note the importance of leadership as a key structural facilitator in implementation of new practices.

In their whole school implementation plan, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (2010) outline 11 key practices in RP ranging from the use of affective statements to a variety of circle processes and restorative conferences. Gregory et al. (2019) released an implementation guide for school administrators that includes 12 indicators of RP implementation with detailed checklists for each indicator. Unique features of their guide include focus on structural facilitators, which they call “RP infrastructure” (pp. 5–8), and a focus on capacity-building including the importance of addressing equity issues (pp. 9–12). Additionally, specific implementation guides and materials have been developed in various locales in the U.S. including Minnesota, Chicago,

Denver public schools, and the Oakland Unified school district, among others. Kidde (2017) offers the perspective that no one school culture is alike, and therefore, there is not one pathway to implementation. He argues that schools should rely on frameworks identified through implementation science to craft the path that best fits their unique contexts.

One such framework that Kidde points to is the research to practice implementation science model developed by Fixen and colleagues (2007). They assert implementation of a new practice in an organization is a multifaceted process that takes several years to complete. They describe six circular steps that characterize implementation processes, including “exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation, and sustainability” (Fixen et al., 2007, p. 5). While the purpose of this article is not to fully dive into implementation science, we include Fixen and colleagues’ perspective because we feel it is instructive for understanding the context of our study. Staff in the school in which we examined year one implementation described the first year as exploratory. While they were not consciously employing Fixen et al.’s framework, we highlight this in order to provide the reader an understanding that the purpose of our study was not to evaluate the implementation of RP at this school in relationship to any one particular model. In fact, our intention was to better understand the ways in which school staff made sense of their exploration of RP implementation as it relates to the elementary school context.

### **Study Overview**

This manuscript specifically describes findings related to year one implementation of RP in an elementary school setting with regard to: (a) types of RP processes implemented, (b) structural facilitators identified by participants that facilitated early RP implementation, (c) the alignment of RP with other schoolwide practices that support student behavior, and (d) next steps for implementation described by participants. The bounded, mixed method, single case study (Yin, 2017) was conducted at an urban preK–5 public elementary school as part of a larger, multiyear, community-based participatory action research project between an interdisciplinary university research team and a local school district. Two co-investigators and a doctoral student collected and analyzed data in collaboration with the school site. The research team examined multiple dimensions of year one RP implementation. As noted, the purpose of the study was not program evaluation, but rather exploring the experiences and perspectives of elementary school staff in beginning to implement specific RP practices. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on findings related to the following research questions:

- What are the primary processes that were utilized in the first year of RP implementation?
  - What are the structural facilitators that supported RP implementation?
- How did RP align with existing school-based behavioral structures?
- What are the next steps for implementation as described by participants?

## Methods

### Study Site

The elementary school in which the study was conducted is situated in a predominantly White state in the northeastern U.S. The school district includes six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school and has committed to implementing RP districtwide. The geographic municipality of the school district is a refugee resettlement community. Thus, the school population includes families from diverse cultural, ethnic, and national backgrounds that contrast with the homogenous, majority White population of the state. Based upon 2016–17 school data from the state education agency, 41% of the 296 preK–Grade 5 students in this particular elementary school qualified for free and reduced lunch. Additionally, 24% of the student population were English Language Learners (ELL), 50% identified as White, and 50% identified as other racial/ethnic identities. The elementary school has two classes per grade level and has a self-contained program for newly arrived refugees.

The elementary school embarked upon implementing tier one RP during the 2017–18 school year. During August professional development days, the entire school staff completed a districtwide four-day training introducing RP. During the training participants learned about the roots of RP, explored how RP differs from traditional disciplinary models, and were trained in implementing tier one circles. Following the training, the principal set a goal for his staff to continue to explore using RP tier one circles throughout the academic year and made a personal commitment to begin to use circle processes and restorative conferences when responding to some office disciplinary referrals. He also committed to engaging parents in experiencing RP circles at PTO meetings and set goals to incorporate circles into staff meetings.

Rather than dictating a set number of circles for teachers to conduct, the principal encouraged staff to incorporate as many community-building, proactive circles into their teaching practice as they saw fit. All staff members were provided copies of the book, *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Additionally, all staff were provided copies of restorative questions that they could choose to use when responding to challenging behavior. Each card included the following question prompts:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done?
- What do you need to do to make things right?

