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## A Correlational Study Examining the Relationship Between Restorative Practices and School Climate in Selected Elementary Schools in a Large Mid-Atlantic Urban School District

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Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education  
Doctorate of Education Program

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A Correlational Study Examining the Relationship Between Restorative Practices and School  
Climate in Selected Elementary Schools in a Large Mid-Atlantic Urban School District

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Teacher Leadership

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## **Abstract**

Punitive consequences are extensively utilized when dealing with school discipline. Recently, positive approaches to discipline, such as restorative practices, have been implemented in many schools to address school discipline concerns and to improve school climate. Restorative practices is a philosophy that focuses on building positive relationships by changing mindsets. This study took place in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. The goal of the study was to determine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate from the perspectives of school staff members who utilize restorative practices in their schools. A quantitative correlational research design was utilized for this study to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Findings from this study indicated a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practice and school climate.

*Keywords:* school discipline, school climate, restorative practices.

## **Dedication**

This dissertation would not have been possible without the constant motivation and support of several people. First, and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Makeda for her endless support for me as I pursued this goal. She listened diligently to my complaints during this process and abandoned her own pursuits when I needed support. She seldom complained about my many hours of isolation or about all the extra responsibilities that she had to assume as a result. The completion of this dissertation is as much her effort as it is mine. This dissertation is also dedicated to my entire family. Their support has made all the difference to me in completing my doctoral degree and has contributed greatly to who I am today. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Melvin “Mugsy” Porter who once told me that I do not have to be like other people in the neighborhood, I could be different. I hope I am making you and Orange, NJ proud!

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

School discipline is important for creating a safe and successful learning environment for all students. Effective ways of managing student behaviors has been a crucial topic for educators and administration for many years. Even though it is imperative to maintain a sound school-discipline system, many school leaders and staff members use a punitive approach (Payne & Welch, 2015). Many researchers and scholars believe that school discipline has come to be linked to punishment. School discipline is intended to decrease the amount of future negative behavior, teach students successful communication and relations in school or society, ensure students and staff are safe, and create a climate conducive to student achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Teasley, 2014). However, punitive discipline practices undermine the goal of success for all students. There are too many inconsistencies and variations of these policies to guarantee that they are equally applied to all students (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014; Skiba, 2000).

Data have been collected for many years that illustrate the overrepresentation of ethnic minority students in suspension rates. This disciplinary school exclusion carries intrinsic risks that can create or exacerbate the challenges that targeted students have (Patterson, 1992; AAP, 2003; Perry & Morris, 2014). No evidence to date has proven that zero tolerance policies have improved student behavior or contributed to a positive school climate. On the contrary, the evidence shows that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are linked to elevated probabilities of future student misbehavior, lower levels of achievement and lower rates of school completion (Skiba, 2000, 2014). Scholars also believe that punitive consequences are a major factor sustaining the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). Wald and Losen (2003) performed an

extensive study on the school-to-prison pipeline, and found that minority students are almost three times more prone to be suspended than Caucasian students.

There is limited research looking at school discipline and school climate in a proactive manner. The inconsistent use of punitive discipline strategies has been demonstrated by findings of disproportionate representation of African-American students in suspensions for minor classroom infractions. Skiba (2002) stated that African-American students were more likely than White students to be referred to the office by classroom teachers, and that they believed that the racial disparities of out-of-school suspensions were due to this fact. According to many researchers, school discipline can be improved through positive strategies rather than the use of punitive discipline (Auld, Belfiore, & Scheeler, 2010; Cornell, Sheras, Gregory, & Fan, 2009; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010; Teasley, 2014). Building positive relationships and improving efficacy will produce more productive learning environments.

I examined the population of school staff members who currently work in urban elementary public schools and who were trained in and utilize a restorative practices program. The goal was to determine whether there is a relationship between restorative practices and school climate. This research utilized a quantitative research design and a correlational analysis. I have worked in the education field for over nine years, and my interest in this topic was enhanced when my school incorporated restorative practices to manage student behaviors and improve our school climate. This prompted my inquiry into which other schools in my district utilize restorative practices to help improve their school climate, and whether there is a relationship between restorative practices and school climate at these schools.

Scholar-practitioners will be interested in this topic because it addresses a subject that affects schools all over the world. Managing student behaviors and finding ways of improving

school climate without the use of punitive discipline practices has been a crucial debate for educators for many years. This study provided a unique perspective on a positive discipline practice that aims to improve school climate. Therefore, the information will be useful to educational institutions who want to improve their school climate without the use of punitive practices. This study will contribute to ongoing research in the educational field, because it addresses an existing problem. Strategies in education are always evolving; therefore, more questions will begin to unfold now that the foundation has been set by this study. Future researchers will further investigate why this problem exists and how it can be resolved. More research is needed around school discipline and alternative methods to punitive discipline practices.

### **Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

The conceptual framework used in this study was based on the concepts and theories of zero tolerance, the school-to-prison pipeline, school-wide positive behavior support, restorative practices, and school climate. New research shows the likelihood of a student having low achievement and dropping out of school is increased by a single suspension (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014). Research also shows that African-American and Latino students are more likely than White students to receive more punitive consequences for behavior infractions (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014). African-American and Latino students also experience more suspensions, expulsions, school arrests, and transfers to alternative educational settings than their White counterparts. These punishments are often for nonviolent, noncriminal behaviors that could be remedied and addressed within the school community. Research has also shown that African-American and Latino students, especially males, are more prone to be suspended for violations like disrespect, insubordination, or willful

defiance, which are subjective and require interpretation from the administration (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Carter et al., 2014). These negative components of school discipline are also important contributors to sustaining the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014).

Expulsions and suspensions nationwide have doubled since the 1970's (Wald & Losen, 2003; Perry & Morris, 2014). Since the implementation of zero-tolerance to school code violations, the number of student suspensions per year increased from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000 (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2012). During this period, schools also increased other punitive methods like increasing school police, bar windows, metal detectors, required expulsions, and arrests of students (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2012). In addition to being suspended more often than White students, African-American students were victims of zero-tolerance policies at unequal rates and accounted for 39% of students who were expelled. Additionally, 70% of African-American or Latino students were arrested or referred to law enforcement agencies, and these students are punished more harshly than White students for the same infractions (United States Department of Education, 2012; Perry & Morris, 2014).

Many researchers have examined school discipline. One study that was conducted during the 2005–2006 school years discovered that 74% of discipline actions resulted in suspensions lasting 5 or more days, and a student's chances of graduating high school decreased by twenty percent with each suspension (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013). Another study examined the relationship between student behaviors and student suspensions, and found that suspensions not only affect academics but also the whole community. A 2-year study into teachers' views of disruptive behaviors and the interventions used to address these problems found that administrators and teachers should be provided with professional development on addressing



challenging student behaviors in the classroom. Students that exhibit negative behaviors are too often immediately removed from the learning environment, which results in academic underachievement. Consequently, when a student is removed from the learning environment, this begins to have an unfavorable effect on the student's chances and ability to learn (Balfanz et al., 2013; Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, & Rime, 2012). One of the major issues in the educational system is the fact that student learning is altered when punitive consequences are administered.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem that has been identified is that there are many school leaders and staff members in the United States who are managing student behavior with punitive consequences which have not been effective. Punitive discipline practices such as suspension, expulsion, zero tolerance policies and other harsh discipline undermine the goal of success for all. Although effective disciplinary systems are a very important function for schools, punitive consequences have been largely unsuccessful in deterring or changing students' negative behaviors. For teachers in urban districts and in some suburban districts, school discipline and classroom management challenges are still a dilemma. The risk that students take in being involved in self-destructive behavior is attributed to negative school climates.

Punitive consequences are often extensively utilized in dealing with school discipline (Payne & Welch, 2015). The procedural aspects of these methods are defined very broadly, leaving them open to unpredictable interpretation. Evidence of this ambiguity was found with a study of disciplinary referrals within a school system in which little agreement was found among administrators on a definition of violent behavior (Skiba, 1997; Monahan et al., 2014). Furthermore, Verdugo (2002) and Skiba (2014) stated that punitive discipline policies are normally general in nature, which fails to account for the context of behaviors. Many educators

argue that this makes the application of these policies even more vague or unclear. Punitive discipline policies are so ambiguously defined that they can be highly subjective in the determination of their use. Researchers believe that these policies may have a negative effect on student achievement and high-school graduation rates (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). Many scholars also deem these practices unproductive and believe that they may intensify students' negative behaviors (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in selected elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. I explored the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. Understanding the benefits of restorative practices will determine if this strategy is a viable option to help improve student behavior and school climate for students and staff in the entire school district. A positive school climate promotes learning for all students and should be the goal for all educational institutions. However, when dealing with student discipline and consequences, schools traditionally have resorted to punitive policies.

Restorative practice, which evolved from restorative justice, is a fairly new approach to school discipline and has received significant support from scholars all over the world (Wachtel, 2013). Advocates believe that restorative practices gives students the opportunity to engage in discussions to resolve conflict. Restorative practices focuses on building positive relationships, which should be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The climate of a school building will depend on the relationships that are present. To promote student achievement, positive relationships need to be present in the school environment. Restorative practices is a positive school discipline approach which has been increasingly implemented by many schools

in recent years, and Ashley and Burke (2009) argued that many of these schools show positive improvement in the overall culture and climate of the school. According to McCluskey et al. (2008), the schools that incorporated these practices demonstrated a noticeable positive effect on relationships, which were observed by staff and students. These schools also showed a decrease in discipline referral, suspensions, expulsions, and a reduction in the need for outside support. Research suggests that restorative practices has positive impacts on schools; however, there is still a lot to learn about its effects.

Schools that fail to address the root of students' discipline issues see declines in student and school outcomes (Novotney, 2009). Many researchers believe that suspensions combined with practical and positive alternatives to suspensions are efficient deterrents to negative student behaviors (Bear, 2012; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Fenning et al., 2012; Teasley, 2014), and that school discipline should involve more than just punishing students for negative behaviors (Bear, 2012). Students' behaviors and attitudes are usually influenced by their own community or environment. Strategies that help students with self-discipline should be incorporated by teachers and leadership in order to ensure a successful and positive school climate.

### **Research Question and Hypotheses**

**Research question.** What is the relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district?

**Null hypothesis.** There is no statistical relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.

**Alternative hypothesis.** There is a statistical relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

Schools must ensure a positive school climate by using positive discipline methods (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Numerous schools are commonly plagued by behaviors that are not conducive to learning. Schools that are successful are well-disciplined and focus on student learning; these schools also use effective discipline practices to teach rather than to punish students.

The significance of this study originates from the need and challenge of managing students' negative behaviors in schools, while providing a positive school climate that promotes high levels of student achievement. The use of punitive measures that remove students from school is likely to produce more negative behaviors, which could result in contact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system. Students' risk of dropping out of school is a predictor of suspension or out-of-school punitive consequences (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Perry & Morris, 2014), and the risk of developing harmful behaviors decreases if a school climate promotes positive relationships and respect for all. Furthermore, alternatives to punitive discipline methods need to be implemented to provide a productive and effective school environment. To accomplish this task, schools will need to implement positive school discipline approaches that use discipline to teach rather than punish. Schools that adopt positive school discipline approaches such as restorative practices will prevent negative and risky behaviors while helping students succeed and thrive in school.

Restorative practices is a positive school discipline approach that has been increasingly implemented by a number of schools in recent years. Ashley and Burke (2009) argue that many of these schools show positive improvement in their overall culture and climate. This approach is focused on building relationships which in return reduces negative student behaviors, allowing for a better school climate and overall school community. According to McCluskey et al. (2008), the schools that incorporated these practices demonstrated a noticeable positive effect on relationships, which were observed by staff and students. These schools also showed a decrease in discipline referral, suspensions, expulsions, and a reduction in the need for outside support. This study will provide important information for school districts and school leaders who are considering restorative practices as an alternative to punitive discipline practices at their schools.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Restorative practice:* This term is defined as positive discipline strategies or methods that build positive relationships which prevent or resolve conflicts.

*School climate:* This term is defined as relationships and behaviors of students and staff in a school environment.

*School discipline:* This term is defined as consequences for school rules violations and inappropriate behavior, intended to change the behavior of students.

*Zero tolerance:* This term is defined as punitive consequences based on the theory that the threat of removal will deter students from engaging in negative behavior or violating school rules.

*School-to-prison pipeline:* This term is defined as the process of when a school punitively punishes a student which results in suspension or expulsion and ultimately leads that student to prison.

*School-wide positive behavior support:* This term is defined as strategies that build students' repertoires with positive behaviors by teaching them a variety of educational, therapeutic, and system-wide methods.

*Positive school discipline:* This term is defined as discipline that is used to teach rather than punish.

*Punitive discipline/punishment:* This term is defined as exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, expulsion).

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

**Assumptions.** A quantitative research methodology using a web-based survey was chosen for this study. A quantitative method was used to obtain the most accurate results. Quantitative research methods focus on measurements that are objective, using statistical data to test theories or a hypothesis in a descriptive, experimental or non-experimental approach. Descriptive research gathers people's perceptions, opinions, and attitudes. It also describes behaviors and investigates beliefs about current issues in education (Lodico et al., 2006). In order to conduct a study examining the question surrounding restorative practices and school climate, a descriptive quantitative study is used to investigate these relationships within selected elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.

A web-based survey was chosen so that the researcher could reach a wider range of school staff members who are trained in and utilize restorative practices. A web-based quantitative research methodology also assists the researcher because there is little financial burden, and few constraints from time or location. Overall, these methods combined are appropriate for the problem being addressed and the purpose of the study.

**Limitations.** For this study there are several limitations that were identified. First, a single quantitative research study did not account for all factors associated with restorative practices and school climate. Another limitation is that the study was restricted to school staff members' perceptions in a selected group of urban elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic school district. Parents' or students' perceptions on restorative practices and school climate was not be included. The study was limited to the voluntary responses of school staff members who completed and returned a survey from their school site. Finally, in a correlational study such as this, correlation does not involve causation and there is no way to verify or confirm causation.

