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WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS?  
A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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of

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at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Gabriella Franza

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS? A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

Gabriella Franza

Restorative practices have the ability to shape the framework of communication in schools. Restorative circles are safe spaces created to help students connect with their peers and build community with the guidance of a facilitator. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the impact that restorative circles have on school connectedness at the high school level. By utilizing a theoretical framework linking critical theory, culture of care theory, and the whole child approach, the researcher was able to examine how students connect with the school, their peers, and their restorative circle facilitator. The sample size for this study consisted of ninth grade students, seven females, and two males, whose ages ranged from 14 to 15, and all of whom were children of color and from a suburban New York public school district. Through 45-minute narrative interviews, the participants were able to share their experience with the program and the influence it had on their school relationships. Data were analyzed in this study through a triangulation of a logbook, interviews, and codebook. Each of these forms of data that were collected were used together in order to come to conclusions regarding students' views on restorative circles and the school environment. The researcher came to four conclusions: (a) restorative circles allowed for students to understand the commonalities that exist between themselves and their peers, (b) students feeling

connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness, (c) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness, and (d) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness. The researcher addressed the gap in the existing literature by exploring the perceptions of students and how restorative practices shape their ability to develop relationships with their peers, staff, community, and themselves.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Empathy is a response that stems from one's apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional condition and involves feeling connected to what another person is feeling (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1999). Empathy is necessary when developing human connections, and many researchers have long viewed empathy as a fundamental social skill that allows the individual to understand others' points of view (Davis & Franzoi, 1991). Restorative circles, a form of Restorative justice, look at understanding motivations and the "whys" behind decision making, allowing students to address preconceived perceptions, focusing on the impact of their behaviors and the effect on their relationships (Wachtel, 2012).

Restorative justice, often referred to as restorative practices, is an all-encompassing term for the use of restorative approaches over punitive approaches. Research implies that it is considered an umbrella term, which can come in many different forms and interventions, which should be specifically developed to meet the students and stakeholders of the school (Wachtel, 2012). At its core, restorative justice looks at crime as a violation of people, relationships, and the community, as well as the law (Zehr, 1990). Therefore, addressing the harm, rather than quickly administering punishment is the true goal of this justice philosophy.

Restorative justice programs can be used when a student commits a punishable act and must face the victims and community members to address his/her/their actions. This involves the student looking at the impact of said actions and seeing the living consequence (Latimer, 2005). Models of restorative justice can morph and change to fit

the needs of a school or program, as well as be broken into three tiers. A few examples of models are restorative circles (Tier 1), conferences (Tier 2), and victim-offender mediations (Tier 3) (Latimer, 2005). Restorative circles focus on building social capital. Restorative justice conferences are face-to-face conferences in which a trained coordinator “brings together offenders, their victims, and their respective kin and communities, in order to decide what the offender should do to repair the harm that a crime has caused” (Sherman et al., 2015). Victim-offender mediations follow the same type of model, with the addition of a mediator preparing each party through an individual conversation and ending with a (written) agreement, but the conversation itself between victim and offender is where the true justice occurs (Jonas-van Dik, 2020; Umbreit et al., 2006).

The focus of restorative circle programs is on building community with students and a restorative justice leader having a conversation about anything that pertains to what the students in the group might be struggling with. It is here that antecedents to behaviors can be looked at and reflected on in order to prevent a recurrence of the behavior. This practice can also be used for academic and personal reflection, with the students looking within themselves or with a healing circle group to address personal decisions and trauma (Wachtel et al., 2010).

Fundamentally, restorative circles bring together all parties of a conflict, facilitating a safe space to have mediated discussion about emotions and struggles. They have the power to create a tremendous amount of change for students' social-emotional well-being, as well as facilitating behavioral changes that will help them when dealing with future conflicts. Schools are implementing circles to help build the community and

address systemic bias in schools, as well as to help students grow as individuals, help with emotional literacy, and to address systemic inequities that make students feel unheard. They can be a necessary tool when looking at behaviors and social emotional learning, and how these behaviors impact school connectedness (Joseph et al., 2021).

School connectedness is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, cared for, close to, and supported by others in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993). Libbey (2007) defined the terms as a combination of feeling a part of school, feeling safe, and feeling that teachers and staff members care for their wellbeing and success. Implementing social-emotional literacy skills and relationship-building, on top of academic structure, can develop school connectedness for students. By having students take an active role in their educational journey, just as the roles that Freire (2000) claimed was necessary to reform education, students were able to have part in their school success. Bond et al. (2007), when looking at the importance of school connectedness in early secondary life and its impact on mental health and academic outcomes, concluded something similar, finding that student's experience of school connectedness shaped their success later life, both socially and in health and learning outcomes.

Restorative circles can be a solution to this challenge, for they aim to have students develop school connectedness through communication with his/her/their peers and an adult facilitator concerning issues happening within their lives and the community. This study examined the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness for ninth grade students. The research suggested that students need to feel

a part of their school in order to be fully invested in their educational success, and restorative circles could be a part of this journey.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study is to identify the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. The implementation of restorative practices, specifically restorative circles, although relatively new, can help foster social capital and connectedness. For the purposes of this study, the research specifically looked at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness, based on the perceptions of students (Chapman, 2015). Although all stakeholders contribute to school connectedness, such as the teachers, administration, staff, security and community members, the perceptions of students are key components and valuable indicators of that classroom climate (Fraser, 1999; Freiberg & Stein, 1999). When looking at the impact of restorative circles, focusing on how students look at themselves and where they fit into their school community, student perception is vital. According to Kaplan and Maehr (1999), the perception of the school connectedness should be considered as a modifier for the general wellbeing of students. Student perception can contribute to good behavior and facilitates a positive orientation toward life both in and outside of school. Engels et al. (2004) defined the wellbeing of students as “a positive emotional state that is the result of a harmony between the sum of specific context factors on the one hand and the personal needs and expectations towards the school on the other hand” (p. 128). Restorative circles are focused on how the students advocate for their needs and what expectations they have of their school and school community members. Student perceptions are key when looking at school connectedness and that this moderating factor needs to be considered



(Van Petegem et al., 2007). There is emerging evidence that school connectedness, school experience, and student social/emotional well-being can be improved by school-based interventions (Cadman et al., 2021). Researchers have noted the imbalance in social/emotional school curriculum and the absence of interventions aimed to specifically increase students' perception of belonging (Allen et al., 2016). With schools reopening from the COVID-19 shut down, school connectedness, and how to foster it, is a primary focus for school districts nationwide (Abrams & Wachtel, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on a theoretical framework linking critical theory (Freire, 2000), culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2012) and the whole child approach. When creating the curriculum for the restorative circle program, a crux of these three concepts was used to develop each circle, using foundations from teachings in New Zealand, while having students look at the status quo within the school building and themselves for true self-reflection and growth. Additionally, these frameworks were used to create the narrative questions that were asked to participants in the interview process, as they all address building relationships through restorative mindsets within education.

### ***Critical Theory***

Freire (2000) hoped to break down the traditional roles that exist within a school and looked to humanize the school systems. Freire believed that true learning happens through conversation, questioning, and sharing of one's interpretations by all stakeholders in the classroom. Specifically, Freire called for an equal playing field with all parties involved (Micheletti, 2010). Restorative circles, at their core, are there to give students a voice in their own learning and make the lines that exist between stakeholders

in the classroom not as rigid as they would be in a traditional school setting. Brown and Di Lallo (2020) described talking circles as “safe spaces where relationships are built, nurtured, reinforced, and sometimes healed; where norms and values are established; and where people connect intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally with other members of the circle” (p. 367). Restorative circles create a space that fights against the traditional roles of the school system and allow students to develop relationships in a new pedagogical setting.