Prior to implementation of RP, the elementary school was already utilizing a range of schoolwide disciplinary procedures and curricular initiatives to address student behavior. The foundation of the school's approach to discipline draws from the Responsive Classroom model, an evidenced-based, classroom-level, social/emotional learning intervention (Rimm-Kaufman, 2006). Many of the school's teachers have received Responsive Classroom training, and the school's discipline approach incorporates strategies found within the Responsive Classroom framework. The school also utilizes SWPBIS, which means they embrace the multitiered framework that seeks to proactively establish a school culture characterized by common expectations in all environments (Horner et al., 2010). The school actively engages in proactive teaching and reinforcement of schoolwide expectations and spends the first six weeks of school dedicated to explicit instruction on schoolwide norms. Schoolwide celebrations related to broad progress in behavioral expectations are frequent. In fact, the school had even received recognition from the state for the quality of its practices related to SWPBIS.

Even with the implementation of these classroom and school-level behavioral supports, school personnel and leadership still reported numerous challenges related to student behavior. These challenges pushed the school to focus on additional efforts to develop social skills within and among students. To this end, the school adopted the Second Step Curriculum, a research-based social/emotional learning curriculum widely used in elementary settings (Low et al., 2015) and implemented at all grade levels by classroom teachers and school counselors. Despite these multifaceted efforts, the principal reported significantly high levels of office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) as documented by the Schoolwide Information System data collected at the beginning of 2017–18, or RP implementation year one. Across the three years prior to 2017–18, an average of 302 total ODRs were made in any given year, while 569 ODRs were made during 2017–18. Furthermore, Black students received twice as many ODRs than their White peers. In examining these data, we asked the principal why he believed there were more ODRs during that first exploratory year of RP implementation. According to the principal, the expectation for RP implementation during that first year was merely exploratory and was not fully implemented in a universal and systematic way nor did they transform previous disciplinary practices and procedures in alignment with the RP framework.

He also conveyed that the spikes were partially influenced by a particularly challenging student who had numerous ODRs during a time period when they struggled to develop effective supports to address the student's needs. We present this data to provide additional context around the circumstances under which the principal and school staff determined that their current behavioral support efforts were not sufficiently addressing challenging behaviors, which opened the door for exploring RP implementation.

## **Data Collection**

### *Interviews*

During spring 2018, the principal investigator, co-investigator, and a doctoral student conducted 17 semi-structured interviews 1:1 with school personnel. In addition, the principal investigator conducted a focus group with two parents. The principal disseminated an informational email invitation created by the principal investigator to 24 teaching staff and planning room personnel. In addition, an open invitation to parents was disseminated through the school newsletter. Interviews were conducted at the school site and were recorded for the purposes of transcription. A detailed IRB-approved information sheet was provided to each participant. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and utilized a 13-question protocol developed from prior research on RP implementation and from research questions generated from conversations with the school principal during the research design phase. Questions for individual participants focused on their personal definitions of RP, the types of curriculum they utilize to support social/emotional learning, the type of training received for RP implementation, and their personal experiences with utilizing RP. Sample questions included:

- Describe for me the different ways that you address the social and emotional needs of students in your classroom.
- How did you first learn about Restorative Practices? Have you received any training or professional development on Restorative Practices? If so, can you describe the nature of that training?
- How are you as a whole staff evaluating RP implementation? Are there shared goals or vision for how RP will be implemented short term? Long term?

Questions for the parent focus group centered around how RP was introduced to the broader community, their understanding of RP, and personal experiences with RP by themselves or their children.

### *Surveys*

During December 2017, a staff survey created by the principal was administered ( $N = 27$ ) using an online survey hosting platform to gather feedback

on individual staff knowledge, skills, and RP implementation strategies. The survey consisted of 10 questions that probed staff on the degree of frequency of circle use. The survey included a mix of multiple choice, yes or no, and multiple selection format questions. The survey also asked questions about which circle elements staff were using and whether the circle scripts were individually designed or derived from *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). The survey went out to all staff ( $N = 40$ ). The survey was administered again in June 2018 ( $N = 22$ ), and each time it was anonymous and voluntary.

### *Schoolwide Information System Data Set*

The principal granted access to Schoolwide Information System data, including information on office discipline referrals (ODRs) and teacher-reported behavioral incidents. De-identified data accessed for this project related to office referrals for 2014 through 2018 and school information related to historical trends in behavioral needs and referral patterns. Because of the early stage of RP implementation, these data were shared for the purposes of providing additional context around behavioral incidents and the types of interventions in place when a teacher-reported behavioral incident occurred. These data were not analyzed for the sole purpose of determining whether implementation of RP in the first year was impacting exclusionary discipline rates.