**Delimitations.** There are several delimitations associated with this study. First, data was only collected from elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic school district that implemented restorative practices school-wide. Secondly, the study delimited the survey to school staff members, namely administrators, teachers, teacher assistants or paraprofessionals, social workers/counselors, support staff, and other related personnel. Finally, delimitations was not imposed on other factors that involve the students, which may include: the special education population; free or reduced-price lunch eligibility; socioeconomic status; the physical location of the school building; years the school was in operation; diversity of the student and staff population; the age of school staff members; the length of the current staff members' contracts; and how many years the staff members have been employed. I took the following precautions to maximize validity of the measurement, instruments, and data: used pre-existing tools for the survey questions, made sure content of the surveys was consistent with the research questions, and properly protected and stored data after collection.

## **Summary**

Punitive consequences are often extensively utilized in dealing with school discipline. The procedural aspects of these methods are defined very broadly, leaving them open to unpredictable interpretation. Punitive discipline policies are so ambiguously defined that they can be highly subjective in the determination of their use. Punitive approaches to discipline also have been proven to be ineffective and do not help improve student behavior. Researchers have identified the problem that there are too many school leaders and school staff members in the United States that are managing student behavior with punitive consequences. For teachers in urban districts and some suburban districts, school discipline and classroom management challenges are still a dilemma. Students' risk of involvement in self-destructive behavior is attributed to negative school climates.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in selected schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. Understanding the benefits of restorative practices will determine if this strategy is a viable option for school leaders to help improve student behavior and school climate for students and staff. A positive school climate promotes learning for all students and should be the goal for all educational institutions. This study will provide helpful information for education leaders who want to utilize restorative practices to help improve their school's climate.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

As an experienced educator, I understand that there is a need for effective disciplinary systems and a positive school climate for schools to be successful and safe. These factors promote valuable learning for the entire student body. As school shootings and school violence has increased during the years, schools have been actively trying to address issues of violence and disruption. Unfortunately, fear created by these incidents often results in the use of more punitive methods of school discipline. As Skiba and Peterson (2000) suggested, school systems have a direct tendency towards the use of punishment and exclusion.

In this chapter I will discuss school discipline and alternative approaches to punitive consequences that can produce positive school climates. Education has the potential to change students' lives; however, there are still many children who struggle in under-resourced and low-performing schools. One of the major challenges for these children is school discipline policies and practices that are ineffective and that disrupt teaching and learning opportunities for staff and students. As all schools and districts need to develop a student code of conduct, zero tolerance punitive punishments such as suspensions and expulsions are disproportionately administered for the violation of these codes (Skiba, 2014). The use of these approaches produces an ineffective cycle in which students miss considerable time from direct instruction, and this missed time cannot be replicated when students return to school; students are then negatively affected because they are further behind and most teachers have little or no support to catch them up.

The context and significance of this study originate from the fundamental need to manage students' negative behaviors in schools, which in return will provide a positive school climate that promotes student achievement. As previously discussed, schools currently manage negative

student behavior by primarily removing students from the school environment. However, students who are removed from school are more likely to engage in negative behaviors that could result in contact with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system. Researchers believe that disruptive and negative behaviors can increase if students become exposed to law enforcement and juvenile detention facilities (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Perry & Morris, 2014). All stakeholders who are involved with these students will be affected by these negative behaviors. Students' risk of dropping out of school is a predictor of suspension or out-of-school punitive consequences (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Perry & Morris, 2014).

New research shows the likelihood of a student having low achievement and dropping out of school is increased by a single suspension (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Perry & Morris, 2014). Research also shows that African-American and Latino students are more likely than White students to receive more punitive consequences for behavior infractions (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Perry & Morris, 2014). African-American and Latino students also experience more suspensions, expulsions, school arrests, and transfers to alternative educational settings than their White counterparts. Often these punishments are for nonviolent, noncriminal behaviors that could be remedied and addressed within the school community. Research also shows that African-American and Latino students, especially males, are more prone to be suspended for violations like disrespect, insubordination, or willful defiance, which are subjective and require interpretation from the administration (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Carter et al., 2014). According to Carter et al. (2014), racial disparities in discipline suggest that students from some groups are at even greater risk of negative outcomes relative to students from other groups. All of these negative components of school discipline are important contributors to sustaining the school to prison pipeline.

The statement of the problem in this study is that there are many school leaders and school staff members in the United States who are managing student behavior using punitive consequences that have not been effective in improving students' negative behaviors or in creating a positive school climate. Punitive discipline practices such as suspension, expulsion, zero-tolerance policies and other harsh discipline undermine the goal of success for all. Haft (1999) believes that these policies "are designed to suspend or expel students from public schools for a single occurrence of a proscribed conduct" (p. 796).

Many educators question the effectiveness of punitive discipline approaches. Skiba (2000) states that "there appears to be little evidence, direct or indirect, supporting the effectiveness of suspension or expulsion for improving student behavior or contributing to overall school safety" (p. 13). Effective disciplinary systems are a very important function for schools and society, and a vital component of human behavior. They adjust and determine the reactions of individuals to different situations, which affect their relationships with others. The effectiveness of any school is determined by the discipline of students and staff (Skiba, 2000). New research shows student behavior and school climate can be enhanced when alternative approaches to discipline are implemented (Ashley & Burke 2009; Teasley, 2014). For teachers in urban districts, school discipline and classroom management challenges are still a dilemma. Students' risk of involvement in self-destructive behavior is attributed to negative school climates. I work at a district which is the largest urban school districts in the United States. Like many other urban school districts my district have the challenge of improving school climate without the use of unproductive punitive measures.

If schools can create an environment that promotes academic achievement, respect for all, and a high motivation to learn, then students' risk of developing harmful behaviors will decrease.

To develop a productive and efficient school environment, alternatives to punitive discipline practices are needed.

Positive school discipline is an approach that uses discipline to teach rather than punish (Ashley & Burke, 2009; Teasley, 2014). Schools that adopt positive school discipline prevent negative and risky behaviors while helping students succeed and thrive in school. Restorative practices is a positive school discipline approach which has been increasingly implemented by many schools in recent years (Wachtel, 2013). Ashley and Burke (2009) argued that many of these schools show positive improvement in overall culture and climate. This approach is focused on building relationships which in return reduces negative student behaviors, allowing for a better school climate and school community. According to McCluskey et al. (2008), schools that incorporated these practices demonstrated a noticeable positive effect on relationships, which were observed by staff and students. These schools also showed a decrease in discipline referral, suspensions, expulsions, and a reduction in the need for outside support.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used in this study to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate is based on the concepts and theories of zero tolerance, the school-to-prison pipeline, school-wide positive behavior support, restorative practices, and school climate.

**Zero tolerance.** Zero tolerance is a punitive approach based on the theory that the threat of removal will deter students from engaging in negative behavior or violating school rules (Wilson, 2014); students who engage in these behaviors are usually suspended or expelled. Morrison and Skiba (2001) described suspension as a "disciplinary action that is administered as a consequence for a student's inappropriate behavior and requires that a student absent

him/herself from the classroom or from the school for a specified period of time" (p. 174).

Schools utilize suspensions for many different reasons. If there are threats to the physical safety of students or staff, a suspension may be given. Also, if a student is exhibiting extremely inappropriate behavior and is disturbing the learning environment and only removal of the offender will allow learning to continue, then this student may be suspended.

The Code of Maryland Agency Regulations (2009) describes out-of-school suspension as the removal of a student from school for disciplinary reasons by administration. The New Jersey Department of Education (2016) describes out-of-school suspension as temporary removal by administration from school and activities for dangerous or unsafe behaviors. In-school suspension is when a student is removed for disciplinary reasons from the classroom but not the school. Expulsion is when a student is removed from the school and is not allowed to return.

**School-to-prison pipeline.** The school-to-prison pipeline is when a school decides to punitively punish a student which results in suspension or expulsions. Policies that offer automatic punishments that result in suspensions, out-of-class time and harsh physical interactions, and that encourage police presence at schools, are major contributors to the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). Away from the safe haven of the school environment, a student's chances of being introduced to the juvenile justice system increases. Studies indicate that African-American and Latino students are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline; and that African-American students, particularly males, face disproportionately greater retribution and consequences in our nation's public schools (The United States Department of Education, 2012).

**School-wide positive behavior support.** School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) is an emerging model that is an alternative to punitive discipline (Sugai & Horner,

2002). Horner and his colleagues described SWPBS as a proactive school-wide approach (Crone & Horner, 2003; Crone, Horner, & Hawken, 2004). It focuses on minimizing problem behaviors while teaching and supporting positive behaviors in the entire student body (Frey, Lingo, & Nelson, 2008), providing positive behavioral strategies and methods to attain socially essential behavior change (Sugai et al., 2000). Positive behaviors are essential skills to be successful across a variety of settings such as school, work, home, and in the community (Carr et al., 2002); SWPBS provides students with a repertoire of positive behaviors through a variety of educational, therapeutic and system-wide strategies (Carr et al., 2002; Teasley, 2014).

**Restorative practices.** Restorative practices were introduced by Wachtel (2004) and has roots in the restorative justice philosophy of the 1970s (Zehr, 2002). It is a relatively new field and is experiencing a progression in the development of theory and practice. Many schools in the United States have implemented restorative practices, and many of these schools have demonstrated a positive school climate that promotes safety, inclusion, positive relationships and respect (Wachtel, 2013). These schools also experienced positive impacts in relationships between students and staff, and decreases in the need for outside assistance, discipline referrals, and exclusions (McCluskey et al., 2008). Restorative practices can be referred to as whole-school change, because it is a new approach to addressing negative behaviors and student infractions. Rundell (2007) stated that whole-school change or restorative practices has eleven core tools that create a productive community: restorative conferences and responsive circles; proactive circles; small impromptu conferences; basic theory understanding; restorative approaches with families; restorative community of staff; and learning how to address shame, fair process, restorative questions, and affective statements (Rundell 2007).

**School climate.** Many aspects of a student's educational experience can be explained by the broad, multifaceted concept of school climate. Hoy, Tarter, and Kottkamp (1991) stated that school climate influences the behavior of a school's members, and is the set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another. It is the expectations, values, and norms that support people feeling emotionally, socially, and physically safe (National School Climate Center, 2012). A school's success is critically related to its climate: a positive climate will promote safety, a supportive academic environment, and encourage respect, trust, and caring relationships throughout the school community.

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

Managing students' behaviors is a difficult task for most educators. We must understand that behavior management is about changing unproductive behavior. This process involves making adjustments for the student who has challenging behaviors, and making changes in the environment where the negative behavior takes place. When trying to change the negative behavior of a student, you must also examine the behavior of the adults and other students in the environment. It is also vital to recognize and describe the behaviors that need to be changed, along with the more appropriate ones that need to be learned.

There are many researchers and scholars who believe that school discipline has come to be linked to punishment. School discipline should decrease the amount of future negative behavior; teach students successful communication and relationships in school or society; ensure students and staff are safe; and create a climate conducive to student achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Hemphill, Plenty, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2014).

As all states are mandated to protect and maintain a safe and positive school environment for all students, the state of New Jersey developed the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act

(ABBRA), which began in 2011 in all public schools. The ABBRA is a law with several sections outlining steps to addressing harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) in efforts to protect children inside and outside the school (NJ Department of Education, 2016). The need to reduce the number of suicides and bullying incidents in New Jersey was the rationale behind this act. The ABBRA also addresses cyberbullying. Schools must be accountable for monitoring and managing students' behaviors that revolve around harassment, intimidation and bullying. One of the expectations of the ABBRA is for schools to sustain a positive school climate, which requires establishing a School Safety Team to manage and improve this area. The ABBRA provides a policy with firm guidelines, that schools must adhere to and that is intended to help create positive school climates throughout the state of New Jersey.

In October 2012, due to the new requirements mandated by the ABBRA, the former Commissioner of Education in New Jersey received an annual report that revealed there were 12,024 confirmed cases of HIB from a total of 35,552 investigations in New Jersey during the 2011–2012 school years (NJ Department of Education, 2016). The New Jersey Department of Education responded to this report with recommendations for improving and expanding existing policies, and implementing improvement plans tailored to local needs. Most recently, in school years 2013–14 there were 19,781 HIB investigations with 7,218 confirmed cases; and in school years 2014–15, there were 18,635 HIB investigations with 6,664 confirmed cases. The most common disciplinary actions that were imposed for offenders of HIB incidents in 2014–15 were out-of-school suspension, followed closely by detention and in-school suspension. In 2014–15, seventy-five percent of all HIB incidents occurred within the school building, and police were notified 5,289 times (NJ Department of Education, 2016).



The New Jersey Department of Education (2016) reported the number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions by duration for school years 2012–13, 2013–14, and 2014–15. In 2012–13, 3,695 students were suspended for 1 day; 8,982 for 2–4 days; 2,490 for 5 days; 1,193 for 6–9 days; and 3,307 for 10 or more days. In 2013–14, 3,856 students were suspended for 1 day; 8,112 for 2–4 days; 2,270 for 5 days; 1,103 for 6–9 days; and 2,948 for 10 or more days. In 2014–15, 3,419 students were suspended for 1 day; 8,305 for 2–4 days; 2,274 for 5 days; 1,208 for 6–9 days; and 2,453 for 10 or more days. These data only account for incidents that met Electronic Violence and Vandalism Reporting System (EVVRS) criteria, and do not account for all suspensions for disciplinary referrals (e.g., for defiance of authority or academic dishonesty) (NJ Department of Education, 2016).