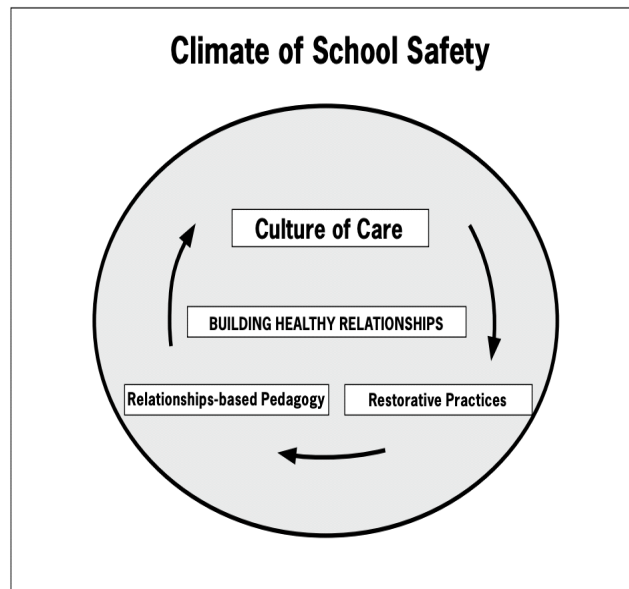
### ***Culture of Care Theory***

Cavanagh (2007) created the culture of care when looking at indigenous populations in New Zealand. The question that drove the study, which was a catalyst for the creation of this theory was “how do we create a school climate of safety?” The findings of this initial study found that restorative practices were imperative when creating an environment of safety and learners developing problem solving skills that are applicable to the real world. Specifically, it was found that “building healthy relationships in school is the heart of creating a climate of safety and that the use of restorative practices can help create a new school culture of healthy relationships” (p.2). Restorative circles are at the forefront of helping students develop social and emotional literacy skills, build relationships, and work on connecting with his/her/their school. The culture of care theory has relationship-based pedagogy, where students develop a relationship with each other, school staff and their school community. Figure 1 details how the climate of school safety can be fostered by utilizing the culture of care methodology. By focusing on building healthy relationships, using relationship grounded pedagogy in and out of the classroom and restorative practices together, a positive school climate can occur. These

practices are all related and necessary when focusing on the social/emotional care of students in schools (Cavanagh, 2007).

**Figure 1**

*Climate of School Safety*



***The Whole Child Approach***

The whole child approach was born out of a meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD] (2007), where educational leaders were asked about what resources ensure a child's success. It questioned if students were truly at the center of the educational system as it existed. It established five tenants that provided a framework that would look at learners from a holistic point of view.

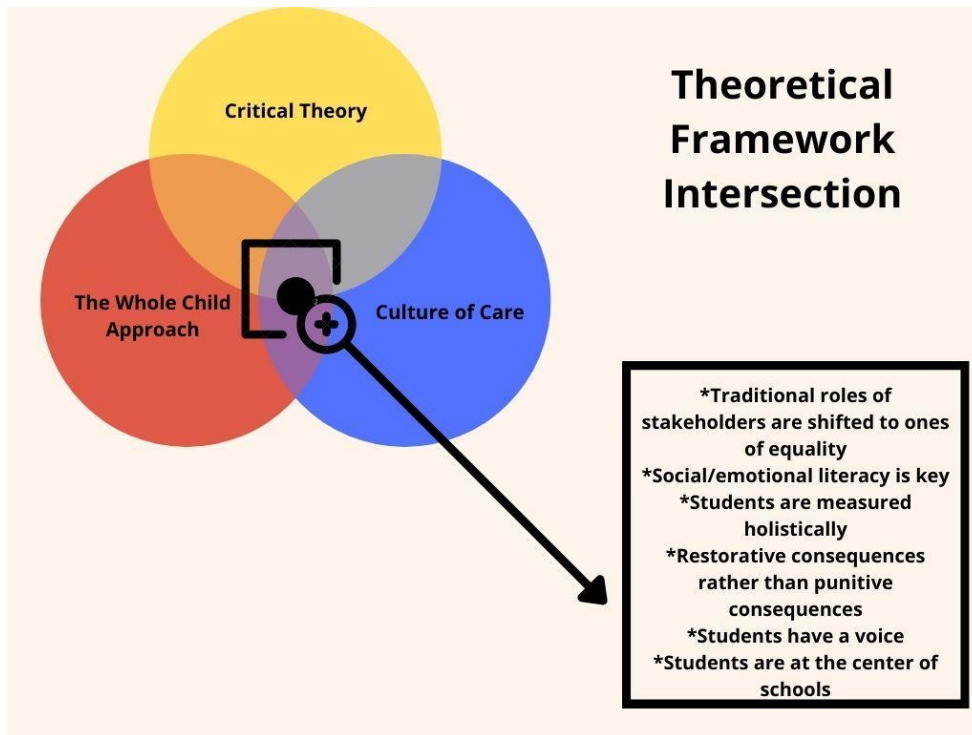
Raspberry and Lohrmann (2015) analyzed these tenants, looking at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as well as the needs of a student within the school community. The five tenants were: health, safety, engagement, support, and challenges. By establishing these tenants, the whole child approach, required school districts to look at the factors within a school

that extend beyond the academic and into the school's extra-curricular environment. School connectedness is a contributor to the safety and well-being of students, and part of the theological framework of restorative practices.

Figure 2 showed how critical theory (Freire, 2000), culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2004; Cavanagh et al., 2012) and the whole child approach overlap in thought. All three theories looked at shifting the traditional roles in school to create equity and allow for students to be seen by more than just their academic record. They focused on developing students' social/emotional literacy and students' voice, so that each student could feel a part of and connected to their school community.

**Figure 2**

*Theoretical Framework Intersection*



*Note.* This figure showed how the theoretical concepts connect and their similarities in thought.

### **Significance of the Study**

In their exploration of student relationships, Klem and Connell (2004) found that: Students become more disengaged from school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, [with] as many as 40% to 60% of students becom[ing] chronically disengaged from school – urban, suburban, and rural – not counting those who already dropped out. (pp. 14–17)

School connectedness is a necessary focus for all schools, for this exact reason, with a great deal of research of literature focused on the topic. However, Blum (2005) discovered that because this research is connected to so many topics and fields, and includes related concepts like student engagement and climate, it can be perceived as a soft approach to school improvement. This is just a perception however, for there can be a tremendous impact.

Although difficult to quantify school connectedness is a crucial factor needed for the success of students and the school community, when looking at ways to accomplish this, the implementation of restorative practices could have a tremendous impact on the way students feel connected to their school. Restorative circles provide a process and a practice for students and supporting adults to examine themselves and their relationships. Additionally, by allowing all students to participate, it allows equity of student voice within a school system. According to Elswick (2018):

In recent years, researchers and practitioners have affirmed how fundamentally important this form of learning is for student/child behavioral and academic

outcomes. Through research we have also learned a great deal about how most effectively to integrate SEL into school life within an educational format or framework. (p. 8)

This importance is further stressed by standards implemented by the state of New York, which created benchmarks for schools to reach for in their classroom curriculum.

The New York State Social Emotional Learning Benchmarks (2018) were the following:

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills essential to success in school and in life.
2. Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
3. Demonstrate ethical decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

Although restorative circles may have an impact on all three of the benchmarks, this study focused specifically on how restorative circles address the second SEL Benchmark, focusing on student relationships, both with peers and their school community. This study would further contribute to research that looks at how restorative circles can impact a school and its students.

### **Counter Arguments**

There have been some critiques of restorative practices, specifically concerning the investment needed to implement practices and how the practices fail to effect any real change. Morris (2002) researched the validity of such claims stating:

Most critics of restorative justice are skeptical about what it has achieved. Of course, most examples of restorative justice have not been in existence long enough to track the extent to which the kinds of transformation envisaged by advocates have occurred. The New Zealand youth justice system- implemented in 1989-is an exception. The implementation of restorative justice there has resulted in significant and real changes. (p. 598)

It is true that restorative practices take an investment of time and resources to see true change. Programs need to train personnel, as well as expect a gradual change because there is a shift in mindset that needs to occur.