### **Participants**

We utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007) to recruit a participant sample that represented a variety of stakeholders who experienced RP implementation in some capacity during 2017–18. We sought to understand what RP strategies were being utilized and how implementers were aligning RP to other schoolwide practices. Of 24 invited personnel, 17 teachers and support staff participated. The focus group was offered to any parents who wanted to share input, and two parents (from different households) participated in the focus group format. To protect confidentiality, we intentionally do not provide the specific grade levels or titles of participating school personnel. However, participants represented a range of grade levels across preK–5 as well as teachers who function in specialty roles (e.g., non-classroom-based roles). The two parent participants had experience in tier one RP circles within the monthly Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting. In addition, one of the parents reported having participated in RP conferencing with the principal and their child related to behavioral incidents. All participants were provided an information sheet outlining the specifics of the study and how confidentiality would be protected.

## Data Analysis

### *Coding*

All semistructured interviews were audiorecorded and professionally transcribed. Coding involved several iterative phases, with each member of the research team independently coding two of the same interview transcripts utilizing a priori codes developed from: (a) field memos completed post interviews, (b) the interview protocol, (c) research literature on RP implementation, and (d) descriptive codes that emerged during the first round of coding (Saldaña, 2009). The research team met to compare notes and develop a refined codebook. Next, the researchers individually engaged in second round coding (Saldaña, 2009) of one transcript through the use of a focused coding procedure. Comparison following this process led to discussion about several codes that needed further refinement. After consensus was reached, the three researchers divided and coded the remaining transcripts utilizing the qualitative research software, Dedoose. This revealed frequency of certain codes which led to theme generation and initial findings which were, in turn, shared with the school principal as a member-check (Thomas, 2017). Specifically, the principal provided us affirmation that the way we described elements of circle processes implementation and the timeline for implementation was consistent with what staff shared. We also invited a fourth trained qualitative researcher to code a selected transcript using the final codebook aligned with the draft themes for interrater reliability. A high level of agreement (< 90%) was reached through this process.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Using Dedoose, we identified salient participant narratives that aligned with each of the emergent themes from the coding process. Cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) within Dedoose was used to affirm code frequency and theme strength. Results are reported in relationship to themes that emerged through the data analysis process.

### *Survey Analysis*

For the teacher surveys, we calculated descriptive statistics to highlight the frequency of responses across participants. The survey data were utilized to understand the degree to which teachers experimented with circle implementation and which components of typical circle elements were utilized. This information broadened the results from the qualitative interviews (Creswell & Clark, 2018) and highlighted the prevalence of certain RP strategies throughout the school community.

### *Data Triangulation*

Multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources including surveys, source documents, and video footage were collected and analyzed to understand what occurred during the first year of RP implementation (Creswell & Clark, 2018; Onghena et al., 2018). Source documents included school newsletters published on the school website as well as print resources being used in relation to RP in the classrooms (e.g., printed copies of restorative question cards, teaching charts). Video footage of circle implementation, arranged by school personnel, was provided to the research team to view on-site. This enabled us to see in action the various circle procedures that teachers described in the interviews. Through the process of viewing the videos, we noted which circle procedures were most prominently used—data that was affirmed in the staff surveys. Triangulating the findings from the interviews with these data provided the investigators a clearer understanding of what participants described in relation to RP implementation.

## **Results**

The study findings describe: (a) what RP processes occurred within implementation, (b) what structural facilitators supported implementation, (c) how RP aligned with existing school-based behavioral structures, and (d) next steps needed to sustain RP implementation beyond year one as described by participants. As previously mentioned, the school began implementing tier one RP circles during the 2017–18 school year with the primary goal for staff to attempt circles within their teaching spaces. This included general education classrooms and special areas such as physical education (PE), art, and music.