Expulsions and suspensions nationwide have doubled since the 1970's (Wald & Losen, 2003; Perry & Morris, 2014). Since the implementation of zero-tolerance to school code violations, the number of student suspensions per year increased from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000 (U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, 2012). During this period, schools also increased other punitive methods like increasing school police, bar windows, metal detectors, required expulsions, and arrests of students (U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, 2012). In addition to being suspended more often than white students, African-American students were victims of zero tolerance policies at unequal rates and accounted for thirty-nine percent of students who were expelled. Additionally, 70% of African-American or Latino students were arrested or referred to law enforcement agencies, and these students are punished more harshly than White students for the same infractions (United States Department of Education, 2012). Losen and Martinez (2013), using data from a national report by the Center for Civil Rights at UCLA, found that in the school year 2009–2010 over two

million students were suspended in the United States. Of these, 24% were African-American students, 12% were Latino, and 7% were White students (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Data from the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2012) illustrate that educational injustice is failing African-American students, especially males, verifying that the school-to-prison pipeline exists (Wilson, 2014). Darensbourg et al. (2010) noted that the increasing arrests of minority students and the increasing use of police in schools have alarmed many youth advocates, and they argued that schools in the United States are becoming pipelines to prisons. Wald and Losen (2003) conducted an extensive study on the school-to-prison pipeline, and found that minority students are almost 3 times more prone to be suspended than Caucasian students. Minority students without any criminal records are 6 times more likely to be arrested than Caucasians for the same offenses; and whereas African Americans and Latinos only comprise one third of the U.S. youth population, they represent two thirds of all those incarcerated at juvenile detention facilities (Wald & Losen, 2003).

In Pennsylvania, unconventional schools were created to deal with the needs of 30,000 youth who had been labeled as disruptive (Pennsylvania Department of Education 2009). Curry (2011) believed that addressing the educational crisis of minorities is vital, noting that African-American males who do not finish high school are 3 times more likely to be sentenced to prison than their White counterparts. A publication called *Abandoned in the Back Row: New lessons in Education and Delinquency Prevention* by the Coalition on Juvenile Justice (2001), estimated that 70% of the youth in the juvenile justice system have learning disabilities, and that 33% of these youths read below a 4th-grade level.

The incarceration rates of minority groups are even more disproportionate than their dropout rates (Flores-Ragade & Williams, 2010). Data from the Sentencing Project reveal that,

in addition to male African-American students facing challenges like high dropout rates, unemployment, and violence, they are also more at risk of being sentenced to prison or being a victim of a violent crime (Maurer & King, 2007). Sum et al. (2008) suggested that more than half of the males who do not complete high school and enter prison are African Americans. There is a clear connection between a high dropout rate and a high incarceration rate for male African-American students. Almost half of the male African-American students in urban communities drop out of high school and end up in prison, according to various statistical reports (Flores-Ragade & Williams, 2010). African-American males in the United States public school system experience more behavior referrals, suspensions, and expulsions than any other racial group (Darensbourg, Perez & Blake, 2010). A major factor behind these alarming statistics is the zero-tolerance school discipline policies that many schools across the country have implemented. Procedural, practical, and perceptual factors play a role in the disproportionate exclusion of some students (Drakeford, 2006).

Although punitive consequences are often extensively utilized in dealing with school discipline, the procedural aspects of these methods are defined very broadly, leaving them open to unpredictable interpretation (Payne & Welch, 2015). Skiba et al. (1997) found evidence of this ambiguity with a study of disciplinary referrals within a school system in which little agreement was found among administrators on a definition of violent behavior. Furthermore, Verdugo (2002) reported that punitive discipline policies are normally general in nature and that this fails to account for the context of behaviors. Some argue that this makes the application of the policy even more unclear. Punitive discipline policies are so ambiguously defined that they can be highly subjective in the determination of their use.

The inconsistency of the use of punitive discipline strategies is further demonstrated by findings that suggest the disproportionate representation of African-American students in out-of-school suspension begins at the classroom level (Skiba et al.,2002). Skiba et al. (2002) also stated that African-American students were more likely than White students to be referred to the office by classroom teachers, and concluded that this was the cause of the racial disparities of out-of-school suspensions. Vavrus and Cole (2002) conducted an ethnographic observational study, and found that school suspension from office referrals was often not the result of serious classroom disturbances. African-American students often experience punitive disciplinary actions for offenses that are not related to violent behavior, because of the singling-out of students whose race and gender is different from their teacher's (Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

Some educators argue that the lack of cultural knowledge of white teachers may create interactional patterns that increase the possibility of African-American students receiving punitive consequences. Townsend (2000) suggested that many White American teachers may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the more active and energetic style of interaction that some minority students exhibit, and Skiba and Rausch (2006) suggested that fear plays a contributing role in over-referrals of students to administration. For example, teachers who stereotype minority students may react a little more quickly to minor threats to authority, particularly if fear is related to the misunderstanding of the environmental norm and community interaction (Skiba et al., 1997; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Monahan et al., 2014).

Restorative practices is a philosophy that focuses on building positive relationships (Wachtel, 2013), which must be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The culture and climate of the school building will depend on the relationships that are present. Healthy positive relationships are needed in the school community so that student achievement can be at high

levels; a healthy teacher-student relationship will create an effective learning environment. Two recent studies have examined interpersonal relationships between teacher and student (Anderman, Andrzejewski, & Allen, 2011; van Tartwijk & Hammerness, 2011). These studies focused on the interpersonal perspective, pedagogical, and methodological aspects of the learning environment. Anderman et al. (2011) found that teachers must establish an environment that promotes student learning, and must project a positive attitude. The focus of a teacher's interpersonal behaviors is very important according to many researchers (Anderman et al., 2011; van Tartwijk & Hammerness, 2011). Effective learning environments or effective classrooms cannot be created if a teacher's interpersonal relationships are negative.

Student motivation, student achievement, and teacher interpersonal behavior were shown to be closely related in a study by Toste, Heath, and Dallaire (2010). A part of a student's experience in the classroom is the relationship they have with the teacher, which can be an advantage for encouraging student success (Hamre, Pianta, Downer, & Mashburn, 2008; Macleod, MacAllister, & Pirrie, 2012). If the teacher-student interpersonal connection is strong in the classroom then a student becomes more engaged. In classes where teachers project positive attitudes, students are more engaged in learning and do better academically (Ackoff & Greenburg, 2008). The students' view of the teacher is another aspect of the classroom relationship. Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007) stated that a student's view of teacher support encourages students to learn in the classroom. Students are more willing to be active participants if they believe that the teacher cares about students' learning. To avoid having a negative impact in the classroom, teachers must be aware of their students' opinions, and they should understand that a positive view of an educator's feelings and actions will have a positive influence on students.

According to Alderman and Green (2011), the success of students is determined by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. A teacher decides what teaching materials are used, and also decides on classroom behavior management strategies from a pedagogical, methodological, and interpersonal perspective (Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Smith-Collins, 2010). Therefore, educators need to be setting the tone for the classroom environment. The reason for negativity in the classroom is often due to different approaches to student discipline (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). One educator may use punitive punishments for negative student behaviors while another may use a more supportive approach (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). When students believe that their views and opinions are not respected, and that communication is one-sided, negative or disruptive classroom behaviors become more frequent. Many researchers recognize the importance of allowing a student to have a voice (Sanacore, 2008; Zion, 2009; Teasley 2014).

As mentioned previously, teacher prejudice due to cultural differences is another reason for negativity in the classroom. Teachers who are ethnically different from students may bring biases to the classroom, which can have a negative impact on student learning. Research has found that policies and procedures are based on the individual values of educational leaders (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011). The main policymakers in the education systems are middle-class white Americans who judge students' behavior using biased cultural norms. A student who is disciplined for disruption is often punished based on cultural influence. Rocque (2010) conducted a study on disciplining students in midwestern schools, and found that, even though all students were disciplined for disrespect, misconduct, disobedience, and fighting, African-American student behaviors and interactions were more often considered

inappropriate and this led to more consequences (see also Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012).

An additional challenge is that cultural disagreement can arise with school discipline problems, as with pedagogy and instructional practices. A negative impact on student behavior occurs when teachers project biases in their learning environments and students resist learning. According to Milner (2011), teachers must be prepared for multicultural students in order not to bring their biases to the classroom, and there is more research needed into reforming cultural diversity and management. Another study on multicultural education by Hill-Jackson et al. (2011) discovered that, in 2010, 85% of the teacher population was Caucasian women in the U.S; the National Education Association (2010) further reported that twenty-three percent of these women work in urban schools. In contrast to these figures, 40% of the student population is African American. Therefore, it is essential to recognize how educators need to manage students in culturally congruent ways, so they can build learning communities without the use of punitive discipline (Milner, 2011).

According to many researchers, school discipline can be improved with positive strategies rather than the use of punitive discipline (Auld et al., 2010; Cornell et al., 2009; Osher et al., 2010; Payne & Welch, 2015). Gregory, Bell, and Pollock (2014) believed that it is important to examine alternative disciplinary practices that are more student centered. This will allow school leaders and staff members to move away from exclusionary practices (e.g., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension). Building positive relationships and improving efficacy will produce more productive learning environments. Other approaches to positive school discipline include classroom management and teacher-student relationships. Englehart (2012) stated that the teacher's experience and assumptions determine the classroom techniques

that are used. Effective classroom-management techniques and practices are focused on preventing problems not solving problems (Evans & Lester, 2010). Hart (2010) suggested that classroom management should be utilized at different systemic levels. Other researchers have concluded that decreasing students' negative behaviors will require behavioral interventions and support that address students' individual needs (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Muscott, Mann, and LeBrun (2008) conducted a study in New Hampshire school district that implemented positive behavior interventions and supports. The report found a seventy-one percent improvement in with school climate all schools, showing a significant reduction in suspensions and office discipline referrals, and an increase in the school's overall student achievement.

Other discipline problems that face the educational system include bullying, defiance, and fighting. Studies have found that school staff misjudge the occurrence of some negative behaviors such as bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Crosby, Oehler, & Capaccioli, 2010). Failure to prevent or resolve students' misconduct will decrease the opportunity for success for the student and the school (Novotney, 2009); consequently, many schools resort to punitive consequences to resolve school discipline problems.

Dinkes, Kemp, and Baum (2009) conducted a study during the 2005–2006 school years and discovered that seventy-four percent of discipline actions resulted in suspensions lasting five or more days. However, many researchers believe suspensions, along with constructive practical options to suspension, are valuable deterrents to negative student behaviors (Bear, 2012; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Fenning et al., 2012). Bear (2012) stated that school discipline is more than just punishing students for their negative behaviors—teachers and administration should also incorporate strategies to help students' self-discipline. Students must be the main priority of



the school (Lumby, 2009); therefore, no school will be successful without putting the interests of its students first.

A thirty-six-week study with ten student participants was conducted by Thompson and Webber (2010) using a Student-Teacher Agreement Realignment Strategy (STARS). The goal of this strategy was to improve student behavior and serve as an intervention for students and teachers. At the end of the study, the behavior of nine out of the ten students improved and there was also a decrease in office disciplinary referrals. This study proves that positive intervention can help improve students' negative behaviors; however, not all schools utilize these types of strategies. Riordan (2006), in a study of the relationship between student behaviors and student suspensions, found that suspensions not only affect academics but also the community as a whole. According to Lewis (2009), who surveyed more than 10 schools where restorative practices was applied, every school that was examined reported a decrease in negative student behaviors and discipline actions.

A study of restorative practices and future school suspensions in the Denver Public Schools district found that students who received restorative practices interventions were less likely to receive discipline referrals for inappropriate behaviors (Gregory, 2015). Similarly, a study in some New York City schools found that, after restorative practices was implemented in 2011, the number of suspensions decreased from 69,000 to under 45,000 in 2012 (Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York, 2013). In the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California 24 schools were participating in restorative practices in 2014 and a decrease in suspensions of approximately 23% was recorded (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014). At Ed White Middle School, in San Antonio, Texas restorative practices were implemented in 2013 for their 6th-grade students and in 2014 for their 7th-grade students; between 2012 and 2014,

attendance improved and in-school suspensions dropped for both grade levels (Armour, 2014). Finally, Validus Preparatory Academy located in Bronx, New York implemented restorative practices in 2010 and by the third year of implementation only had one long term suspension (Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York, 2013).

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

After a review of literature and methods used in other studies, I found that there were many different methodological approaches used to conduct research on the topic of school discipline. The two main methods are qualitative and quantitative analyses. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to study participants over a continual time period in a real-life context. It is a methodical study where the researcher gathers data and generates conclusions (Merriam, 2014).

McCready and Soloway (2010) conducted a qualitative study on findings from a 2-year research project titled Socio-cultural Perspectives on Behavior and Classroom Management (SPBCM). This study investigated statistics on detrimental student misconduct from four schools in Toronto, Canada from a cultural and social context. The objective of the examination was to gain insight on teachers' views of disruptive behaviors and the interventions used to address these problems. Fifty teachers were selected to be a part of a group and to take part in individual interviews. The study concluded that administrators and teachers should be provided with professional development around addressing challenging student behaviors in the classroom.

A case study is bounded by activity and time, and can investigate an incident, a process, a program, an action, or individuals (Stake, 2010). A case study involves collecting detailed information using many different data-collection procedures over a continuous period of time.

Yin (2014) stated that case studies are experiential examinations that explore an experience in a real-life context. In a qualitative design, research questions and data collection can be adjusted during interviews, making it quite flexible (Creswell, 2013).

Anthropologists, ethnographers, and other social scientists use a practice known as ethnography, which is the study of people in their own environment using methods such as participant observation and face-to-face interviewing. Creswell (2013) states that “ethnography focuses on an entire culture-sharing group” (p. 90). Ethnography provides a detailed account of a given community or society in attempts to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances of the people being studied. Creswell (2013) summarized ethnography as "a qualitative design in which the researcher describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language, of a culture-sharing group" (p. 90).