Acorn (2004) referred to restorative justice as seductive due to its promise to make change, not understanding that there needs to be a specific mindset applied for a circle to be effective. Moss et al. (2019) approached this critique by stating that all parties involved in restorative practices need to have a growth mindset, believing all stakeholders involved can change and can make change. Restorative practices can create change in school, both culturally and individually for students, with an investment of time and resources.

### **Connection with Social Justice in Education**

Historical inequities that exist within systems, such as education, reinforced the necessity and urgency to bring healing into focus. Shifting from punitive to restorative justice, in all forms, helps address existing inequities. Livne-Tarandach et al. (2021) analyzed how healing needs to be cultivated within the workspace to advance social justice. Livne-Tarandach et al. defined healing as a restorative, transformative process,

which is designed to return an organism back to health from an unbalanced, damaged, or enervated condition, while also strengthening the culture of the organization.

The school to prison pipeline (SPP) or school prison nexus has shown the connection between juvenile detention, recidivism, and school discipline, highlighting the inequities that exist within our school system and our justice system, and the relationship the two structures have. With fears of school-based crimes growing since the 1990s and having legislation that encouraged zero-tolerance practices created, students, particularly students of color, have fueled a “culture of incarceration” (Wilson, 2014). Exclusion and suspension have become standard tools for schools to demand obedience and compliance. Incidents once handled by a trip to the principal's office are dealt with by police and the justice system, contributing to the climate of suspension and exclusion (Kupchik, 2012; Wilson, 2014). With the United States being the leading country in mass incarceration, zero tolerance and retributive justice are simply not working and failing students, specifically students of color. Restorative justice practices and utilization can be part of the solution to the SPP.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student perceptions of the development of school connectedness?
2. What are the role students have in maintaining school connectedness?

### **Definition of Terms**

*Restorative justice (RJ)*: The Restorative Justice Consortium (2006) defined the term as “works to resolve conflict and repair harm. It encourages those who have caused



harm to acknowledge the impact of what they have done and gives them an opportunity to make reparation. It offers those who have suffered harm the opportunity to have their harm or loss acknowledged and amends made”. According to McCold (2003), restorative justice processes “in their purest form, involve victims and their offenders in face-to-face meetings and these participants... Only three practices Dash mediation conferencing in circles – currently meet these requirements. Each of these emerge independently but have influenced each other”. Restorative practices are broken into three tiers, starting with community building circles, leading into conferences, and ending in victim-offender mediations.

*Restorative circles (RCs):* Follestad and Wroldsen (2019) defined restorative circles as “participating students sit in a circle and the teacher or adult – acting as the facilitator – sits in the circle with the participants. This way, all participants are facing one another and can see each other’s faces directly. Everyone gets equal attention and can learn to trust each other”. Using restorative circles in schools makes others feel safe; no student can hide or be the center of attention, and everyone is able to participate as equals and be respectful to one another. All voices are heard, and they all must listen to what the others are saying—without comments or interruptions. The goal is to have the students open and recognize that they have a lot in common with their classmates. The result is a safe atmosphere and good relationships, both between students and between students and teachers (Wroldsen, 2019). Restorative circles focus on community building and having students build relationships with each other and school connectedness.

*Restorative circles: Relationship building:* RCs focused on thinking about the elements of a relationship and how they bring positivity to their lives (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Restorative circles: Who am I really? Identity circle:* RCs focused on self-reflection and a deeper level-increase self-awareness (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Restorative circles: Listening and silence circle:* RCs focused on emotional literacy by becoming still and aware of the inner state of self (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Restorative circles: Picturing my future circle:* RCs focused on awareness of possibilities in the future, connecting through sharing of dreams and aspiration (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Restorative circles: Celebration circles:* RCs focused on focusing shared energy on happy occasions, positive accomplishments, and practice affirming peers (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Restorative circles: Community building:* RCs focused on shared stories to increase empathy-shatter stereotypes or assumptions (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*School connectedness:* According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2022), this term is defined as the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals—is an important protective factor (2018). School connectedness refers to the level of attachment that a student has with his/her/their school (Osterman, 2002). Research showed that the more that students care and feel connected to their school, the better students perform. The converse is also true, with many students citing that they dropped

out of school because “no adults cared for them” (Yazzie-Mintz, 2010). For the purposes of this study, this term was defined as how connected the students feel to their school, peers, and community, beyond the academic culture. It encompassed the “peer culture” and community relationships (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

*Empathy*: A response that stems from one’s apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional condition and involves feeling connected to what another person is feeling (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1999).

*Social–emotional literacy (SEL)*: “Refers to the process of learning to read ourselves and others, and then using this growing awareness to solve problems flexibly and through creative means. To have emotional literacy implies that the child has learned social–emotional skills and is fluent in the art of reading their own and others’ emotions through observation” (Elswick, 2018).

*Community*: “Group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (MacQueen et al., 2001).

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

This study focused on the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. Ninth grade students were the demographic of focus. The study was accomplished using a qualitative narrative study of students who experienced a monthly implementation of a restorative circle program. The themes examined in this literature review were the historical context of restorative circles, success stories of restorative circle programs, why student perception matters, and why school connectedness directly correlates to student success. Through the exploration of these themes, the researcher examined the implementation of restorative circles in schools and the methodology behind the creation of these programs. The researcher explored the critical theory (Freire, 2000), culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2012) and the whole child approach for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study focused on the critical theory (Freire, 2000), culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2003; Cavanagh et al., 2012) and the whole child approach to navigate the narrative research. These frameworks examined how the application of restorative practices, both in school and other organizations in education, challenged the punitive structures that exist systemically. Each framework addressed the needs of students and how they can be implemented to make them feel safe and connected to their school community.

### ***Critical Theory***

Freire (2000) looked at education critically, wanting to take it from being “an act of depositing ... [where] the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (p. 72). Freire saw the traditional education system at the time, where students were given information by a teacher to memorize, as educational oppression, thus failing to have students learn how to think for themselves. This was referred to as “banking” education where students:

Work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (p. 73)

Forcing people to have secondary roles regarding their own learning and self-development was considered dehumanizing. Students are considered objects meant to be taught how to exist in an oppressive system, rather than be participants for change. This state of fully realized “humanness” existed in dialectical opposition to the education system set up that Freire et al. (2014) considered atemporal and ahistorical (Blackburn, 2000). Freire et al. (2014) believed in having students challenge the status quo in the educational structures presented and think critically of their own education.

Restorative justice is based on the same foundations, having students guide their learning, both in the classroom and on a social/emotional level. Freire’s (2000) understanding of the educational structures and their limitations in Westernized education were the exact reasons why his critical theory was developed with indigenous influence.

This concept created the blueprint for a pedagogy grounded in the existential realities of the oppressed rather than false realities imposed from outside by oppressors (Célèste Kee & Carr-Chellman, 2019).

Restorative justice aims to give students a voice. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) noted that this theory is a tool to help:

Devise questions and strategies for exploring it... In this light critical theory allows for an interrogation and examination of RJ so that those involved in the field—practitioners and researchers—are more explicitly aware of how RJ has come to be, whose interests are served by the implementation of RJ, and where our frames of reference come from. (p. 303)

By focusing on restorative circles, students get to look at their school community and how they influence school culture.

### ***Culture of Care Theory***

Cavanagh et al. (2012), just as Freire et al. (2014), looked at indigenous cultures, the traditional education system, and humanity when creating a “culture of care.”

Cavanagh et al. created this theory after spending time in New Zealand to learn about the Māori culture, the use of restorative practices to create community change, and looking at connections between their national curriculum and the Te Kotahitanga. Cavanagh et al. created a research and professional development project, aiming to engage at-risk students in learning, thus retaining them in school. Cavanagh et al. found that the teachers within this sphere approached education through a restorative and collaborative manner, which remained consistent with what other researchers found when exploring this topic.