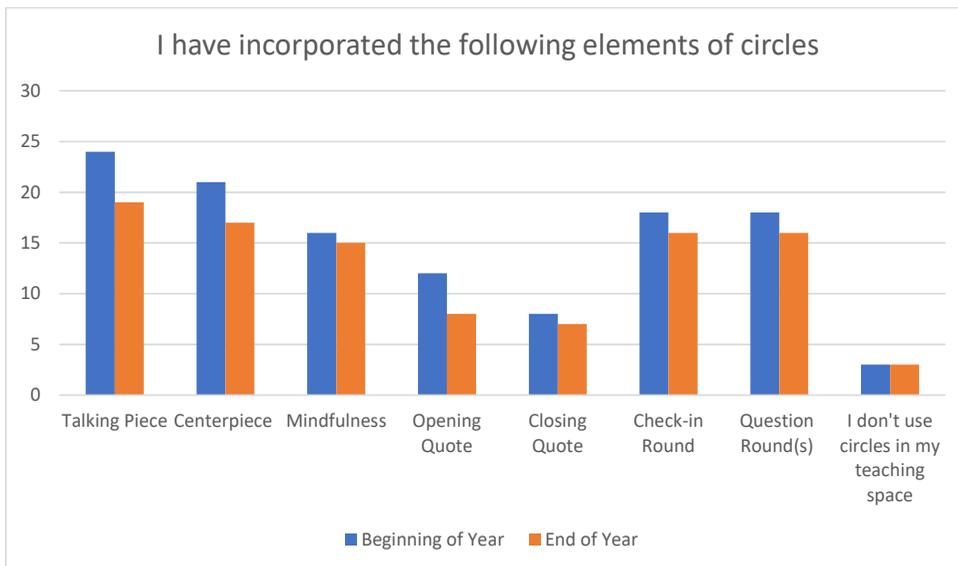
### **What RP Processes Happened During Year One Implementation?**

#### *Circle Procedures*

Utilizing the circle procedures outlined in Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015), participants conducted tier one circles for the dual purpose of community building and problem-solving. A survey administered by the principal at the beginning and end of the school year captured types of circle procedures utilized and frequency of use. Figure 1 shows the different procedures utilized by respondents as part of circle implementation. The survey results indicated the most common circle procedures implemented across respondents were use of a talking piece and centerpiece, check-in, and question rounds. These practices were corroborated through the one-on-one interviews and by our video observations. When asked specifically what resources supported their circle

facilitation, participants reported that *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* was their primary resource.

Figure 1. Elements of RP Circles Utilized by Staff Implementing Tier One Circles



### Circle Dosage

Multiple participants led circles themselves as circle keepers and/or collaborated with colleagues (e.g., asked the principal to model). Additionally, beginning and end of year staff surveys suggest participants implemented weekly circles, with the majority utilizing them between one to two and three to five times per week.

Additional themes related to the process of year one RP implementation were explored through thick description of the findings from the one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This process revealed: (a) structural facilitators of implementation that fostered buy-in, (b) alignment with existing school initiatives and structures to support student behavior, and (c) implementation next steps.

### Structural Facilitators of Implementation

The interview protocol probed regarding why participants implemented RP and how they were supported as they adopted the practice. There were a number of structural facilitators identified by participants that contributed to the school community's willingness to begin utilizing RP.

*Sustained Professional Development*

The first facilitator of RP implementation related to the impact of the August 2017 professional development retreat where RP was introduced and subsequent consistent RP messaging in faculty meetings and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings. Multiple participants framed the retreat event as the starting point for the staff to learn about RP and consider how it might be utilized within their school setting. One participant recalled:

We definitely talked about it at our in-service at the beginning of the school year, and it was introduced then. Circle practice was introduced, and we had some nice professional development with a guest teacher, and we took part in circles. So, that was when it got a little bit more focused.

It is important to note that the in-service was not the only time RP was introduced. Continued conversations about RP implementation occurred throughout the year at faculty meetings and PTO meetings. A parent described first hearing about RP at the end of summer 2017 at a board meeting and in the fall at a PTO meeting. Additionally, one teacher recalled:

One of the really wonderful things about this community is that they utilize certain times like retreats in order to introduce us to this practice, and then they don't just do it—we don't just as adults, we do it with children, and then we do it as adults again during our faculty meetings, and then we do it as adults again during the PTO.

This idea of deeply engaging with the content was further supported by a participant who explained:

We sat with this book in a faculty meeting two months ago [November], just to continue that point that it wasn't just in August, it isn't just repeated in this, you know, going through the motions kind of way where we're just doing a circle. We actually delved deeply into this by breaking up into groups and recognizing what is said in certain sections of this book and then sharing that with our community, our staff here.

*Collaborative School Culture*

A second structural facilitator noted by participants was the strong culture of collaboration among staff and commitment to partnering with families and the community to serve students. Several participants felt that this spirit of collaboration reinforced the desire among school staff to implement what they learned in the professional development sessions. One participant described: "I feel like this school is very—everyone feels like a team, like we're a big team, and we go full force ahead into a new thing. Okay, we're all gonna do this, and

we believe it's the best thing." This was echoed by the principal who was struck by the degree to which staff jumped into RP implementation, reflecting the necessary level of committed buy-in required for sustainable and efficacious RP implementation. The principal noted, "People are doing multiple circles a day, and every single class is doing it. So, it far exceeds, and it's far beyond what I thought it would be."