The two types of ethnographies are critical and realist. Critical ethnographers identify and celebrate their biases in research. They recognize that all research is value-laden and that it challenges the status quo and asks, “Why it is so?” A study that uses the third-person voice to report what is observed is narrated by the realist ethnographer. Data that are free from judgment, political goals, and personal bias, are objectively reported by researchers. Closely edited quotes are produced through the views of the participants. The final word on how the culture is to be interpreted and presented is also explored by the researchers (Creswell, 2013). Although qualitative methods generate rich and detailed data, they use small sample sizes, which weakens the opportunities for practical generalizations or broad policy suggestions. Also, researchers using qualitative methods are often embedded in the cultures and experiences of others, which increases the opportunity for bias in the way data are collected, analyzed, and reported (Anderson, 2010).

Quantitative research methods focus on measurements that are objective, with statistical analysis and/or numerical data collecting. Data are gathered through different methods such as polls, surveys and questionnaires. Manipulating previous statistical data using different techniques is also undertaken. This approach is centered on gathering statistical data to generalize it across groups of people to give details on a particular phenomenon (Barbie, 2010). Vidic (2010) conducted a quantitative research study to examine student behavior from the perspective of teachers. The study involved 143 classrooms from the Zagreb County, and the participating teachers were given a closed-ended questionnaire. The results from the study indicated that there was a considerable difference in the perception of extended-stay teachers and classroom teachers on student behaviors (Vidic 2010).

Another relevant quantitative study was conducted by Ding, Yeping, Ziaobao, and Kulm (2008), analyzing Chinese teachers' perceptions of student behaviors. In two provinces of China, a questionnaire about student behaviors was given to 244 elementary and high schools. The results found that approximately 60% of teachers were not concerned with classroom management and student behaviors; their concern was to focus on the psychological aspect of student negative behaviors, which suggested using school psychologists (Ding et al., 2008). The goal when conducting a quantitative research study is to determine the connection between one thing and another within a population. This can also be stated as finding the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent or outcome variable.

Quantitative research methods are either descriptive (establishing associations between variables that are measured once) and experimental (establishing causality by measuring before and after a treatment) (Barbie, 2010). The goal of quantitative researchers is to identify and segregate specific variables in a study framework. They search for connection, associations, and

causality, with an attempt to control the setting in which the data are collected. This is done to avoid the risk that variables other than the one being studied may account for the relationships identified. Quantitative methods have an objective approach to studying research problems, which may lead to results that are statistically significant but often humanly insignificant. This is because data are controlled and measured to address the gathering of facts to determine the causes of a behavior (Anderson, 2010).

Many scholars believe that quantitative and qualitative research differ fundamentally but that their applications and objectives overlap in many ways. The main purpose of quantitative research is the quantification of data, although qualitative research is sometimes utilized to further examine results or findings. An in-depth analysis of causes and rationales for a behavior is provided by qualitative research. The main differences between quantitative and qualitative research are the way data are collected and analyzed, and how the data samples are used. Qualitative research uses data collection techniques that are suited to extract great detail and provide a comprehensive view, such as individual interviews or group discussions. Quantitative research uses answers from pre-formulated questions, and carefully structured methods such as on-street or telephone interviews and online questionnaires.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Many research studies have explored causes and interventions for decreasing students' negative behaviors in schools (Thompson & Webber, 2010; Vallaire-Thomas, Hicks, & Growe, 2011). A thirty-six-week study with ten student participants was conducted by Thompson and Webber (2010) using a Student-Teacher Agreement Realignment Strategy (STARS). The goal of the strategy was to improve student behavior and to provide an intervention for students and teachers. At the end of the study, the behavior of nine of the 10 students had improved and there

was also a decrease in office disciplinary referrals. This study proves that positive intervention can help improve students' negative behaviors; however, not all schools utilize these types of strategies. Most schools use a reactive and punitive approach (suspension, expulsion, etc.) to student disruptive behaviors (Thomas & Webber, 2010; Payne & Welch, 2015).

Zero tolerance and punitive approaches to discipline have been proven to be ineffective and to not help improve student behavior. Lee et al. (2011) believe that suspension and zero tolerance policies may adversely affect whether students graduate from high school. Typically, students are suspended or expelled from school if they display inappropriate or dangerous behaviors. However, suspension and expulsion may intensify students' negative behaviors (Sharkey & Fenning, 2012; Skiba, 2014). Brown (2004) conducted a study in a school within the Cincinnati public school district. The name of the school was Project Succeed Academy (PSA) which was deliberately opened to address extreme discipline problems in the district. A survey was used to collect data from 188 parents, 17 teachers, and other staff members. After analyzing the data, it was found that the school experienced a 23% decrease in non-mandatory suspension and a 12% decrease in district expulsions in the first year of the implementation of the school. This initiative was successful, and student negative behaviors decreased but research uncovered that there were literacy and other barriers to student achievement that exist.

A student's chance of graduating high school decreases by 20% with each suspension (Balfanz et al., 2013). Consequently, when a student is removed from the learning environment it begins an unfavorable effect on the student's chances and ability to learn (Chin et al., 2012). In this can be identified one of the major issues in the educational system: negative student behavior can be a distraction and a cause for new teachers to leave the profession, and it can be a hindrance to the overall success of administration, teachers, students, and the educational system.

Negative student behavior can produce poor student achievement, leading to outcomes as drastic as the closing of schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). However, many researchers believe that students cannot attain academic growth when they exhibit disruptive behaviors (Algozzine, Wang, & Violette, 2010; Boysen, 2012).

Fullan (2010) notes that school administration has many concerns about negative student behavior in and out of the classroom; consequently, teacher morale decreases and negative student behavior increases when the school does not have an effective disciplinary plan or if leadership is ineffectively managing the school (Kendziora & Osher, 2009). Cha and Cohen-Vogel (2011) concluded that if the learning environment lacks structure and discipline, teachers will lose their passion for teaching and leave the profession. Although many school leaders believe that zero tolerance and punitive consequences will bring structure and discipline to their schools, these strategies have been proven to be ineffective.

School discipline can be improved using positive approaches to discipline (Auld et al., 2010; Cornell et al., 2009; Osher et al., 2010). One approach to improving school discipline is school wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS), a proactive school-wide approach to negative behaviors. SWPBS minimizes negative behaviors in the entire student body by teaching and supporting positive behaviors (Frey et al., 2008), and provides positive behavioral strategies and systems that promote social behavior change (Sugai et al., 2000). SWPBS provides an array of therapeutic, educational, and system-wide interventions that can help students improve their behaviors (Carr et al., 2002). Classroom strategies are geared towards avoiding problems rather than solving problems (Evans & Lester, 2010). Zero tolerance focuses on remediating a specific problem with students through the use of punishment, whereas SWPBS uses proactive assessments and interventions to address negative behaviors (Emerson, McGill, & Mansell,

1994; Luiselli & Cameron, 1998). This philosophy was created to increase and maintain an environment that enhances learning for all students. When negative behaviors decrease, students' quality of life increase (Hendley & Lock, 2007).

Another approach to improving school discipline is restorative practices. This philosophy is a new positive approach for addressing wrongdoing and negative behaviors. Advocates of restorative practices believe that decreasing students' negative behaviors requires implementing positive behaviors, strategies, and interventions. Restorative practices uses formal responses to wrongdoing, and allows all those involved in an incident to come together and address the situation. Building positive relationships is the core of this philosophy, and promoting a positive school culture and climate is the goal. It aims to create a wholesome environment filled with respect, caring, and community. In some schools where restorative practices has been implemented, evidence shows that negative student behaviors have decreased (Graham, 2009; Keely, 2009; Woodall, 2011). Data also show where restorative practices has been implemented in predominantly black schools, there has been particular success in transforming the school climate (Graham, 2009; Keely, 2009; Whitehorn, 2009; Woodall, 2007). Lewis (2009) investigated schools where restorative practices was conducted, and found that every school showed a decrease in disruptive behaviors and discipline actions.

The school-to-prison pipeline is another issue that affects the educational system in the United States. Students are being suspended, expelled, or even arrested for minor offenses far too often, and data show that this policy targets students of color at a disproportionate rate. Students who are suspended or expelled for disruptive behaviors are usually sent back to environments that are filled with negative influence; these students can become hardened, confused, and bitter. They often become stigmatized and fall behind in the classroom, which can



result in them dropping out of school. Many of these students begin to commit crimes in their community.

Schools that fail to address the root of students' discipline issues see declines in student and school outcomes (Novotney, 2009). Many researchers believe that suspensions, along with practical and positive alternatives to suspensions, are efficient deterrents to negative student behaviors (Bear, 2012; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Fenning et al., 2012). School discipline is more than punishing students for negative behaviors (Bear, 2012). Students of a system usually do not see how their attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their environments; therefore, strategies that help students with self-discipline should be incorporated by teachers and leadership to ensure a successful school community. Teachers that implement social and emotional learning in their lessons will produce a positive climate in the classroom (Zinsser, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2013).

### **Critique of Previous Research**

The use of restorative practices has been suggested by many educational and social examinations and reports; this literature review is restricted to that which was available within the United States in July 2016. Some studies have focused on the use of restorative practices to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline and others examined restorative practices to see if it reduces suspensions or expulsions (Mezzacappa, 2010; Mezzacappa, 2012; Youth United for Change & Advancement Project, 2011). Barr (2007) reported on investigations undertaken by The Standing Committee on Education, Training and Young People in Australia, which provided vast resources for researching how restorative practices influences youth. This investment took place because of the positive reports and feedback from school officials regarding restorative practices. Similar studies are needed in the United States to investigate the potential impact of restorative

practice on culture and climate in urban schools. There are studies that focus on school discipline and restorative practices; however, many of them were not conducted in an urban environment.

For example, Muscott et al. (2008) conducted a study in New Hampshire school district that implemented positive behavior interventions and supports. The report showed a seventy-one percent improvement in all schools, and a significant reduction in suspensions and office discipline referrals, which increased the school's overall student achievement (Muscott et al., 2008). Although this study provides evidence of success with the use of positive school discipline, it was conducted in a predominately white environment. There were many experimental studies on the topic of school discipline and restorative practices; however, researchers should also consider other quasi-experimental approaches, such as using non-randomly assigned comparison groups to study the impact of restorative practices in schools.

Wald and Losen's (2003) study on the school-to-prison pipeline found that minority students are almost three times more prone to be suspended than Caucasian students, and that African-American males with no criminal record have a higher probability of being arrested for the same offenses as their white counterparts. African-Americans and Latinos represent two-thirds of all young adults incarcerated in detention institutions but only one-third of the US youth population (Wald & Losen, 2003). Although this study provided valuable evidence on the unequal treatment of minority students (Wald & Losen, 2003), it did not provide information on how these schools handle their discipline infractions. Some of these minority students may have been repeated offenders, and punitive consequences may have been the last resort after previous attempts at a positive alternative to discipline.

Restorative practices produced improved school climate according to school leaders and researchers (Lewis, 2009; McClusky, 2008). However, there is limited research in which those school staff and administration who implemented restorative practices could reflect and give input on their experiences. Most of the studies focused on raw numbers, such as the decrease of suspensions, expulsions, and discipline referrals. There is a lack of proper educational examinations of restorative practices in American urban schools. Research on restorative practices was often limited by small sample sizes. To demonstrate statistical rigor, researchers must obtain properly sized samples. Reaching an adequate sample size can be a challenge for restorative practices studies that focus on individual or school-level effects.

There is also inadequate educational research looking at school discipline from a positive perspective. This study will contribute to research on urban schools by examining staff members' perspectives on restorative practices, where it has been implemented for three years in their school buildings. It will focus on teacher and staff practices that address stability, and procedures that change negative student behaviors. There has been little research focused exclusively on restorative practices and school climate, or on discipline policies and practices pertaining to negative student behaviors and the use of restorative practices. Research is a process of critical, systematic, and self-critical examinations that intend to add to the development of information and understanding (Yin, 2014). This study may serve as a model for school leadership, by examining a more positive and proactive approach to school discipline.

## **Summary**

Schools must ensure a safe school climate which is maximally favorable to education and learning, by using all the effective resources that are at their disposal (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Numerous schools are frequently plagued by behaviors that are not conducive to learning.

Schools that are effective are well-disciplined, place emphasis on the importance of learning, and use successful discipline practices. The topic of this literature review focuses on school discipline and alternative approaches to punitive consequences which promote a positive school climate. Discipline problems can take up time that is needed for academic instruction. Educators, parents, and students are extremely concerned about disorder, danger, and the safety of their school environments. Because of this concern, many school districts have implemented tough school discipline policies that were meant to decrease student negative behaviors and provide safety for the entire school community. However, data on these policies have shown them to be ineffective in addressing these concerns. Punitive discipline such as suspension, expulsion, and zero tolerance policies are not effective discipline strategies, and have an impact on the drawing of students into the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly for minority students (Wald & Losen, 2003).

The statement of the problem is: many schools in the United States manage student behavior with punitive consequences such as suspensions, expulsions, and zero tolerance policies. These punitive discipline practices are ineffective and are applied disproportionately to minority students, which sustains the school to prison pipeline phenomenon (Wilson, 2014). Punitive discipline practices also undermine the goal of success for all students. There are too many inconsistencies and variations of these policies to guarantee that they are equally applied to all students (Skiba, 2000). Furthermore, there have been decades of data that illustrate the overrepresentation of ethnic minority students in suspension rates. This disciplinary school exclusion carries intrinsic risks that can exacerbate challenges that these students already have (Patterson, 1992; AAP, 2003). No evidence to date has proven that zero tolerance policies have improved student behavior or contributed to a positive school climate. On the contrary, the

evidence shows that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are linked to elevated probabilities of future student misbehavior, lower levels of achievement and school completion (Skiba, 2000).

School leadership is the key to making the difference to enhance school productivity and effectiveness. Leaders need to learn from previous mistakes and take a holistic approach to school discipline. The school system will continue to deteriorate, especially in urban environments, if leadership does not create atmospheres that encourage systematic learning with improved results (Andreadis, 2009). School leadership and teachers have a direct and indirect impact on teaching and learning. The teacher-student relationship is an effective way to create a positive learning environment; Moolenaar, Slegers, and Daly (2012) believe that it is very important to have a good interpersonal relationship between teacher and student. Teachers must create an environment that encourages student learning by projecting a positive attitude and being proactive to discipline. Moreover, various researchers believe that there are methods to addressing negative student behavior other than punitive consequences (Auld et al., 2010; Cornell et al., 2009; Osher et al., 2010).