Bishop et al. (2007) conducted a similar study when looking at New Zealand and Māori students and found:

Teachers are helped to build trusting, non-dominating, and reciprocal relationships with their students, so that they can learn from their Māori students as well as better able to teach them. Teachers are encouraged to accept responsibility for the holistic care for the learning and well-being of their students and to commit to a common (school-wide) vision of what constitutes excellence in educational outcomes for Māori students. (p. 15)

It was through this research that Cavanagh et al. (2012) discovered that restorative practices offer a powerful means of moving our school systems from a punitive approach to a culturally responsive, restorative one. Cavanagh (2004) set a culture of care, which makes students drivers of their own learning. This culture has three elements:

1. Being in relationships by building healthy relationships.
2. Living in relationships by creating a sense of belonging or community.
3. Learning in relationships through routines, practices, and customs.

Restorative circles focus on creating and developing these relationships, allowing students to have a sense of community, as well as a sense of self and self-advocacy.

### ***The Whole Child Approach***

All aspects of the child are to be considered when making decisions, with the hope that each student reaches their own goals, which are created and set by them. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2007) took a stance on the need for this mindset in education, asking:

If decisions about education policy and practice started by asking what works for the child, how would resources - time, space, and human - be arrayed to ensure each child's success? If the student were truly at the center of the system, what could we achieve? (p. 4)

When looking at making an education approach focused on school connectedness, rather than an academic focus, looking at a holistic evaluation of students is necessary. For this study, a restorative circles curriculum was developed using the *Circle Forward-Building a Restorative School Community* by Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015). This text was influenced by the educational philosophy of Dewey (1956), which focused on schools looking at a student in all dimensions of human development. The whole child approach to education focused attention on the social, emotional, mental, physical, and cognitive development of students. At its center, this philosophy views the purpose of schooling as developing future citizens and providing the basis for each child to fulfill their potential (Slade & Griffith, 2013).

## **Review of the Literature**

### ***Historical Context***

Restorative justice can neither be defined singularly nor traced back to one single place. Restorative justice was a specific program, but part of the cultural framework of conflict resolution in many different cultures. Weitekamp and Kerner (2003), looking at the work of Zehr (1990), defined restorative practices in the first nations cultures as a thread woven into the fabric of their lives. Restorative justice looks at the way all community members are connected and how each member has a responsibility to take their role in society seriously. Pranis et al. (2003) explored this by looking at the mindset



behind indigenous community collaboration. Specifically, Pranis et al. (2003) found that when the community viewed each person as a part of the greater picture, being connected to all beings, there was an understanding about personal impact that developed. The connectedness that developed allowed them to care for each other, having a team-minded perspective.

The Māori practiced “family group conferences”, which influenced the creation of “diversionary conferences,” which is the name used in Australia to describe both juvenile and adult restorative and transformative justice programs (Sherman et al., 2015).

Indigenous people in Canada, specifically Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Yukon, used sentence circles to deliberate justice, only that there is also a judge added to the circle, in addition to a mediator (Stuart, 1997). Ubuntuism, with its origins in Zimbabwe, took a humanistic approach to justice, looking at how people fit and interact with society and how crime affects this unifying sense of community (Oko Elechi et al., 2010). There are cited examples of restorative justice in Hindu, Arab, Greek, Roman, Buddhist, and many other groups of people, showing that restorative practices are not new, by any means, and have helped societies for longer than its emergence in the western world in the 1970s.

The first case of restorative justice in North America is noted to have been when Mark Yantzi and his colleague, Dave Worth introduced two young men who had vandalized a neighborhood to meet their victims (Johnstone, 2007). Restorative justice was introduced to schools as a response to the school to prison pipeline (SPP) or school prison nexus and the connection between juvenile detention, recidivism, and school discipline. With fears of school-based crimes growing since the 1990s and having legislation that encouraged zero-tolerance practices formulated, students, particularly

students of color, have fueled a “culture of incarceration” (Wilson, 2014). Exclusion and suspension have become standard tools for schools to demand obedience and compliance. Incidents once handled by a trip to the principal's office are dealt with by police and the justice system, contributing to the climate of suspension and exclusion (Kupchik, 2012; Wilson, 2014). With the United States being the leading country in mass incarceration, it can be suggested that zero tolerance and retributive justice are simply not working and failing students, specifically students of color, showing a need for a different form of discipline and dealing with emotional trauma. In addition to being a form of differentiation for discipline models, restorative justice can be used to help students grow as individuals, help with emotional literacy, and to address systemic inequities that make students feel unheard (Zernova, 2007). Understanding that the implementation of restorative justice is not a new concept is crucial in conceptualizing its potential impact. These practices have a historical foundation of success; therefore, success was assessed in this study.

### ***Success Stories of Restorative Circles in Schools***

Restorative practices can be used for academic and personal reflection, with the students looking within themselves or with a healing circle group to address personal decisions and trauma (Wachtel et al., 2010). Through these restorative circles, which can also be called healing or talking circles, students can collaborate and develop social capital, which is a connection among individuals (Putnam, 1995; Wachtel, 2012), and the trust, empathy, mutual understanding, shared values, and behaviors that make behavioral change possible (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Wachtel, 2012).

Sparks (2006), as cited by Cozza (2010), suggested that “creating a culture means establishing practices that lead to trust, mutual respect, continuous positive improvement, team-focused collaboration, and interpersonal accountability for fulfilling commitments” (p. 8). When looking at the concept of school connectedness, which is connected to school culture, relationships, trust, and mutual respect are needed from all stakeholders involved. Wang and Lee (2018) explored relationship building, responsive circles, and restorative practices (RP) to reform school climates. The study explained the importance of the relationship between control and support. Improved relationships and community have shown to improve problem solving skills and increase attendance. In this study, restorative circles were shown to allow students, as well as adults involved, to respond to incidents. The study used four schools (two elementary, one middle, and one high school) who implemented IIRP’s SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program. This model aimed to decrease punitive consequences. The mixed methods multiple case study utilized consultants as well as coaches to help implement the program and restorative circles. 22 circles were conducted with 13 teachers involved, as well as students. Interviews were also conducted with staff. The circles focused mainly on detention/disruptive behavior, student-student conflict, student-adult conflict, and family issues. The study found that the prompts of the circles were highly correlated to the responsiveness of the circles. The more relevant and interactive the topic felt to the students, the more responsive the circle was. The study also found that the relationship between students and staff was crucial to the success of the circles as well. The comfortability level had a direct correlation with the response of the circle. Overall, 70% of staff and school professionals felt that the circles were a positive experience and

helped to address issues throughout the school. Through the implementation of these responsive circles and the development of relationships, as also referenced in the culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2007), students felt more connected to their school, improving school climate, and giving them a voice in their community. When students were given more roles in their school, as opposed to being passive in their school days, school connectedness improved.

Umbreit et al. (2006) completed a restorative circles study from the caseload of the South Saint Paul Police Department, which utilized a restorative circles method for offenders. 28 of the 35 cases used restorative circles, with the number of circles each case participating in ranging from 1 to 16. The study “was to provide a qualitative look at the nature of circle work and how participants believe circle participation has impacted them, the community, and the formal justice system” (Umbreit et al., 2006, p. 14). Through this study, peacemaking circles were found to be an effective way to involve community members in the process of holding offenders accountable for their actions. The circles focused on the offenders looking at and repairing the harm they caused, to assist crime victims, and to help create a greater sense of connectedness among all stakeholders. Victims had a pleasant experience through the circles and said they would recommend the process to others. With this study, the circles implemented helped offenders’ transition back into society, fostering community connectedness.