### *Leadership*

A final, and perhaps most influential structural facilitator identified by multiple interviewees was the role of leadership in supporting RP implementation. Participants surmised that the move to adopt RP happened quickly due to the vision and leadership of the principal. One teacher explained, "[School Principal]'s really passionate about it. So, that helps when your leader is really on board." Additionally, they felt the principal's willingness to partner with them and provide modeling nurtured their ability to lead circles. For example, one teacher noted, "At the beginning of the year, [School Principal] would come in and do circles with us with the whole class, as well, and he tended to do the movement, the quote, and then the questions." This was echoed by another participant who identified the principal as an important resource:

You're not just sort of adrift. Like, we're doing this new thing—sometimes, we get directives from the district that are—you're kind of on your own once you get it, and it's nice to feel like, oh, we have somebody who's learning to be an expert in the building, and we're able to rely on them and learn together and be on the same page.

The sense of communal, collective effort scaffolded with support emerged throughout the interviews and during our parent focus group. Parents shared that the principal introduced RP concepts, goals, and implementation plans at a PTO meeting and modeled the circle process with them. Parents were so impressed by the RP introduction that they continued to use a circle process during their PTO meetings. One of the parents described the benefit of using RP circles within this context: "Well, I think they're great community builders...I love hearing what other people have to say about the school and learning about their answers; [RP circles] helps you to learn about those people."

In addition, the principal described RP and the rationale behind adopting circle practices in the school newsletter which was disseminated to all families in the school. The school newsletter itself was also posted to the school's website that allowed the browser to change the language of the information being posted so that it was accessible to families for whom English was not their first language. The principal reported that in addition to posting the newsletters to the website, he also consulted with multicultural liaisons to ensure that

important information was disseminated through direct phone calls. While efforts were made by the principal to disseminate information about the school's adoption of RP during that first year broadly across the school community, the parents we interviewed also raised concerns that the initiative moved forward primarily due to the principal's agency and wondered how more information about the rationale for implementing RP could be communicated to the broader school community, including families who, despite these efforts to ensure communication and accessibility, may not be fully aware of the RP initiatives.

One parent reflected that the principal is a strong advocate for practices that will positively impact students. Referring to recent work in the school on growth mindset and SWPBIS utilization, the parent described, "[The principal] will latch onto anything that [the principal] thinks will make a difference to kids, and restorative practices is a great thing to latch onto...." While leadership seemed to be a key factor for creating buy-in among staff and within the context of PTO meetings, parents felt more information and a clear rationale would be useful for the greater school community outside the context of PTO meetings and school newsletters.

### **Alignment With School Behavioral Initiatives**

To facilitate RP adoption, the school did not simply replace existing initiatives with RP but worked diligently to consider how RP tier one circles aligned with other efforts and curriculum. Therefore, RP became an additional tool that teachers utilized to create a positive classroom culture, build community, promote social/emotional learning, and address behavioral challenges as they arose.

According to school personnel, the most frequent RP strategy they employed were circles, and there were three primary ways tier one circles were utilized: community building, content discussions, and problem-solving. Community building circles were utilized to build community and often in grade level classrooms became the format for "morning meeting." Teachers reported that the morning meeting routine, part of their commitment to Responsive Classroom (Rimm-Kaufman, 2006), was a natural fit for RP circles for community building.

Teachers, particularly in specials classes such as art or PE, also used circles to explore content when the circle process was likely to increase equity and opportunity for more voices to be heard or to foster understanding of a new idea or concept. Content circles were also utilized to introduce elements of the Second Step Curriculum. If a particular social skill was being introduced, for example, friendship problem-solving, teachers used a circle process to facilitate exploration of that particular concept. Problem-solving circles were also used to address issues that arose in the classroom related to schoolwide behavioral expectations. If conflicts arose or schoolwide behavioral expectations established

through SWPBIS needed to be revisited, teachers used RP circles to engage in a classwide discussion. Teachers described the nuanced ways they integrated RP as an additional tool compatible with the other schoolwide behavioral and social/emotional learning initiatives. For example:

Well, I felt like it was a great fit because I felt like it wasn't necessarily something so vastly different from the best practices we'd already been using from various other programs. Whether it was Responsive Classroom or PBIS or anything else emphasizing the positive inclusion...it just gave some additional kind of protocols to use and information to use to make our circles and our practices even more fair and inclusive, I thought.