Building positive relationships and improving efficacy will produce more productive learning environments. Positive approaches to discipline such as restorative practices are effective approaches to school discipline. Restorative practices is a philosophy that focuses on building positive relationships by changing mindsets. Positive relationships need to be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The culture and climate of the school building will depend on the relationships that are present. Healthy positive relationships need to be evident in the school community so that student achievement can be at high levels. Thornton, Peltier, and Perreault (2004) believed that, to improve student achievement, systems and proactive thinking

is necessary. Educators need to change the way they operate and think, to change the educational system.

Research illustrates that proactive thinking is beneficial for improving student achievement. This literature review develops a unique conceptual framework to understanding school discipline, using the concepts of zero tolerance, the school-to-prison pipeline, school-wide positive behavior supports, and school climate and restorative practices. Based on this review and framework, there is reason to consider that an investigation into the impact of alternative approaches to school discipline may yield significant findings. Additionally, many urban school districts, there is a need to improve school climate without the use of the punitive measures that have been proven to be unsuccessful.

Therefore, I consider that the literature review has provided strong support for pursuing a project to answer the following research question: What is the relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

One of the main goals of school leaders is to frequently explore discipline strategies that provide a positive school culture and climate. This is imperative because positive school climate builds relationships and promotes student achievement. Throughout the United States, many school leaders and staff members are managing student behavior with ineffective punitive consequences. School discipline is meant to decrease the amount of future negative behavior and teach students successful communication and relations in school or society. School discipline is also meant to ensure that students and staff members are safe, and create a climate conducive to student achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). There are many researchers and scholars who believe that school discipline is linked to punishment. Punitive discipline practices such as suspension, expulsion, and zero tolerance practices challenge the goal of success for all. These practices punish and do not help change many students' negative behaviors, which ultimately leads to unsuccessful academic performance. Many educators question the effectiveness of these punitive approaches. New research is showing that students' behaviors and school climate can be improved when alternative approaches to discipline are implemented. Public schools face increasing exterior demands to improve student achievement. With standardized tests becoming the main focus of state legislatures and school leaders, creating and enhancing a positive school climate is essential for maximizing student outcomes (Ravitch, 2010).

Restorative practices, which evolved from restorative justice, is a positive approach that improves school discipline and school climate. This philosophy is a new approach for addressing wrongdoing and negative behaviors. Advocates of restorative practices believe

decreasing students' negative behaviors requires implementing positive behaviors strategies and interventions. Restorative practices uses formal responses to wrongdoing, and allows all those involved in an incident to come together and address the situation. Building positive relationships is the core of this philosophy, and promoting a positive school climate is the goal. Restorative practices aims to create a wholesome environment filled with respect, caring, and community. In schools where restorative practices have been implemented, there is evidence that students' negative behaviors have decreased and school climates have improved, especially in urban black environments (Graham, 2009; Keely, 2009; Woodall, 2011; Gregory, 2015). According to Lewis (2009) who investigated schools where restorative practices were conducted, every school showed a decrease in disruptive behaviors and discipline actions. Schools that fail to address the root of students' discipline issues see decreased student and school outcomes (Novotney, 2009). School discipline is more than punishing students for negative behaviors (Bear, 2012). Students from the inner city usually do not see how their attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their environments; therefore, strategies that help students with self-discipline should be incorporated by teachers and leadership to ensure a successful school climate and community.

In this chapter I will describe the methodology that guided the research study. I explained the purpose of the study, research questions, hypothesis, research design, population, and sample size of the participants that was studied. I also discussed the sampling process, data collection, data analysis, instrumentation, operationalization of variables, ethical issues, expected findings, validity, delimitation, and the limitations of the study.



## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine what relationship exists between restorative practices and school climate in selected public elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. The study explored the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. Understanding the benefits of restorative practices will determine if this strategy is a viable option for school leaders to help improve student behavior and school climate for students and staff. Practitioners of positive school discipline use discipline to teach rather than punish (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Schools that adopt positive school discipline prevent negative and risky behaviors while helping students succeed and thrive in school. Restorative practices is a positive school discipline strategy that has been implemented by a number of schools in recent years. Ashley and Burke (2009) argue that many of these schools show positive improvement in the overall culture and climate of the school. This strategy is focused on building relationships which in return reduces negative student behaviors, allowing for a better climate and overall school community.

Restorative practices are new to education, but this positive school discipline strategy has received substantial support from scholars across the world (Wachtel, 2013). Advocates of restorative practices believe that it gives students the opportunity to engage in discussions to resolve conflict, which teaches them to become productive citizens. Research suggests that restorative practices influences schools in a positive manner; however, there is still a lot to learn about its effects—the amount of research on this positive school discipline strategy is still relatively small and most of the relevant studies are from outside the United States. As schools in different countries have significant differences from those in the US, the implementation challenges will also be different. Therefore, I provided information in this study on restorative

practices for school leaders who want to use an alternative approach to punitive discipline to improve their school climate.

### **Research Questions**

Although punitive consequences are extensively utilized in dealing with school discipline, the procedural aspects of these methods are defined very broadly leaving them open to unpredictable interpretation (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Discipline is a very important function for schools and society, and a vital component of human behavior (Ashley & Burke, 2009). One crucial factor that can affect the success of a school is their selected discipline practices. As new research is published, data show that students' behaviors and school climate can be enhanced when alternative approaches to discipline are implemented (Osher et al., 2010; Teasley, 2014). Healthy positive relationships need to be evident in the school community to promote high levels of student achievement (Zinsser et al., 2013). This study was guided by the following research question.

**Research question.** What is the relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district?

**Null hypothesis.** There is no statistical relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.

**Alternative hypothesis.** There is a statistical relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.

## **Research Design**

This study utilized a quantitative correlational research design. Quantitative research methods focus on measurements that are objective, with statistical analysis or numerical data collecting. Data are gathered through different methods such as polls and questionnaires (Creswell, 2009). Interpreting previous statistical data using different techniques can also be undertaken in quantitative studies. This approach is centered on gathering statistical data to generalize it across groups of people to give details on a particular phenomenon (Barbie, 2010). The method is best suited for this study because I was able to effectively examine the relationship between a dependent variable and an independent variable. The goal of the study was to determine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate from the perspectives of school staff members who utilize restorative practices in their schools.

Participants are from schools that have implemented the restorative practices philosophy school-wide during last three years. All school staff members at these schools were trained in restorative practices before the program was implemented. The staff members were trained on how to conduct restorative conferences and responsive circles, proactive circles, small impromptu conferences, basic theory understanding, restorative approach with families, restorative community of staff, and learning how to address shame, fair process, restorative questions, and affective statements (Rundell, 2007).

Using a quantitative analysis allowed more schools to participate in the study, and provided the opportunity to receive more responses from school staff members who experience restorative practices in their schools. There were approximately 225 staff members from the three selected schools who have been using restorative practices for at least three years. Utilizing Qualtrics statistical software from [www.qualtric.com](http://www.qualtric.com), the suggested sample size needed

for this study was 105 participants. The suggested sample size was based on a 95% confidence level. To determine whether two variables are correlated, researchers utilize a correlational research design. The three types of correlation that are identified are positive correlation, negative correlation, and no correlation. Positive correlation can be explained as when an increase in one variable leads to an increase in the other, and a decrease in one leads to a decrease in the other. Negative correlation is when an increase in one variable leads to a decrease in another and vice versa (Neuman, 2003). Finally, no correlation is when a change in one variable does not lead to a change in the other and vice versa. In a correlational study a correlation coefficient that varies between + 1 and -1 is usually used. A strong positive correlation is a value close to +1 and a strong negative correlation is a value close to -1; if variables are uncorrelated a value near zero will be shown (Creswell, 2013). In order to conduct a study examining the question surrounding restorative practices and school climate, a correlational quantitative study was used to investigate these relationships within the selected schools.

### **Target Population, Sampling Method (power) and Related Procedures**

This study took place in a large mid-atlantic urban school district at three elementary schools. The sample of this study included school staff members from three schools, and involved at least 105 participants. School staff members who currently work in the schools and who have implemented restorative practices during the last three years were included in this study. Both full-time and part-time school staff employees were eligible. The participants were categorized into three groups: administrative role, instructional role, and non-instructional role. The participants were selected through a cluster sampling design, which is the typical procedure for sampling a specific population. For this study, a cluster sampling was ideal because the

researcher only needed school staff members who work in the selected schools and have implemented restorative practices during the last three years.

### **Instrumentation**

Validity and reliability are very important when conducting research. Validity is the degree to which an instrument performs as it is intended to perform and measures what it is presumed to measure. To assess the validity of quantitative instruments, numerous statistical tests and measures are conducted. The validation process also involves collecting and analyzing data to assess the accuracy of an instrument. Reliability is the consistency of an instrument. The validity of a measure is directly related to reliability. Researchers can use the validity of the measure to assess whether the instrument consistently measures what it is intended to measure or perform what it is intended to perform (Carter & Porter, 2000).

To address the research question in this study, I administered a web-based questionnaire to staff members from the three selected schools. The survey questions that were used for this research are from the WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center, from a restorative practices study conducted by Guckenburg, Hurley, Persson, Fronius, and Petrosino (2016). This study focused on how practitioners were integrating restorative practices into their schools to manage student behaviors. The restorative practices survey was used to gather information on restorative practitioners. A snowball sampling technique which involved three rounds of disseminating the survey was utilized by the researchers who created the restorative practices survey. There was no evidence of pre-tests for content validity provided for this survey tool.

Questions were also included from a school climate survey from the State Department of Education. The school climate survey is a validated survey that was created to support local school climate and culture improvement activities. To validate this tool, the State Department of

Education conducted pre-tests to ensure content validity and reliability. It is a free public survey and is used to help improve student's educational environments and prevent misbehaviors. The survey materials are also used as a service to help schools understand and improve environmental conditions for learning.

Questions from both surveys was combined to developed one survey tool for this study but the combined survey was not pre-tested for content validity and reliability. The survey consisted of 34 items that were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with the categories: (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree. I obtained instrument permission from the creators of the restorative practices and the school climate survey to use for this study. This survey tools utilized for this study was chosen because I wanted to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in the selected schools. I entered all questions into Qualtrics creating one survey containing 34 questions. A copy of this tool is in appendix A. All findings, processes, summaries of the restorative practices and school climate scores were presented within this study. Based on the research design outlined in this chapter, this study can be replicated using the same or similar statistical analysis software.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to conducting this study, I received consent and permission to conduct research in the school district. I applied for approval from Concordia University and to the large mid-atlantic urban school district's Institutional Review Board. The principals at all three schools granted permission to conduct the study at their sites. All collected data were extracted from this large mid-atlantic school district. Participating schools in the study was not identified. Not identifying the schools protected the confidentiality of the subjects and the schools.

A quantitative correlational research design was utilized, using data based on the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. Participants are staff members from schools who utilized restorative practices strategies for the last three years. All participants have also been trained in restorative practices. They were contacted via email with the research study information and an active link. If interested, the participants navigated to the active link and proceeded to the Qualtrics website. Qualtrics is the web-based survey tool that processed and managed the data. Before completing the survey, participants provided their consent to be a part of the study. After providing consent, the participants completed the 34 questions of the survey. There was a step-by-step guide that was utilized by the participants and it goes as follows:

- Step 1: Proceed to active link that will take them to the Qualtrics website.
- Step 2: Read the overview of the research study and provide consent to be a part of the study.
- Step 3: Complete and submit survey.

### **Operationalization of Variables**

Using quantitative research helps researchers to observe relationships between variables and this study examined the relationship between restorative practices and school climate.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

I discussed the inferential and descriptive data that was used to examine the research question. Data was exported from Qualtrics into an Excel file and then the file was imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). Figures and tables were used to present the data. In this study, (y) is the variable used to represent individuals average school climate scores and (x) represented individuals' average restorative practices scores. This Pearson's

correlation analysis was chosen because I wanted to test a hypothesis examining the relationship of restorative practices and school climate. Likert scale questions and ordinal data were analyzed in this study.

I used a cluster sampling design to organize the raw data. Raw data was placed into clusters based on the research questions. Therefore, the restorative practices questions and school climate questions was clustered for the correlational analysis. During the data collection process, all participants' identities remained confidential. Data was provided by the survey participants when they answer the questions on the web-based survey, making the data self-reporting. I analyzed school climate using ordinal data (Likert scales), using a cluster sampling design. Data was collected in a cross-sectional manner using self-administered web-based questionnaires; a report was provided on the number of participants from the sample that did not complete and/or return the survey, and the response bias using a respondent/non-respondent analysis.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

**Limitations.** Several limitations can be identified. First, a single quantitative research study did not account for all factors associated with restorative practices and school climate. It was also limited to the perceptions of school staff members at three selected urban elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic school district. Parents and students' perceptions were not included. In addition, the study was limited to the voluntary responses of school staff members who choose to complete and return a survey from their particular school site. In a correlational study, correlation does not indicate causation and there is no way to verify or confirm causation in this study. Finally, to address issues of instrument validity, standard pre-existing instruments were used but the combined survey was not pre-tested.



**Delimitations.** There are several delimitations associated with this study. First, data was only collected from three elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district that implemented restorative practices school-wide. Secondly, the study delimited the survey to school staff members: administrators, teachers, teacher assistants or paraprofessionals, social workers/counselors, support staff, and other related personnel. Finally, delimitations were not imposed on other factors that involve the student which may include: the special education population; free or reduced-price lunch eligibility; socio-economic status; the physical location of the school building; years the school was in operation; diversity of the student and staff population; the age of school staff members; the length of the current school staff members' contracts; and how many years the school staff members have been employed. The precautions that I took to maximize validity of the measurement instruments and data were: to use pre-existing tools for the survey questions; to make sure the content of the surveys is consistent with the research questions; and to properly protect and store data after collection.