The importance of school connectedness goes beyond just developing social-emotional literacy skills. School connectedness has a tremendous effect on school discipline. Augustine et al. (2018) conducted a randomized controlled trial to look at how restorative justice practices and how their implementation affected school climate and

suspensions. The study examined IIRP's SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change program on 44 Pittsburg schools, evenly split between treatment (PERC school- Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities schools) and control groups. The study was implemented over two years, where data was gathered by looking at observations of training, surveys, and interviews of schoolteachers and staff, observations of the practices in action, and administrative data from the district and the county. The study found that the practices improved overall school climates, reduced the average suspension rate, suspension rates of African American students, and of those from low-income families. Additionally, there were less disparities in suspension rates between African American and White students.

Talking circles can help students establish healthy relationships with peers and school staff, while also helping students develop the emotional literacy skills to monitor behaviors that could be considered problematic in a school environment. Schumacher (2014) conducted a study that discovered the positive impact on student emotional literacy and relationship growth through the implementation of talking circles with girls from 14 to 18 years old. The researcher referenced relational cultural theory for the development of this project and why such work has such a great need in schools. Data were gathered looking at participant observations of the circle meetings, one-on-one interviews, and a few teachers and gatekeepers. The girls came from diverse countries and settings, including "South Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe; others included African Americans, Polish Americans, and Arab Americans" (Schumacher, 2014, p. 249). The researcher used qualitative data to gather if the study was effective, focusing on the joy of togetherness, feeling safe, expressing genuine

emotions, cultivating empathy, and emotional literacy skills, such as learning to listen, managing anger, developing interpersonal sensitivity, and self-efficacy. Through these interviews and observations, Schumacher (2014) found that all girls improved in all skills. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, as referenced by Usher:

Self-efficacy beliefs help determine the choices people make, the effort they put forth, the persistence and perseverance they display in the face of difficulties, and the degree of anxiety or serenity they experience as they engage the myriad tasks that comprise their life. Self-efficacy has received ample attention in educational research, where it has been shown to predict students' academic achievement. (p. 3)

Self-efficacy in students, which was developed in these circles as stated by Schumacher (2014), according to Zeinalipour (2022), can have a positive and significant relation on school connectedness.

Beaver and Swank (2020) explored a middle school's implementation of a restorative justice program, using the development of relationships, restorative justice activities, purposeful consequences, and setting expectations. The researchers looked at the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies, as set by the American Psychological Association (APA), Zero Tolerance Task Force, and Welch and Payne's study of students of color within a punitive system. The researchers partnered with Smithville Middle School (a pseudonym), which is in the southeast of the United States, serving 1,000 students in six through eighth grade and used interviews, observations, and review of documents of the stakeholders and the implementation of practices within the school. The

results showed five trends: different approach, RJ activities, sub theme respect agreement and letter writing, relationships, subtheme “we” mind-set and peer accountability, meaningful consequences, and expectations. After implementation of a multi-tiered restorative justice program, the researchers found that teachers and administrators had immediate buy-in and the importance of developing peer to peer, student to teacher, and student to administrative relationships, and how developing a “we” mindset is crucial. Meaningful consequences shared that all stakeholders found consequences with meaning made learning better and helped the student to grow. Expectations shared the importance of a classroom setting up and agreeing to hold themselves to the standard set by expectations. Developing a “we” mindset is a result of students feeling connected to their school community, for they are claiming the school and those stakeholders within it.

The use of a restorative practices program can have an influence on students, even outside of the school year. For example, Garnett (2020) hoped to implement their version of a multitiered model for RP teacher professional development (PD), initially developed by Mayworm et al. (2016) during summer school, which has a targeted group of students. The model used guided the sample school districts’ implementation of a restorative practice (RP) program in its summer institute, specifically looking at the program development, implementation, and professional development needs of the staff. The researchers strategically partnered with The Burlington School District (BSD) based on the racial make-up of the school and the data of the infraction rate within the racial makeup. Black and Brown children made up 14% of the student body and they constituted 37% students assigned suspensions. The study showed between 87% and 90% of staff reported that they were willing to disrupt the status quo and voice support for RP,

with the rest of the results reflecting a high support in the implementation of RP, and that a program could be tremendously useful for schools because the students showed emotional growth through their summer restorative practices.

Mehl-Madrona and Mainguy (2014) examined talking circles through the lens of primary care and potential impacts on education. The talking circles used in this study emphasized communication through a talking piece. The study consisted of 1,200 people. Of the 1,200 participants, the mean age was 40.5 years. 65.5% were women, 66% of which were married. 35.1% of the men who participated were married. 415 people attended 4 sessions and completed pre and post questionnaires. The questionnaires used were specifically Measure Your Medical Outcome Profile Version 2 Forms. The circles were advertised in 10 primary care practices that had long waiting periods prior to patients attending their appointments. The study took place over three years. Individuals chose 1 or 2 symptoms of concern, as well as one activity of daily living that was impacted by those symptoms. The study not only showed the improvement in overall quality of life, but also that talking circles can be extremely effective in education. The researchers specifically mentioned the impact of talking circles on communication, stating that “the talking circle prevents reactive communication and directly responsive communication, and it fosters deeper listening and reflection in conversation” (p. 4). This allows individuals to stay on topic, self-disclosure, and monitoring of emotional content. Emotional literacy is imperative, particularly in the high school setting, especially when students are aiming to connect with their classmates.



### ***Student Perceptions of Restorative Circles: Why Does it Matter?***

Restorative circles have the power to create a tremendous amount of change for students' social-emotional well-being, as well as them making behavioral changes that will help them when dealing with future conflicts. Edutopia (2018) examined, via digital interviews and observations, the restorative circles, and practices of Pearl-Cohn High School. Pearl-Cohn High School is a public magnet high school in Nashville, Tennessee. It is considered an entertainment magnet high school; it is the only one in the country. The school has grades 9 through 12 and is organized into academies. The school uses restorative circles and reflection, as opposed to in-school suspension to address behavioral and academic problems within the school. The principal, along with teacher and social-emotional specialists, hold a space called “The Zone,” in lieu of suspension, to allow students to have a restorative circle and to discuss their behaviors in a safe way. Rashida Fetuga, a social-emotional learning specialist for the school, spoke about the impact that she saw using the talking circles, stating:

Young people have to be given space to grow and to feel like, okay, I made a mistake from this morning experience, so I can continue to learn and become better. Usually, the infractions are cell phone use or disrespect, but it could also be that there was an argument in a classroom or more aggressive behaviors that also get sent to us. When students come in we go over circle guidelines, so there are agreements that we hold within the space.

Ortega et al. (2016) conducted a study on students and staff experiences and outcomes after taking part in a restorative circle program in a large, urban high school in the Southeast United States. After participating in the program, a male sophomore stated:

Me and this kid [were] about to fight, and I think I, uh, I got in his face. I was upset and, you know, everybody wanted to hype up the situation. It was not like that. I just wanted to get a little closer to see what he was saying. And so, uh, me and him ended up being cool after that [the Circle]. (Ortega et al., 2016, p. 458)

Circles can allow for students to be able to self-reflect on their choices, as well as be held truly accountable for their actions. Kolb (1984) described learning as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience and emphasizes reflection as an integral part of learning activities’ (p. 38). Reflection on behaviors and being an active partner in the discipline process, not only helps students change their own behaviors, but also understand others. Understanding can lead to relationship and community building.

DeFur and Korinek (2010) conducted a study focused on students in middle school and high schools across four secondary schools in southeastern state. Two were from rural communities and two from suburban communities. Eight focus groups were conducted with 5 to 12 students per group. 74 students participated, with 35 being girls and 39 boys. 64 students were Caucasian, and 10 were African American. The distribution was equal across grade levels. All students in the first group had an individual education program (IEP). The focus group was conducted in a classroom of a teacher conference room during the school day and led by the research team, which consisted of one man and one woman, who were both Caucasian. The sessions were not audio or videotaped. This helped to encourage open discourse. The sessions were then transcribed and coded with NVivo software looking for certain themes. The major themes noted were a sense of belonging, the climate of the community, availability of after

school activities, safety, and the importance of engaging teachers who are committed to student success. The study also emphasized the importance of listening to and assessing the needs of students, as well as class sizes. Overall, students served as an undeniably credible source for finding the keys to effective instruction. Additionally, the study further showed the importance of students having an active role in the choices they make and feeling a part of their school.