Another teacher reflected on the importance of having a range of tools to be responsive to student needs: "I'm not a packaged deal. So, I take something from this, restorative circles. I take stuff from 20 years ago when I was doing Responsive Classroom. I take stuff from Second Step, and I take stuff on my own." Several participants also acknowledged that there are drawbacks of teachers jumping in without having a systematic and consistent vision and approach to understanding how different tools work together. They emphasized, "But, it would be nice if in some areas, there were a little bit more consistency, because it can be confusing for kids." Parents echoed some of the confusion about fully understanding what RP is and how it aligns with other schoolwide behavioral supports:

People really don't understand what [RP] fully is or where it could go. I think [RP] probably—I mean we're already doing PBIS, right? So, there's already an emphasis on incentivizing positive behaviors rather than crazy punishing infractions. So, I think many people just feel like this is a natural extension of PBIS.

It was clear that concerns existed regarding the intentional alignment of schoolwide efforts to support behavior as well as helping families and students understand the relationship between those different strategies. On the one hand, teachers embraced RP as a framework that fit naturally with SWPBIS, social/emotional curriculum, and Responsive Classroom within the elementary setting. On the other hand, they identified a need to develop an intentional, clear vision for how those different mechanisms align and to communicate that vision to all stakeholders.

### **Implementation: Next Steps**

An overarching sentiment from interviews with school staff was that a systematic approach is needed to ensure RP is implemented with fidelity and

meets the goals to improve school climate and reduce disciplinary referrals. Participants noted that the first year of implementation was exploratory and that one of the things they learned was that they needed more conversations around how to consistently integrate use of RP across all settings and incorporate it into schoolwide systems for tracking and responding to behavior. Although the school staff and leadership believed that integrating RP into existing school initiatives was essential to holistically address student behavioral needs, participants universally expressed a desire for more training and professional development. Of particular interest to participants was individualized coaching and staff discussions about how to consistently align discipline procedures with RP philosophy and strategies and knowledge to move beyond tier one RP implementation strategies. Participants also articulated a need for shared goals and an action plan related to implementation. One participant advised, “I think it’s time now to share. These are the things that are working. These are the things that aren’t working.” Another acknowledged:

I can sit there every day and do restorative practices and feel like I’m doing it right or feel like I’m doing it wrong, but without the opportunity to reflect with someone, a third person, about what they are seeing or noticing by what I’m doing or what the class is doing, then I really don’t see any room for growth.

Participants also expressed the need for sustained professional development beyond the first year. For example, one participant in our study expressed that although they attempted to align RP with PBIS, more formal training was needed to do this effectively. This person expressed, “I think important trainings that I would like to see is how restorative practices can be symbiotic with things like Responsive Classroom and PBIS because I know, personally, it gets a little overwhelming.” Another area identified for more professional support is moving beyond tier one circles to more effectively respond to behavioral issues through an RP tier two circle that addresses issues. One participant explained, “I don’t feel that people felt as prepared to do circles in response to something.” An additional area of alignment needed for best practice pertained to trauma-informed practice. This was introduced to the district but was not systematically explored regarding how this additional set of tools might enhance their efforts to support student behavior. This emerged at a practice level but also related to teacher needs pertaining to job stress and secondary trauma:

It’s just that you go home, and you’re just crying, and you’re upset because it’s just been so hard. Sometimes I do think that we, as teachers, need to also think about ourselves and our own frustrations and our own responses to defiance and restoring ourselves. I feel like we need more PD like that.

In addition to training needs, many participants expressed a desire to work together to create greater curricular coherence. Teachers felt this would be a logical next step after experimenting with implementation during year one. In particular, participants noted the need for vertical alignment across developmental levels to develop a clearly articulated curriculum map across K–5 that enhanced students skill development through RP implementation. One participant described:

And furthermore, intentional curricular alignment and resources are needed, and work could be done doing that to make it, you know, age-appropriate for all the different levels. That way if the kindergarteners are on board with it, which I'd like them to be, then by the time they get to fourth grade they will be like secondhand.

Another participant explained that it would be important to attend to the developmental needs of elementary-aged students when considering RP resources and strategies:

But it did feel like the expectations from the middle school and high school level weren't appropriate for this age range...figuring out how you can modify it so you are staying true to the intention and getting some of that important work done, but also make sure it's something they can actually DO when they're 10, 9, 8, 7, 6.