### **Internal and External Validity**

I protected the validity and reliability of the study by taking precautions early in the research study. First, I only sampled participants that utilized restorative practices within their schools and secondly the survey was only given to participants who underwent restorative practices training. Creswell (2013) believes that a researcher should consider the various threats to a study's validity and reliability. Identifying and considering the various threats to validity and reliability will ensure that the instrument is valid and reliable, and will sustain the idea that the explanations of the information are accurate (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). The data for this study was acquired from one source, which is the questionnaire described above.

Internal validity is the degree to which the results are attributable to the independent variable and not another variable (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). External validity is the extent to which the results of a study can be generalized. There are many factors that jeopardize internal and external validity. Some factors that affect internal validity are instrumentation, testing, and selection of subjects. Factors that affect external validity are multiple treatment interference, pre-test treatment interaction, selection treatment interaction, and specificity of variables (Johnson & Christensen, 2007).

In this study, I examined the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. A major goal of the data collection process was to eliminate the possibility of extraneous variables such as demand characteristics, experimenter/investigator effects, participant variables, and situational variables. The data collection process also identified observable behaviors or indicants, which closely reflect abstract constructs, to rule out, reduce, or control extraneous variables. Only schools that were using restorative practices as a school-wide discipline method at a large mid-atlantic urban school district were sampled. Randomization also reduces threats to internal validity (Carter & Porter, 2000). Sampling schools that only utilize restorative practices as an approach to school-wide discipline reduced, eliminated, and controlled threats to internal validity, because the chance for other factors to affect the dependent variable were minimal. To improve external validity, I strategically choose the sample selection in the research design. As mentioned before, the sample in this study was obtained by using a cluster sampling design.

### **Expected Findings**

I expected to find a statistically significant relationship between restorative practices and school climate. As mentioned throughout this study, many school staff members who

implemented restorative practices in their schools have observed a drastic improvement in their school climate. In this study, school staff members agreed that there are improvements in academic achievement, student respect for other students, student respect for staff, staff respect for each other, staff respect for students, and the overall school climate. Expected results confirmed the idea that restorative practices are an effective method to build positive relationships and resolve conflicts in a school environment. These results informed the literature and confirmed the theory of the practice.

### **Ethical Issues in the Study**

In this section, I will discuss the ethical issues that were presented in the study. I will start by identifying the sample and discuss how human participants were protected. The chosen sample population presented minimal risks and did not involve children, individuals who are unable to care for themselves or individuals who are unable to make rational decisions. No questions on the survey instrument deliberately caused ill will, conflicts, or tension at the workplace. Participating schools in the study were not identified to protect the confidentiality of the subjects and the schools; this secured any other information that might be considered confidential and personal. An email explaining the research study and requesting their participation was provided to the principals of the schools, and their permission was granted. Individual appointments were also made available for each principal to answer any questions about the research study as needed.

Participants who were a part of this study are school staff members from the schools who have utilized restorative practices in their schools for the last three years. The participants were not a vulnerable population and they were contacted by the researcher via email with the research study information and an active link. The participants who chose to continue with the

web-based survey was directed to click yes or agree to give the researcher permission to use the information they provide in the survey and acknowledge that they comprehend the study information.

During the data collection phase, the participants were protected because their identities were not required, and only adults 18 years or older were sampled. The survey questions were made available via email and potential participants were given the opportunity to ask questions. During the analysis process, participants were protected because Qualtrics assigned each participant a distinct number that kept their information confidential, and particulars such as names were not collected. Because data was collected using Qualtrics, it was impossible to identify who completed which survey when the survey results were printed. All printed data was kept confidential and secured. After data was collected, the human participants were protected by the researcher because the data was kept private. Files pertaining to the study were stored using a personal computer for the data analysis and any hard copies was secured in a locked file box.

## **Summary**

School discipline has been an important topic for educators and administrators for many years. There are many researchers and scholars who believe that school discipline is linked to punishment. School discipline should decrease the amount of future negative behavior, teach students successful communication and relations in school or society, ensure students and staff are safe, and create a climate conducive to student achievement (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Punitive discipline practices undermine the goal of success for all students. There are too many inconsistencies and variations of these practices to guarantee they are equally applied to all students (Skiba, 2000). Furthermore, there have been decades of data that illustrate the

overrepresentation of minority students in suspension rates. This disciplinary school exclusion carries intrinsic risks that can exacerbate the challenges these students already have (AAP, 2003; Patterson, 1992). No evidence to date has proven that zero tolerance policies have improved student behavior or contributed to positive school climate. However, there is evidence to show that high levels of out-of-school suspension and expulsion are linked to elevated probability of future student misbehavior, lower levels of achievement, and reduced rates of school completion (Skiba, 2000).

The use of restorative practices has been suggested by many editorials, social examinations, and reports. Some have focused on the use of restorative practices to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline issue, and others have examined restorative practices to see if it reduces suspensions or expulsions (Youth United for Change & Advancement Project, 2011). Additional restorative practices studies are needed in the United States, especially to investigate the potential impact of restorative practice on school culture and climate in urban schools. Even though there may be studies that focus on school discipline and restorative practices, many of them are not conducted in an urban environment.

Furthermore, there is limited educational research examining school discipline and school climate from a less punitive manner. Positive relationships need to be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The climate of the school building will depend on the relationships that are present. Healthy positive relationships need to be evident in the school community to enhance student achievement. This study contributed to research on urban schools because it examined school staff members' perspectives on school climate after three years of using restorative practices in their school building. The study also focused on teacher and staff practices which address procedures that change students' negative behaviors.

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. A correlational quantitative design was used to investigate these relationships in three selected elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. This section outlines the methodology of the study, and provides detailed information on the following: the purpose of the study, research questions, hypotheses, research design, target population, instrumentation, data collection, operationalization of variables, data analysis procedures, limitations and delimitations of the research design, internal and external validity, expected findings, and ethical issues. All permissions were received, and a copy of all instruments is included in Appendix A.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine what relationship exists between restorative practices and school climate in selected public elementary schools. The following research question guides the study and presents a clear goal: What is the relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district? A quantitative correlational research design was utilized for this study. The chosen method was best suited for this study because it allowed me to effectively examine the relationship between two measures. The goal of the study was to determine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate from the perspectives of school staff members that utilize restorative practices in their schools. The participants are from three schools that recently implemented the restorative practices philosophy school-wide during the last three years. All staff members at these schools were trained in restorative practices before the program was implemented.

To address the research question in this study, I administered a web-based questionnaire to school staff members from all three participating schools. The survey questions that were used for this research were from the WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center from a study conducted by Guckenburg et al. (2016); there were also questions from a school climate survey from the New Jersey Department of Education (2016). The two sets of questions were combined to create one survey tool.

There were a few delimitations associated with this study. First, data were only collected from those elementary schools in the district that implemented restorative practices school-wide. Secondly, the study was limited to school staff members: administrators, teachers, teacher

assistants or paraprofessionals, social workers/counselors, support staff, and other related personnel in the schools. The rationale for only collecting data from schools in a large mid-atlantic school district, and for only surveying school staff members at these schools, was to focus on the goal of the study. In this chapter, I discussed and described the data analysis and results of the research study. I will give a description of the sample, summary of the results, and provide a detailed analysis of the findings.

### **Description of the Sample**

The sample for this study was obtained by using a cluster sampling design. When there is a need to sample a specific population, a cluster sampling procedure is typically utilized. For this study, a cluster sampling was ideal because I only needed school staff members who work in the large mid-atlantic urban school district at schools that implemented restorative practices the last three years. Three schools that met these criteria selected to obtain the appropriate sample size. Restorative practices and school climate are the two measures that will be reviewed for this study.

There are approximately 225 total staff members from all three selected schools who have been using restorative practices within the last three years in the district. Utilizing Qualtrics statistical software, the suggested sample size needed for this study was 105 participants and was based on a 95% confidence level. In total, 128 staff completed the survey, a response rate of 56%.

### **Summary of the Results**

Data were exported from Qualtrics into an Excel file, and this file was imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS). I examined the self-reported behaviors of the sample at one period in time, and explored the relationship between two variables: restorative



practices and school climate. This study does not contain a comparison group. A correlational analysis was used to assess the relationship between restorative practices and school climate.

**Validity.** By nature, correlational analysis studies are prone to many threats of both internal and external validity. Validity is the degree to which the data collection method accurately captures what it intends to measure. In an experimental design, internal validity is the degree to which the results are attributable to the independent variable and not another variable (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). In this correlational design, there are no manipulations of variables, as there is no experimental or treatment condition. The study design does not permit inference to causality, so most threats to internal validity are not applicable. In this case, validity is the degree to which the data collection method accurately captures what it intends to measure. One threat to internal validity is the instrument itself, and the potential for social desirability bias. The survey instructions state: “Welcome to the Restorative Practices and School Climate Survey. The purpose of this survey is to help us learn about the relationship between Restorative Practices and School Climate in your school.” School staff are highly aware of the phrase “school climate” and are aware that a positive school climate is something for which they should be striving. It is possible that staff responded in overly positive ways to the items in order to appear “better.” To address issues of instrument validity, standard pre-existing instruments were used.

Some other factors that affect internal validity are instrumentation, testing, and selection of subjects. Another threat to internal validity in this study was the instrumentation itself. Even though I used questions from two published survey instruments (as outlined in Chapter 3), I had to slightly modify and combine the questions to create one survey to address the two variables

examined in the study. Doing so may have affected the internal validity of the instrument utilized in this study.

Many factors can jeopardize external validity, which is the extent to which the results are generalizable (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). Factors that affect external validity are multiple treatment interference, pre-test treatment interaction, selection treatment interaction, and specificity of variables (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). A factor that may affect external validity in this study is the sampled population. Because only school-based staff from three public schools in a large mid-atlantic school district who use restorative practices were sampled, the findings from this study may only be generalized to similar schools. In order to extrapolate these findings beyond the sampled sub-population of staff, future studies should include a wider diversity of schools in the design.

**Reliability.** It is highly likely that given the variables again, the same group of school-based staff would score similarly. Because the group of school-based staff was selected randomly, it is reasonable to assume that any other random sample of staff from the same schools would achieve the same or similar scores. Future studies should repeat this design in other contexts, outside of the selected schools. Future research is needed to determine the relationship between restorative practice and school climate in schools that do not utilize restorative practices and in other areas in the country.

A quantitative correlational research design was utilized for this study. Quantitative research methods focus on measurements that are objective with statistical analysis or numerical data collecting. Data are gathered through different methods such as polls and questionnaires (Creswell, 2009). Interpreting previous statistical data using different techniques is also utilized. This approach is centered on gathering statistical data to generalize it across groups of people to

give details on a particular phenomenon (Barbie, 2010). The chosen method was best suited for this study because I could effectively examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Using a quantitative analysis allowed more schools to participate in the study, and provided the opportunity to receive more responses from school staff members that have experience with restorative practices in their schools.

I used Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) to run a Pearson's correlation coefficient test to find the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Denoted by  $r$ , the Pearson's correlation coefficient is a measure of the strength of a linear association between two variables. This statistical test was best suited for this study because of the fact it measures the linear correlation between two variables  $X$  and  $Y$ . The three types of correlation that are identified are positive correlation, negative correlation, and no correlation. Positive correlation can be explained as when an increase in one variable leads to an increase in the other and a decrease in one leads to a decrease in the other. Negative correlation is when an increase in one variable leads to a decrease in another and vice versa (Neuman, 2003). No correlation is when a change in one variable does not lead to a change in the other and vice versa. A Pearson correlation coefficient varies between +1 and -1. A strong positive correlation is a value close to +1 and a strong negative correlation is value close to -1; if variables are uncorrelated a value near zero will be shown (Creswell, 2013).

### **Detailed Analysis**

The survey completed by participants contained 34 items—the first 17 were related to restorative practice and the last 17 were related to school climate. For each respondent, composite measures were calculated of restorative practices and school climate, by averaging the

individual scores for the items in each category. One item, Q25, was the only reverse coded item in either scale.

Table 1 illustrated the item mean, standard deviation, and distribution of responses for each item in the restorative practices questions, and Table 2 displayed the same information for the school climate questions. The restorative practices questions average score was 3.93, and the school climate questions average score was 3.65.