### ***School Connectedness: Why Does It Matter?***

School connectedness is a topic that, especially post the COVID-19 shut down of schools, has been a focus of many school districts and national organizations. There are numerous definitions for the term, which can be hard to quantify due to its qualitative nature.

The CDC (2009) defined school connectedness as “the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (p. 2). School connectedness, as defined by Preece (2009), focuses on the ties that students have with the school community, which also involves the trust in administration, their sense of safety and how invested they feel the school is in their success.

The University of North Carolina (n.d.) looked at the impact of protective factors on adolescent well-being among more than 36,000 7th–12th grade students. It found that school connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for all students to decrease school absenteeism, violence, substance abuse and many other at-risk behaviors.

Students feeling connected to their school community is necessary for student success, for it can help students gain social emotional literacy skills that can be applied to all aspects of life. Students who report higher feelings of school connectedness also

report higher academic achievement, engagement, peer acceptance, and emotional health (Anderman, 2002; Loheimer, 2011; Osterman, 2000). This study looked at school connectedness perception, as measured by the School Connectedness Scale, from a sample of two hundred and sixty high school students from a Northeastern suburban high school and six hundred and sixty-nine high school students from an urban school district. The suburban school district had slightly higher levels of overall school connectedness, although for both schools, the seven factors that contributed to the variance were the same. Negative connectedness, connection with adults in school, peer connections at school, school environment, emotional connectedness, value of school, and comfort in school all had an impact on school connectedness for both districts. Developing school connectedness within a school is imperative, and restorative circles potentially can help mitigate these factors.

A lack of school connectedness can lead to mental and physical health concerns in students. McCabe et al. (2021) explored how individual, social, and environmental influence students' perceived sense of school connectedness. Looking particularly at a world that is still dealing with, while also healing from the COVID-19 pandemic, cyberbullying and that many students experienced decreased access to in-person healthcare and mental health resources during the pandemic, exacerbating underlying mental health conditions (McCabe et al., 2021; Rothstein & Olympia, 2020). Restorative circles can assist with addressing these mental health concerns, for most schools are not equipped to work with the student body needs as students come back to school in person.

Looking specifically at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness, Day-Vines and Terriquez (2008) analyzed disciplinary behaviors in schools to decrease

the high suspension and expulsion rates of African American and Latino male students in an urban high school in California. A task force was developed to find interventions that would be more helpful to students rather than resorting to punitive measures. The Youth Together program brought together a diverse group of students during their lunchtime and after school. A survey was also conducted with both teachers and students to evaluate the policies and procedures that were currently in place. The group met once a month to brainstorm solutions. The school counselor also played a crucial role, working with students one-on-one to hear and address their concerns. The school discipline committee then developed new interventions such as creating and distributing a detailed handbook of the policies and procedures, and having rules and consequences posted in their classrooms. Lunchtime workshops were also hosted for students to voice concerns, and student-staff meetings were created to improve the overall school climate and increase effective classroom management. As a result of these changes, suspensions declined by over 75% and the Skyline One Land One People Youth Center was created, offering a variety of services to students such as mental health treatment and tutoring. Overall, by listening to the voices of the students and hearing their concerns, the staff and administration were able to be addressed in the best way possible to meet the needs of the students, while respecting teachers and creating an overall improved school environment and students feeling more connected to their school community.

Han (2021) looked at the connection between school connectedness and student well-being. Positive psychology (PP) has been analyzed to see the impact on student well-being. It focuses on encouragement and adding positives to situations, without negating negatives. Overall, PP increases many aspects of education such as participation

and graduation rates. School connectedness has been shown to be a key protective factor, making students have higher levels of scholastic achievement, as well as social and emotional growth. This study also looked at how grit is related to school achievement as well. Although grit can sometimes be looked at negatively, grit can be a sign of success. It marks a persistence of interest as well as an increased likelihood to continue activities long term. Overall, school connectedness has shown to lead to greater overall success of students not just academically, but mentally, physically, and socially as well.

School connectedness, self-esteem, and adolescent life satisfaction were analyzed by Watson and Haktanir (2019). Data were collected from 652 students in grades 5 through 12. The school districts were in rural southern school districts. Watson and Haktanir (2019) examined how school connectedness impacts overall student satisfaction. In this study, “Life satisfaction is defined as individuals’ subjective assessments of the quality of their lives” (Watson & Haktanir, 2019, p. 33). The study defined self-esteem as “individuals’ judgements about their value or worth” (Watson & Haktanir, 2019, p. 33). 2,586 students in two middle schools and two high schools were originally recruited, and the study ended with 673 students participating in the study. 21 students were removed due to missing values with a final sample of 652 students. Three surveys were taken by the students, and it measured the following values: Student Life Satisfaction Scale and School Connectedness Scale. After the use of a multiple linear regression, overall, the study showed that school connectedness significantly impacted as well as predicted life satisfaction. Self-esteem as well as school connectedness accounted for 40% of the variance in satisfaction scores. These have also been found to serve as protective factors for mental health issues. In addition, this study suggested the importance of the role of

having professional school counselors to help with school connectedness as well as having school activities for students to participate in. Students continue to provide firsthand accounts and data to support the importance of school connectedness to not only succeed in school, but also in overall quality of life.

Graham et al. (2022) looked at the associations between school liking and disliking, as well as school connectedness, and discipline from a learner perspective. 1,002 students, from three schools, in grades 7 through 10, were surveyed about factors that they liked and disliked connected to school. Students were asked about what they liked most in school, specifically looking at breaktime, friends, learning, homework, music/art/drama, sport, and teachers. Additionally, they were asked to look at the least liked aspect of school, specifically looking at schoolwork, teachers, uniform, peers, homework, and discipline policy. 66.5% of students liked school, specifically their friendships, and disliked aspects were homework, teachers, discipline, and schoolwork. Although this was the predicted response, the researchers found that most students reported that there is a high point in Grade 7 through Grades 8 to 10, with the lowest point in Grade 9, where suspension rates are also high. In terms of school connectedness, the study found that school dislikers provided significantly lower ratings than those that were favored schools. All students provided the highest ratings for school belonging, then commitment, and finally the belief/power subscale (Graham et al., 2022). Because of this, it is suggested by the researchers that school connectedness interventions should not only be implemented and utilized, but also be focused on the transition from middle to high school.

## **Conclusion**

Restorative circles create safe space for learners to reflect on their actions and relationships. Many school districts are implementing restorative programs as a way to help build community and address systemic bias in schools. Although this concept has only recently been explored in American schooling, prior to the westernization of the concept in the 1970s, it was successfully used by indigenous people to help resolve conflict. Implementing restorative circles can help increase school connectedness due to their self-exploratory, as well as empathetic, nature. Han (2021) stated that school connectedness has been a factor for youths' motivated conduct, self-concept, scholarly achievement, improved social and emotional growth, and well-being (Cook et al., 2012; Han, 2021). Conversely, absence of school connectedness may result in low scholarly performance, high-risk practices, and poor mental health practices (Cook et al., 2012; Han, 2021). Restorative circles can help foster school connectedness and the building of a school community.



## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Introduction

This chapter provided information about the methods and procedures for data collection and analysis within this study. This study was a narrative study, where the purpose was to look at the interwoven stories of the participants and the insights they gain from being participants in a restorative circle program (Creswell et al., 2007). Through this study, students' perceptions of restorative circles were analyzed, to look at how this intervention affected their connection to the school. The researcher chose a narrative study because restorative circles are focused on communication, growth, and reflection. The effects of RCs cannot truly be quantified and are mostly understood through the participant's storytelling. When looking at school connectedness, the participants' stories were at the center of the research. The qualitative data was collected through student interviews gathered after the first year of restorative circles participant, excerpts from the researcher's logbook and the codebook. Data was analyzed in this study through a triangulation of a logbook, interviews, and codebook. Each of these forms of data collected were used together to draw conclusions regarding students' views on restorative circles and the school environment.