These statements reflect a desire to engage in intentional curricular mapping that considers the vertical trajectory of RP use across elementary age developmental and grade levels.

## **Discussion**

RP is still in varying stages of adoption by public schools as a means to reduce exclusionary and discriminatory discipline practices and build positive school communities. Carroll et al. (2007) conceptualized implementation fidelity as both structural and instructional (p. 204). In other words, there are elements of the intervention itself, characteristics of how the intervention is implemented, and interactions that follow, all having impact. In the case of RP, because there is not a specific canned or scripted intervention associated with this framework, but rather a myriad of restorative tools and approaches that school communities can implement and modify, it increases the likelihood of variability with implementation. Therefore, how RP implementation fidelity is assessed requires a more systematic and contextually dependent approach to evaluation, in comparison to other more structured school-based behavioral support interventions. Thorsborne and Blood (2013) call for schools interested

in implementing RP to adopt a whole school approach that includes preventative and proactive strategies among adults and between adults and students to foster a school community that functions restoratively. They assert “the ability of RP to make a difference is dependent on the quality of relationships within the school community” (p. 45) and argue that schools must understand and be intentional around the connection between RP, pedagogy, and social/emotional literacy.

In this case study, while there was an underlying acknowledgement and recognition of these connections, there was not a formally articulated or systematic plan for implementation. Kidde (2017) writes that for schools in initial stages of RP implementation, “It is about getting started, trying it out, and leveraging the individual and collective learning that takes place to enhance and improve the way the restorative approach is carried out” (p. 21). However, he notes that as schools move beyond early stages of exploration into full implementation, schools must have “integrated restorative principles, processes, and practices into the school infrastructure to support a whole school restorative approach” (p. 23). This was reflected in participants’ desire to engage in intentional curricular mapping and discussion regarding how to most effectively incorporate RP into existing school-based behavioral structures such as SWPBIS, social/emotional learning curriculum, and Responsive Classroom.

Following best practices from RP practitioners and scholars (González et al., 2018; Kidde, 2017; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), this particular school began to lay a foundation for implementing schoolwide RP tier one classroom circles that build community, reaffirm relationships, and problem solve. Establishing a relational climate is critical in a tiered implementation model of RP because more advanced RP practices utilized when a harm is committed rest upon relational trust, student voice, and collaborative sharing. These tenets are central to the culture of a classroom and the broader school community. In fact, Haney, Thomas, and Vaughn (2011) caution that more intensive restorative processes cannot be effective if students don’t already feel valued and a part of a school community. Findings from our case study suggest that RP expansion requires coaching and training in RP tier two and tier three practices. The principal’s primary support role in this case was appreciated, but execution of more advanced RP practices requires more sustainable efforts. The RP professional development model proposed by Mayworm et al. (2016) suggests systematic approaches are needed to scale up RP implementation. This can be done through intensive and ongoing professional development that includes consultation, coaching, and ongoing needs assessment. These data reveal enthusiasm for RP implementation beyond year one coupled with a formal action plan for ongoing professional development. This would accomplish the goals

of sustaining RP implementation efforts and providing necessary training for utilization of RP tools. This is essential for better RP alignment beyond tier one community building circles that are aligned with existing school initiatives and structures.

The findings from this case study signal the critical importance of relational leadership to initiate and build school staff buy-in for RP implementation. The principal of the elementary school in our case study was instrumental in the creation of a schoolwide vision for staff and in the establishment of expectations for piloting RP throughout the school community. More importantly, the principal was credited for modeling RP practices through interactions with students and staff, for leading classroom circles, and for creating space for staff to engage in RP strategies with one another. Borrowing from the evidence base on similar tiered schoolwide behavioral initiatives such as SWPBIS, leadership and staff buy-in have been documented as levers of implementation efficacy and sustainability and thus demand continued attention and support within the context of RP implementation (Horner et al., 2017). Within the RP literature, Thorsborne and Blood (2013) devote a chapter within their book, *Implementing Restorative Practices in Schools: A Practical Guide to Transforming School Communities*, to the role and importance of leadership. Specifically, they emphasize the significance of fostering a vision, modeling practice, and supporting staff in their efforts to implement RP.