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Restorative Practices Questions*

Restorative Practices Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. At my school, students are aware of Restorative Practices.	128	4.13	0.97	4%	2%	10%	44%	40%
2. At my school, parents are aware of Restorative Practices.	128	3.79	1.00	2%	9%	20%	43%	25%
3. At my school, parents are involved in Restorative Practices.	128	3.48	1.03	4%	13%	29%	39%	15%

(continued)

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Restorative Practices Questions*

Restorative Practices Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
4. At my school, Restorative Practices are available to all students.	128	4.46	0.71	0%	2%	5%	36%	56%
5. At my school, all adults can initiate Restorative Practices.	128	4.09	0.91	0%	9%	11%	44%	37%
6. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for general prevention discussions.	125	4.13	0.76	0%	2%	16%	48%	34%
7. At my school, all students can initiate Restorative Practices.	128	3.86	1.00	2%	9%	20%	39%	30%
8. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for student verbal conflict.	128	4.21	0.73	1%	2%	6%	56%	34%

(continued)

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Restorative Practices Questions*

Restorative Practices Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
9. At this school, Restorative Practices are used for student/staff conflict.	128	4.16	0.79	1%	2%	13%	48%	36%
10. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for student/staff physical conflict.	128	4.02	0.87	0%	6%	18%	43%	33%
11. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for minor behavior infractions (non-physical).	126	4.04	0.81	1%	5%	12%	55%	28%
12. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for major infractions (physical).	127	4.04	0.90	1%	6%	15%	44%	34%

(continued)

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Restorative Practices Questions*

Restorative Practices Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
13. At my schools, Restorative Practices are used for property infractions (vandalism).	127	3.77	0.95	1%	10%	24%	42%	24%
14. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for bullying offenses.	126	4.14	0.78	0%	5%	10%	52%	33%
15. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for truancy.	127	3.39	1.04	2%	19%	37%	24%	18%
16. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for alcohol/substance use.	126	3.37	0.94	1%	14%	48%	21%	16%
17. At my school, the Restorative Practice program is a success.	128	3.79	0.99	2%	9%	20%	45%	24%
Average Scores		3.93	0.64					

Table 2

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for School Climate Questions*

School Climate Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
18. At this school, teachers have close working relationships with each other.	128	3.97	0.94	2%	5%	15%	48%	30%
19. At this school, teachers talk with students about ways to understand and control emotions.	128	4.21	0.68	0%	3%	5%	59%	33%
20. At this school, teachers are treated and respected as educational professionals.	127	3.70	1.11	6%	11%	14%	46%	23%
21. At this school, students respect each other.	128	3.02	1.19	12%	26%	19%	36%	8%

(continued)



Table 2

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for School Climate Questions*

School Climate Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
22. At this school, parents respect their children's teachers.	127	3.36	0.99	3%	17%	30%	39%	10%
23. At this school, adults who work in this school treat students with respect.	127	4.03	0.73	0%	5%	11%	61%	24%
24. At this school, adults who work in this school typically work well with one another.	126	3.96	0.80	2%	3%	15%	58%	22%
25. At this school, many students go out of their way to treat other students badly. **	128	3.02	1.13	7%	32%	23%	29%	9%

(continued)

Table 2

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for School Climate Questions*

School Climate Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
26. Teachers at this school build strong relationships with students.	128	4.13	0.70	0%	3%	9%	59%	29%
27. At this school, the code of student conduct is fair.	128	3.78	0.96	3%	8%	17%	52%	20%
28. This school consistently enforces the code of student conduct.	128	3.38	1.30	12%	16%	18%	33%	22%
29. At this school, parents are actively involved with the school.	127	3.11	1.16	9%	25%	23%	33%	10%
30. At this school, students respect their teachers.	128	3.18	1.11	8%	22%	23%	38%	9%

(continued)

Table 2

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for School Climate Questions*

School Climate Questions	Descriptive Statistics			Responses				
	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
31. At this school, parents are made to feel welcome in this school.	128	4.15	0.76	1%	2%	11%	53%	33%
32. At this school, parents know what is going on in this school.	126	3.78	0.90	1%	11%	16%	54%	18%
33. At this school, parents are aware of what is expected of their child at this school.	128	3.84	1.00	2%	10%	15%	47%	26%
34. At this school, parents care about how their child performs in school.	128	3.50	1.14	8%	10%	24%	40%	18%
<b>Average Scores</b>		<b>3.65</b>	<b>0.63</b>					

*Note.* \*\*Item Q25 was reverse coded. The mean and distribution of responses reported here are adjusted for the reverse coding.

The correlational analysis indicated a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practices and school climate as measured by the scales used in this study. The Pearson’s correlation analysis conducted revealed a positive strong relationship between staff

perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practice and a good school climate,  $r = .7228$ ,  $p < .001$ . Figure 1 provides a scatter plot, with individuals' average restorative practice score on the X-axis and average school climate score on the Y-axis. The plot shows a strong positive relationship.

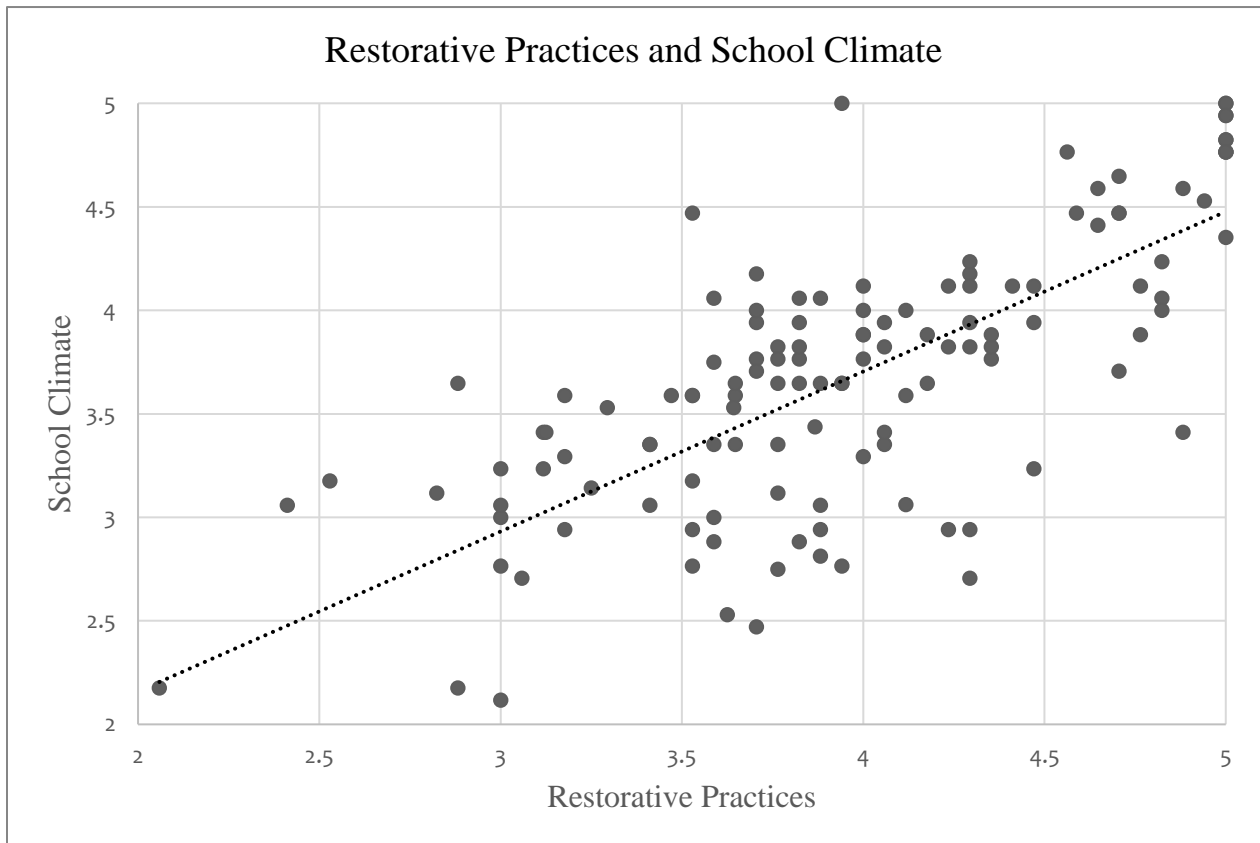


Figure 1. Restorative practices and school climate correlation analysis.

Given this finding, we can **reject the null hypothesis**:

*There is no statistical relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district.*

## **Ancillary Findings**

There were a few observations of statistical nature that warrants mention at this time. Restorative practices and school climate scores for perceived differences by the school staff members' roles was also analyzed. The restorative practices scores for the three categorized roles goes as follows: administrative roles were 3.95, instructional roles were 3.84, and non-instructional roles were 4.21. School staff in non-instructional roles perceived the use of restorative practices in the same schools to be greater/higher as compared to staff in instructional roles in the same schools. The school climate scores for administration roles were 3.62, instructional roles were 3.58, and non-instructional roles were 3.89. There were no significant differences in perception of school climate based on the school staff members' role.

## **Summary**

In summary, the purpose of this study is to determine what relationship exists between restorative practices and school climate in selected public elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. The study explored the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. Understanding the relationship between restorative practices and school climate will help determine if restorative practices strategies could be a viable option for school leaders to help improve student behavior and school climate for students and staff. Practitioners of positive school discipline use discipline to teach rather than punish (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Schools that adopt positive school discipline prevent negative and risky behaviors while helping students succeed and thrive in school. Restorative practices is a positive school discipline strategy that has been implemented by many schools in recent years. Ashley and Burke (2009) argue that many of these schools show positive improvement in the overall culture and climate. This strategy is focused on building

relationships, which in turn reduces negative student behaviors, allowing for a better climate and overall school community.

To examine the research question surrounding the relationship between restorative practices and school climate, a quantitative design and a Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis were used to investigate these relationships within selected elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. Overall, 225 school-based staff members in three public schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district were invited to take the survey; 128 staff completed the survey, a response rate of 56%. Results from the correlational analysis indicate a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practice and school climate as measured by the scales used in this study. This finding contributes to the field of education as it provides a rationale for future studies to better understand the potential of restorative practices to drive improvements in school climate.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

Punitive consequences are often extensively utilized in dealing with school discipline. The procedural aspects of these methods are defined very broadly, leaving them open to unpredictable interpretation. Punitive discipline policies are so ambiguously defined that they can be highly subjective in the determination of their use. Punitive approaches to discipline also have been proven to be ineffective and do not help improve student behavior. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the results of this correlational study examining restorative practices and school climate. I will evaluate the results, add personal insights, and make connections with the implications of the findings for the practicing community. I will also discuss how the research informs the literature and how it adds new knowledge to the community of scholars. The outline for Chapter 5 is as follows: Introduction, Summary of the Results; Discussion of the Results; Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature; Limitations; Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory; Recommendations for Further Research; and Conclusion.

### **Summary of the Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in selected public elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. The study explored the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. The following research question guided the study and presented a clear goal: What is the relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practices and school climate amongst selected K–8 elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district? A quantitative correlational research design was utilized for this study. The participants were selected through a probability random sample and the sample was

obtained by using a cluster sampling design, which is the typical procedure for sampling a specific population. For this study, a cluster sampling was ideal because I only needed school staff members who work in the selected schools and have implemented restorative practices in the last three years. Three schools from the district that have implemented restorative practices within the last three years were chosen to obtain the appropriate sample size. The two variables studies are restorative practices and school climate.

I examined the self-reported behaviors of the sample (128 school-based staff) at one period in time, and explored the relationship between two variables: restorative practices and school climate. This study did not contain a comparison group. A correlational analysis was used to assess the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. In this correlational design, there were no manipulations of variables, as there is no experimental or treatment condition. The study design did not permit inference to causality, so most threats to internal validity are not applicable. In this case, validity is the degree to which the data collection method accurately captures what it intends to measure.

The results from the correlational analysis indicate that there is a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practices and school climate as measured by the scales used in this study. The Pearson's correlation analysis conducted revealed a positive strong relationship between staff perceptions of the extent of implementation of restorative practice and a good school climate,  $r = .7228$ ,  $p < .001$ . Given the finding, I rejected my null hypothesis. The analysis also found that school staff in non-instructional roles perceived the use of restorative practices in the same schools to be greater/higher as compared to staff in instructional roles in the same schools. There were no significant differences in perception of school climate based on individuals' roles.



## **Discussion of the Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in selected public elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. The study explored the perceptions of school staff members regarding restorative practices and school climate. Based on the results from the correlational analysis the study indicated that there is a strong positive correlation between restorative practice and school climate. This positive correlation suggests a positive relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Table 1 and Table 2 illustrated the item mean, standard deviation, and distribution of responses for each item in both variables (restorative practices and school climate). The restorative practices questions average score was 3.93 and the school climate questions average score was 3.65. There were no differences in perception of school climate scores based on individuals' roles. These findings contribute to the field of education as they provide a rationale for future studies designed to better understand the ability of restorative practices to drive improvements in school climate.

As mentioned throughout this study, many school staff members who implemented restorative practices in their schools have observed a drastic improvement in their school climate. Examining the relationship of restorative practices and school climate gives research-based evidence to educators on this positive school discipline practice. Practitioners of positive school discipline uses discipline to teach rather than punish (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Schools that adopt positive school discipline prevent negative and risky behaviors while helping students succeed and thrive in school. Restorative practices is a positive school discipline strategy that has been implemented by many schools in recent years. Ashley and Burke (2009) argue that many of these schools show positive improvement in the overall climate of the school. This strategy is

focused on building relationships, which in turn reduces negative student behaviors, allowing for a better climate and overall school community.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

The analysis in this study indicated a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practices and school climate as measured by the scales used in this study. Restorative practices is a philosophy that focuses on building positive relationships (Wachtel, 2013).

Positive relationships need to be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The culture and climate of the school building will depend on the relationships that are present. Healthy positive relationships need to be evident in the school community so that student achievement can be at high levels. Studies by van Tartwijk and Hammerness (2011), and by Anderman, Andrzejewski, and Allen (2011), examined interpersonal relationships between teacher and student. These studies focused on the interpersonal perspective, and on the pedagogical and methodological aspects of the learning environment. Anderman et al. (2011) concluded that teachers must establish an environment that promotes student learning and must project a positive attitude. The focus of teacher interpersonal behaviors is very important, according to many researchers of classroom effective management (Anderman et al., 2011; van Tartwijk & Hammerness, 2011). Effective learning environments or effective classrooms cannot be created if teacher interpersonal relationships are negative.

Student motivation, student achievement, and teacher interpersonal behavior have been shown to be closely related (Toste et al., 2010). A part of a student's experience in the classroom is the relationship they have with the teacher, which could be an advantage for encouraging student success (Hamre et al., 2008; Macleod et al., 2012). If the teacher-student interpersonal connection is strong in the classroom, then a student becomes more engaged. In

classes where teachers project positive attitudes, students are more engaged in learning and do better academically (Ackoff & Greenburg, 2008). Students' views of the teacher are another aspect of the classroom relationship. A study conducted by Patrick et al. (2007) stated that a students' view of teacher support encourages students to learn in the classroom. Students are more willing to be active participants if they believe that teachers care about their learning. To avoid having a negative impact in the classroom, teachers must be aware of their students' opinions and should understand that a positive view of an educator's feelings and actions has a positive influence on students.