Restorative circles' purpose is to challenge exclusionary language and culture—how people communicate and relate to one another, as well as how they fit into the world around them (Parker & Bickmore, 2020). Restorative circles, when executed properly, allow a safe space for stakeholders to look at their role and impact on themselves and others. Due to the personal nature of this exploration, particularly when looking at students and how they feel connected to their school, a narrative study allowed the

researcher to look at each participant and their individual story. Narrative studies look at each participant as “the culturally constituted individual,” meaning that this research allowed the participant to be seen understanding the intangible ways society shapes the human experience (Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2004). De Medeiros (2014) shared that narrative studies allow for the speaker to feel as though they have purpose when they are sharing their thoughts and revelations. Narrative interviews allowed the researcher to not only look at what is said, but also how and why it was (de Medeiros, 2014). For the purposes of this research, the story and the participant were the focus. Garro and Mattingly (2000) emphasized the importance of looking at the story, particularly when looking at participants' lived experiences, which are shaped by the world around them:

A story is not neutral. Nor is it a hidden text which the anthropologist somehow unearths like buried treasure. Narratives never simply mirror lived experience or an ideational cosmos, nor is a story a clear window through which the world, or some chunk of it, may be seen. Telling a story, enacting one, or listening to one is a constructive process, grounded in a specific cultural setting, interaction, and history. Text, context, and meaning are intertwined. (p. 22)

To understand the impact of restorative circles, the interactions of others, as well as self, with the added context of life experience needs to be explored.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### ***Research Questions***

The following research questions guided this study.

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student perceptions of the development of school connectedness?

2. What are the role students have in maintaining school connectedness?

**Setting**

This study included a deliberately selected setting to conduct a narrative study of a newly implemented restorative circle program with ninth grade students. A purposeful sample is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Both the program and the researcher specifically targeted ninth grade students because ninth grade is a transitional year and considered a “make or break year” for completing high school, for the first time, which means students have to earn passing grades in core courses (Fulk, 2003).

Windwood High School is in a suburban town in New York. As shown in Table 1. Windwood High School in 2019-2020 has 1,540 students, with 796 females and 791 males. Non-binary or gender fluid students are not reported (New York State Education Department, n.d.). The school is demographically diverse (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Total Enrollment Data Windwood High School 2020-2021*

Ethnicity	Number of Students	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0%
Black or African American	733	47%
Hispanic or Latino	467	30%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	79	5%

White	235	15%
Multiracial	52	3%
Total	1,568	100%
English Language Learners	74	5%
Students with Disabilities	218	14%
Economically Disadvantaged	581	37%
Homeless	15	1%

**Educator Training.** Staff members participated in a four-day training with the knowledge, skills, and resources to facilitate and lead the implementation of a culture of care based on restorative justice principles and practices. This occurred over two months, taking place at the school faculty meetings. Teachers were trained to be able to teach others about what they have learned so that a professional learning community would be created focused on implementing restorative justice principles and practices in classrooms to create a culture of care in schools. Teachers successfully completed 16 modules constituting the training (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Facilitator Training (Taken from RD Ed Training)*

Module #	Module Theme	Summary of Module
1	Relationships	Importance of relationships in Restorative Justice and Culture of Care.
2	Basic principles	Doing school “with” students’ attitude - teachers positioning and theorizing; involving all staff
3	Collegial relationships	Restorative tools are used to build and maintain a healthy community
4	Teacher-student relationships	Restorative tools are used to build a healthy classroom community.
5	Restorative conversations	Simple, non-adversarial, problem-solving conversations.
6	Community Circles	A tool to help teachers/ students build connectedness and cooperation.

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7	Restorative circles	A tool to help teachers/students respond to wrongdoing and conflict as a group.
8	Brief restorative conversations for administrators, deans, and counselors	Brief restorative interventions: Referral Based problem solving tools for administrators, deans, and counselors.
9	Classroom conference circles	Structured problem-solving circles for large groups.
10	Pre-conference	Prepare students, staff, and parents so everyone knows the story of what happened before the conference, and they know the conference format.
11	Conference	Formal conferences to address specific incidents of serious harm; facilitated by trained people.
12	Agreement	Specific plans to put right the harm that's been done,

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		including personalized ways for students to learn new skills/attitudes to avoid future trouble; allows for easy monitoring and follow up.
13	Stages of Implementation	(1) Needs Assessment (2) Capacity Building (3) Sustainability.
14	Blending Together Current Practices with Restorative Justice	A plan for how to blend multi-tiered approaches like RtI, PBIS, and MTSS with Restorative Justice.
15	Culturally sustainable restorative practices	Building and maintaining relationships and exercising holistic care to create a Culture of Care.
16	Action plan	Using the process of Appreciative Inquiry, what steps could we take to move from where we are to where we could ideally be in creating a Culture of Care

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based on Restorative  
practices.

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*Note.* This table showed the modules that teachers needed to complete in order to be a facilitator-trainer for the program. Any staff member who participated in the training of staff, curriculum or script creation would need to complete this training.

**Program Creation and Implementation.** This study examined a restorative circle program, developed by stakeholders using work from the Restorative Justice Education Program and *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative Community* by Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015). Staff members were trained in the program the previous year and were taught how to turn-key the training to another facilitator. These facilitator-trainers then created a schedule, routine, and script for each month that a circle would be implemented. These facilitators then trained 24 other facilitators, including guidance counselors, teachers, and social workers, on the implementation of this program. Facilitators then conducted their circles during the student's scheduled time in their physical education class. Students were organized into circle groups alphabetically, based on the last name. Each circle was scripted with the purpose, materials, flow, closing described for each facilitator, allowing for each circle to be streamlined and have a thematic focus. The circle calendar is illustrated in table 3 below (please refer to key terms for the definition of each focus).



**Table 3**

*Circle Calendar*

Month	Circle
1	Restorative Circles: Relationship Building
2	Restorative Circles: Who am I Really? Identity Circle
3	Restorative Circles: Listening and Silence Circle
4	Restorative Circles: Picturing my Future Circle
5	Restorative Circles: Celebration Circles
6	Restorative Circles: Community Building
7	Reflection Circle
8	Reflection Circle

The guidelines and rules for each circle were also consistent for each group. The rules were the following:

- Respect the talking piece
- Speak from the heart
- Listen from the heart
- Personal information shared in the Circle is confidential except where safety is at risk.
- Remain in the circle

The flow for each circle contained an opening, a re-introduction of guidelines, a mindfulness moment, a check-in, an opening, three rounds of exploration, a check out round and a closing.

## *Participants*

The participants for this study included nine ninth grade students from a suburban New York public high school who were currently taking part in year one of the school's Restorative Circle Program (RCP). The sample was made up of seven females and two males (see Table 4). Teachers and administrators created this curriculum based on the training provided by Restorative Justice Education. This study used purposeful sampling to select the students who participated in the narrative study. Purposeful sampling gives the researcher a choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling allows the highest amount of variation and best captures the diversity of a sample (Creswell et al., 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The sampling techniques were used to gain maximal variation to develop many perspectives about the restorative justice program, its implementation, and its effect on school connectedness. Criterion based sampling was utilized, based on the following criteria:

1. The student was willing and able to participate in the study.
2. The parent/guardian allowed the student to participate in the study.
3. Each participant was from a different facilitator group. Due to the nature of each restorative circle group, the researcher wanted to measure the program's impact, not a specific facilitator's impact, so there was need to select students from various facilitator groups.