### **Limitations**

This bounded case study explored RP implementation in a diverse urban elementary school during one academic year. The goal set forth by the principal was for teachers to experiment and explore. A prescribed implementation design that is common with most school-based RP implementation initiatives was not offered. Despite calls by other scholars to systematically study implementation of RP (González et al., 2018; Hurley et al., 2015), this case study was limited by the contextual factors related to the school's individualized approach to RP implementation. Thus, findings are less generalizable beyond the sample frame. Instead, the findings describe initial RP implementation at an elementary school to contribute to the growing research base on the efficacy of RP implementation across the K–12 continuum. With regard to participants in the study, an additional limitation is that only two parents chose to participate. Both of these parents identified as being active members of the PTO and therefore cannot be considered a representative sample of all families. Despite these limitations, some initial implications for RP practice with elementary aged students emerged.

### **Implications for Practice**

Our findings suggest that for RP to be an effective schoolwide structure for elementary schools to promote a positive school climate, bolster student and adult social/emotional learning development, and decrease disparities in exclusionary discipline, there are several considerations for practice. To begin, thinking about vertical alignment across the K–5 grade span is important because the developmental levels of children span a large range, and rapid growth in language development occurs across those early learning years. Because many of the professional resources on RP procedures focus on adolescents and adults, more curriculum that is oriented towards the needs and skill level of elementary-aged children is needed. Additionally, schools that intend to utilize RP in concert with other initiatives and frameworks (e.g., SWPBIS, social/emotional learning curriculum, Responsive Classroom) should thoughtfully align those approaches and ensure all teachers and staff involved with supporting student behavior use common language and approaches. In their evaluation of implementation of antibullying curriculum, Morrow, Hooker, and Cate (2015) found that intentional and integrated alignment between SWPBIS, the Olweus Bullying Prevention program, peer mediation, and student referral systems made their efforts to reduce bullying more effective. In other words, attending to integration of a wide array of behavioral supports within an MTSS system can contribute to meeting goals around improving school climate and student behavioral outcomes. We believe it is through those intentional alignment efforts that RP holds promise and can emerge as a viable tool to shift the tide away from exclusionary discipline, beginning with young children.

Additionally, we acknowledge in this article that there is not one singular approach to RP implementation. Many states and school districts are developing implementation guides, and practical resources are beginning to emerge from scholars and organizations who are studying or providing training for RP implementation (e.g., Gregory et al., 2019; IIRP, 2010; Kidde, 2017). A recently published resource from Gregory et al. provides specific checklists that can be utilized by administrators to guide their implementation of RP. Developed from case studies that examined RP implementation in four different schools, the “12 Indicators of Restorative Practices Implementation” could provide a helpful road map for elementary schools interested in moving beyond the exploratory phase of RP implementation and inform development of a clearer road map for scaling up implementation efforts (Gregory et al., 2019).

### **Implications for Research**

More broadly, further research is needed to best evaluate RP, to understand best practices, and to develop recommendations to sustain implementation

fidelity over time. This study adds to the literature on RP implementation by providing an example of lessons learned from an elementary school that began a journey towards adopting RP within an initial exploratory phase. However, as noted in the introduction, this case study was not a program evaluation. Future research should focus on how to assess the effectiveness and efficacy of RP implementation for elementary-aged children. Research that focuses on direct observation of RP practices in action would contribute to better informing practice in implementation. In addition, future research should seek to theoretically and programmatically align elementary school-based behavioral and curricular supports to avoid initiative fatigue and redundancies in programming for students and staff. An emerging body of research and resources that conceptually aligns RP and SWPBIS (Sprague & Tobin, 2017; Swain-Bradway et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2016) is developing, but more applied research from K–5 school communities is needed to provide implementation frameworks that schools can adopt and modify.

## Conclusion

To disrupt discipline disparities for youth of color and those with disabilities in educational settings, policymakers, researchers, and school leaders have advocated for relational approaches to school discipline that focus on social/emotional skills, relationship building, and structured behavioral interventions (Gregory et al., 2017; Skiba & Losen, 2016). RP has emerged as a popular and promising practice that might reduce exclusionary discipline, improve school climate, and strengthen relationships within school communities. However, because schools are implementing various strategies and initiatives to promote positive behaviors and build safe and engaging classroom communities, more research and implementation work should be directed towards empirically, conceptually, and practically aligning RP with existing structural interventions. Finally, because the majority of research on RP has focused on its utilization in secondary schools and building early foundations for prosocial behavior is critical to creating sustainable trajectories for youth, we advocate for increased attention to the role of RP in advancing social/emotional learning, youth agency, and curricular integration within elementary school community contexts.

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