According to Alderman and Green (2011), the success of students is determined by the quality of the teacher-student relationship. A teacher decides on what materials are used, and also decides on classroom behavior management strategies from a pedagogical, methodological, and interpersonal perspective (Tillery et al., 2010). Therefore, educators need to set the tone for the classroom environment. When students believe that their views and opinions are not respected and that communication is one-sided, negative or disruptive behaviors become more frequent in the classroom. Many researchers believe and recognize the importance of allowing a student to have a voice (Sanacore, 2008; Zion, 2009; Teasley, 2014).

### **Limitations**

For this study, there were several limitations. First, a single quantitative research study does not account for all factors associated with restorative practices and school climate. The study was also limited to school staff members' perceptions of the use of restorative practices and their school's climate: parents' or students' perceptions were not included in this study. The study was limited to the voluntary responses of school staff members who completed a survey on the research topic.

Although a correlational research design was appropriate for this study, it does not involve causation. Therefore, there was no way to verify or confirm causation in this study. A linear regression analysis, which is the next step up after correlation, could also have been conducted for this study. Linear regression is most commonly used to make predictions, and to examine which variables are significant predictors of a dependent variable (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, participants were selected through a probability random sample and the sample was obtained by using a cluster sampling design, which is the typical procedure for sampling a specific population. Cluster sampling was ideal because I only needed school staff members who work in the selected schools and have implemented restorative practices during the last three years. Three schools from the district were chosen to obtain the appropriate sample size. However, there are nine elementary schools in the district who implemented restorative practices in the last three years; therefore, only investigating three schools limited the study to one-third of the schools who utilized restorative practice strategies in the district. This study could have been improved if all nine elementary schools have been examined.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

**Practice.** Schools must ensure a safe school climate which is maximally favorable to education and learning, by using all of the effective resources that are at their disposal (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Numerous schools are frequently plagued by behaviors that are not conducive to learning. Schools that are effective are well-disciplined, place emphasis on the importance of learning, and use successful discipline practices. This study provides a unique perspective on the relationship of a positive discipline practice to improvements in climate in three schools. The goal of this study was to find out if there is a relationship between restorative practices and school climate.

The two variables studied had a strong positive correlation. This information is useful to educational institutions who want to improve their school climate without the use of punitive practices. Although a correlation analysis does not show causation, it provides an indication of the relationship between two measures. Overall, this research is of interest to scholar-practitioners because it adds to the body of knowledge in the education field. This study will contribute to ongoing research in the educational field because it examines a topic that is of high importance in education. Strategies in education are always evolving and the foundation has been set by this study in the quest to find alternative strategies to improve school climate.

**Policy.** Managing student behaviors and finding ways of improving school climate without the use of punitive discipline practices has been a crucial debate for educators for many years. As all states are mandated to protect and maintain a safe positive school environment for all students, the state of New Jersey developed the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABBRA), which began in the fall of 2011 in all public schools. The ABBRA is a law with several sections outlining steps to addressing harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB) to protect children inside and outside the school (NJ Department of Education, 2016). The need to reduce the number of suicides and bullying incidents in New Jersey was the rationale behind this act. The ABBRA also addresses cyberbullying. Schools need to be accountable for monitoring and managing students' behaviors that revolve around harassment, intimidation and bullying. One of the expectations of the ABBRA is for schools to sustain a positive school climate which requires establishing a School Safety Team to manage and improve this area. The ABBRA provides a policy with firm guidelines that schools must adhere to and that is intended to help create positive school climates throughout the state of New Jersey.

In October 2012 due to the new requirements mandated in the ABBRA the former Commissioner of Education in New Jersey received an annual report that revealed there were 12,024 confirmed cases of HIB from a total of 35,552 investigations in New Jersey during the 2011–2012 school years (NJ Department of Education, 2016). The New Jersey Department of Education responded to this report with recommendations for improving and expanding existing policies, and implementing improvement plans tailored to local needs. Most recently, in school years 2013–14 there were 19,781 HIB investigations with 7,218 confirmed cases; and in school years 2014–15, there were 18,635 investigations with 6,664 confirmed cases. The most common disciplinary actions that were imposed for offenders of HIB incidents in 2014–15 were out-of-school suspension, followed closely by detention and in-school suspension. In 2014–15, seventy-five percent of all HIB incidents occurred within the school building, and police were notified 5,289 times (NJ Department of Education, 2016).

**Theory.** School leadership is the key to making the difference in schools to enhance productivity and effectiveness. Leaders need to learn from previous mistakes and take a holistic approach to school discipline. The school system will continue to deteriorate, especially in urban environments, if leadership does not create atmospheres that encourage systematic learning with improved results (Andreadis, 2009). School leadership and teachers have a direct and indirect impact on teaching and learning. The teacher-student relationship is an effective way to create a positive learning environment. Moolenaar et al. (2012) believed that it is very important to have a good interpersonal relationship between teacher and student. Teachers must create an environment that encourages student learning by projecting a positive attitude and being proactive with discipline. Moreover, various researchers believe that there are methods to

addressing negative student behavior other than punitive consequences (Auld et al., 2010; Cornell et al., 2009; Osher et al., 2010).

Gregory et al. (2014) considered it important to examine alternative disciplinary practices that are more student centered. This will allow school leaders and staff members to move away from exclusionary practices (e.g., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension). Building positive relationships and improving efficacy will produce more productive learning environments. Classroom management and teacher-student relationships are other approaches to positive school discipline. Englehart (2012) believes that the teacher's experience and assumptions determine the classroom techniques that are used. Effective classroom management techniques and practices are focused on preventing problems not solving problems (Evans & Lester, 2010). Hart (2010) suggested classroom management should be utilized at different systemic levels. Other researchers believe that decreasing students' negative behaviors will require the implementation of behavioral interventions and supports that address students' individual needs (Flannery et al., 2009; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Muscott et al. (2008) conducted a study in New Hampshire school district that implemented positive behavior interventions and supports, and found a seventy-one percent improvement in all schools. They found a significant reduction in suspensions and office discipline referrals, which increased the school's overall student achievement; the program was found to be a success (Muscott et al., 2008).

The educational system faces many discipline problems, such as bullying, defiance, and fighting. Some research has found that school staff misjudge the occurrence of some negative behaviors such as bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Crosby et al., 2010). Failure to prevent or resolve student's misconduct will decrease the opportunity for success for the student and the

school (Novotney, 2009). Consequently, because of this concern, many schools resort to punitive consequences to resolve school discipline problems.

Restorative practices, which evolved from restorative justice, is a positive approach that improves school discipline and school climate. This philosophy is a new approach for addressing wrongdoing and negative behaviors (Wachtel, 2013). Advocates of restorative practices believe decreasing students' negative behaviors requires implementing positive behaviors, strategies, and interventions. Restorative practices uses formal responses to wrongdoing, and allows all those involved in an incident to come together and address the situation. Building positive relationships is the core of this philosophy and promoting a positive school climate is the goal. Restorative practices aims to create a wholesome environment filled with respect, caring, and community. In schools where restorative practices has been implemented, there is evidence that students' negative behaviors have decreased and school climates have improved, especially in urban black environments (Graham, 2009; Keely, 2009; Woodall, 2011; Gregory, 2015).

According to Lewis (2009), who investigated schools where restorative practices was practiced, every school showed a decrease in disruptive behaviors and discipline actions. Schools that fail to address the root of students' discipline issues see declines in student and school outcomes (Novotney, 2009). School discipline is more than punishing students for negative behaviors (Bear, 2012). Students from the inner city usually do not see how their attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their environments. That is why strategies that help students with self-discipline should be incorporated by teachers and leadership to ensure a successful school climate and community.



## **Recommendations for Further Research**

There is inadequate educational research looking at school discipline from a positive rather than a punitive manner, and a lack of rigorous examination of restorative practices in American urban schools. Research on restorative practices is often limited by small sample sizes; to demonstrate statistically meaningful findings, researchers must obtain appropriate sample sizes. This study contributed to research on urban schools by examining staff members' perspectives on restorative practices where it has been implemented in their school building for the last three years. It focused on teacher and staff practices to address stability, and procedures that improve school climate. There has been very little research that focuses exclusively on examining restorative practices and school climate. Examining discipline policies and practices pertaining to negative student behaviors as they relate to the use of restorative practices in schools has also had limited research.

This study may serve as a model for school leadership, by examining a more positive and proactive approach to school discipline. There is limited research where school staff and administration who implemented restorative practices in their schools had the opportunity to reflect and give input on their experiences. Most previous studies focused on raw numbers, such as the decrease of suspensions, expulsions, and discipline referrals. Further research on restorative practices and school climate still needs to be conducted, especially in urban schools.

This study represented the first, essential step in the research into restorative practices and school climate in elementary schools. It provides more research on alternative proactive measures for managing student behaviors to improve school climate. The results found a strong positive correlation between measures of restorative practice and school climate. These findings

contribute to the field of education as it provides a rationale for future studies designed to better understand the potential of restorative practices to drive improvements to school climate.

The positive correlation found in this study provides an estimate for the suggested predictive relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Future studies should consider quasi-experimental designs that would create comparison groups and allow for causality to be established. Quasi-experimental designs are suited for statistical analysis and the results can often be used to reinforce findings of case studies. This approach can also reduce resource and time demands, because randomization is not required (Creswell, 2013). A linear regression analysis, which is the next step up after correlation, could be considered for future studies. Linear regression is most commonly used to make predictions, and to examine which variables are significant predictors of a dependent variable (Creswell, 2013). I also recommend examining other urban districts that utilize restorative practices strategies. Finally, I suggest conducting a study focusing on students' and parents' perceptions of restorative practices and school climate in elementary schools that utilize restorative practices.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between restorative practices and school climate in selected elementary schools in a large mid-atlantic urban school district. Understanding the relationship between restorative practices and school climate will be helpful to determine if the restorative practices approach is a viable option for educational institutions to help improve student behavior and school climate for students and staff. Positive school climate promotes learning for all students and should be the goal for all educational institutions.

Building positive relationships and improving efficacy will produce more productive learning environments. Positive measures such as restorative practices are effective approaches

to school discipline. Restorative practices is a philosophy that focuses on building positive relationships by changing mindsets. Positive relationships need to be fostered school-wide with all staff and students. The culture and climate of the school building will depend on the relationships that are present. Healthy positive relationships need to be evident in the school community so that student achievement can be high. Thornton et al. (2004) believed that improving student achievement requires systems and proactive thinking. Educators need to change the way they operate and think to change the educational system.

A strong positive correlation was found between measures of restorative practice and school climate, as measured by the variables used in this study in three selected schools. This finding contributes to the field of education as it provides a rationale for future studies designed to better understand the potential of restorative practices to drive improvements in school climate. The finding of this positive correlation provides an estimate for the suggested predictive relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Future studies should consider quasi-experimental designs that would create comparison groups and allow for causality to be established. This study represents the first, essential step in this larger research endeavor.

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## **Appendix A: Restorative Practices and School Climate Survey — Copy**

Welcome to the Restorative Practices and School Climate Survey. The purpose of this survey is to help us learn about the relationship between Restorative Practices and School Climate in your school. Your responses are confidential and will not be shared with anyone else, and only the research team will see your data. The survey should take only about 5-10 minutes to complete.

We thank you for your time and efforts.

### **Restorative Practice Questions:**

**1.** According to your school policy on RP, students in your school should be aware of Restorative Practices. At my school, students are aware of Restorative Practices.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**2.** According to your school policy on RP, Parents should be aware of Restorative Practices in your school. At my school, parents are aware of Restorative Practices.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**3.** According to your school policy on RP, Parents should be involved in Restorative Practices in your school. At my school, parents are involved in Restorative Practices.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**4.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices should be available to all students in your school. At my school, Restorative Practices is available to all students.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**5.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be initiated by all adults in your school. At my school, all adults can initiate Restorative Practices.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**6.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be initiated by all students in your school. At my school, all students can initiate Restorative Practices.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**7.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for general preventive discussions. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for general prevention discussions.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**8.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for student verbal conflict. At my school, Restorative Practices is used for student verbal conflict.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**9.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for student/staff verbal conflict. At this school, Restorative Practices are used for student/staff conflict.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**10.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for student/staff physical conflict. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for student/staff physical conflict.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**11.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for minor behavior infractions (non-physical). At this school, Restorative Practices are used for minor behavior infractions (non-physical).

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**12.** According to your school policy on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for major infractions (physical). At my school, Restorative Practices is used for major infractions (physical).

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**13.** According to your school policies on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for property infractions (vandalism). At my school, Restorative Practices are used for property infractions (vandalism).

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**14.** According to your school policies on RP, Restorative Practices can be for bullying offenses. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for bullying offenses.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**15.** According to your school policies on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for truancy. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for truancy.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**16.** According to your school policies on RP, Restorative Practices can be used for alcohol/substance use. At my school, Restorative Practices are used for alcohol/substance use.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**17.** At my school, the Restorative Practice program is a success.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**School Climate Questions:**

**18.** At this school, teachers have close working relationships with each other.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**19.** At this school, teachers talk with students about ways to understand and control emotions.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**20.** At this school, teachers are treated and respected as educational professionals.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree



- 21.** At this school, students respect each other.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 22.** At this school, parents respect their children's teachers.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 23.** At this school, adults who work in this school treat students with respect.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 24.** At this school, adults who work in this school typically work well with one another.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 25.** At this school, many students at this school go out of their way to treat other students badly.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 26.** Teachers at this school build strong relationships with students.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 27.** At this school, the code of student conduct is fair.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 28.** The school consistently enforces the code of student conduct.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 29.** At this school, parents are actively involved with the school.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 30.** At this school, students respect their teachers.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 31.** At this school, parents are made to feel welcome in this school.
- (1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree
- 32.** At this school, parents know what is going on in this school.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**33.** At this school, parents are aware of what is expected of their child at this school.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

**34.** At this school, parents care about how their child performs in school.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

## **Appendix B: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

## Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association

Akil Boucaud

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Digital Signature

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