**Table 4**

*Participant Demographics*

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race
Dorinda	Female	15	Black/African American
Brandi	Female	14	Black/African American
Teresa	Female	15	Black/African American
Frank	Male	15	Black/African American
Joe	Male	14	Black/African American
Shakayla	Female	14	Black/African American
Vicki	Female	15	Black/African American
Phaedra	Female	14	Black/African American
Jill	Female	14	Latinx

*Note.* The sample size was 9

***Data Collection Methods***

This study was conducted over a finite period, over the 2021-22 academic year. This study relied on interviews, both narrative and semi-structured. Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016) defined narrative interviews as a way to have the researcher better understand people's experiences and behaviors and that they may come closer to representing the context and integrity of people's lives than more quantitative means of research. These narrative interviews provided an opportunity for the participant to narrate his, her, or their experiences for the researcher, in a way that gave a fully detailed story for the researcher. This represents a shift in the way roles are typically conceptualized when using the interview process: from interviewer–interviewee into narrator–listener

(Allen, 2017). This study took place in three parts, the first and third being in the narrative form, with the first section utilizing a biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) and the third utilizing Labov's narrative model.

The interview was done virtually with audio being recorded; it lasted approximately 45 minutes. Twelve ninth grade student interviews were conducted at the end of the second semester of the restorative circles program implementation. The interview had three parts (sub-sessions) (See Table 5). The first sub-session had the listener pose a single, introductory narrative question. The structure of the interview started by utilizing the biographic narrative interpretive method. As suggested by Kvale (1996), with the BNIM, interviews started with a single question and asked participants to look at their life prior to high school. The second sub-session was the narrative follow-up, where the researcher asked the narrator follow up questions, based on their first response (Fehér, 2011). This was semi-structured, which allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions specifically focusing on school connectedness (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the third sub-session, participants explored their memory of a specific restorative circle, utilizing Labov's narrative model, where there was an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov, 2006). This was used to ensure that the researcher had both context from the participants' backstory, as well as the full story of what occurred during a restorative circle.

**Table 5**

*Interview Questions*

Sections	Questions
Part 1: Biographic Narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Please state your name and age.</li></ul>
Section of Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Please describe your life prior to coming to high school and your relationship you have had with school. Please be specific in your response. Feel free to start as early as you can remember and share stories about your time at school.  (Because this is biographical, the following follow up questions will only be offered if the participant is struggling to answer the first question: Where did you grow up? What are your values? What relationship did you have with your school? What relationship did you have with your peers?)</li></ul>
Part 2: Semi-Structured Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What was your knowledge of restorative circles prior to participating in this program? Have you ever participated in a restorative program before?</li><li>• How would you define restorative circles now that you have participated in the RCP?</li></ul>

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- What changed, if anything, about restorative circles from your initial perception?
  - How do you feel about your peers at Windwood High School?
  - How do you develop relationships with your peers at school?
  - How has the RCP affected the way you form relationships?
  - How do you feel about your school?
  - Can you tell me a story about a time you liked school?
  - Can you share with me a story about a time you did not feel connected to school?
  - What makes you feel connected to someone, something or somewhere?
  - Have you made any connections with fellow students in your RCP group? If yes, explain these connections and how they were formed.
  - How connected do you feel to Windwood High School?
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Part 3: Describe a Circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did the RCP affect the way you feel about your school? If so, explain why. If not, explain why you think it did not help?</li> <li>• What feedback do you have for the RCP program?</li> <li>• Describe one restorative circle you remember?</li> <li>• Who, what and where did this take place?</li> <li>• What happened in the circle?</li> <li>• What happened after?</li> <li>• What was the purpose of this circle?</li> <li>• How did this help you feel connected to your school, if at all?</li> </ul>
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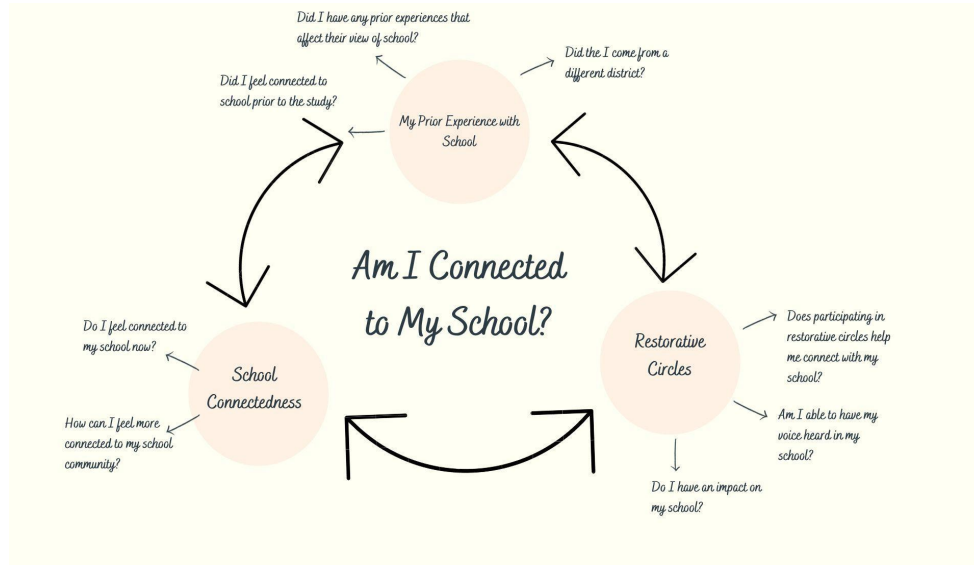
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*Note.* This table showed the questions that were asked to student participants during their interview. It followed the methodology as listed in the section above.

Figure 3 illustrated how the three main themes related to if/how a student felt connected to their school. Each sub circle listed questions that could be asked to evaluate if students felt connected, as well as how restorative circles impacted these feelings, and how their prior experiences affected current school connectedness.

**Figure 3**

*Connection Between Concepts*



***Trustworthiness of Design***

Trustworthiness in qualitative research incorporates criteria, such as those identified by Lincoln and Guba (1986), to judge the quality of the research and if it can be trusted. The criteria that were used in this study to ensure trustworthiness included credibility and dependability. Credibility is established through thematic analysis, which is the researcher identifying patterns and trends that exist within the research to provide a detailed and complex account of data (Braun, 2006). This allowed the researcher to take the reflexivity out of the data collection process. Dependability, which assesses if a study is able to be duplicated, and conformability, which ensures that the findings of a study are based on participant responses, was established through the use of a research audit, which had an objective figure review and analyzed data for bias. Credibility of data trustworthiness was done via member checking in a group setting. According to Doyle (2007), member checking can be an individual process or can take place with multiple



participants in a group setting. Students had the opportunity to review their transcripts at a session at the end of data collection. Transferability was shown by persistent observation, comprehensive field notes and audio recording, and verbatim transcription during the interview process and email process of this study. Validity was maintained by coding all data in deduce and transcribing was also kept consistent with only one company doing so.

Reliability was maintained by conducting a series of trainings for the restorative circle facilitators. The training focused on norming the culture of the circles and establishing how to conduct the scripted curriculum used for the program.

### ***Research Ethics***

After receiving approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), letters of consent were sent to the parent(s)/guardian(s) for the participants, along with copies of this research proposal, to the superintendent of schools in the Windwood School District. Once consent was received from both superintendent of schools, the students and parent(s)/guardian(s) were informed of the study and their option to participate. Letters of consent were distributed to willing student participants and their parent(s)/guardians(s) and signed in order to allow participation in the individual interviews. Student participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) were informed that they may review the audio recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed, including their participation in the focus groups and/or individual interviews. The researcher also reviewed the informed consent form before the interview.

Each student participant and their parent(s)/guardian(s) received an emailed consent form detailing the nature of the study. It included the purpose and potential

advantages to the study, such as helping build school communities and understanding the effects of the restorative circle program. Additionally, the invitation included a statement explaining that all collected data would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. The invitation stated that participation in the study was voluntary, and that the participant's name and participation information would be kept confidential. The email invitation was sent two weeks in advance of the interviews to each student. Member checking allowed participants to look at the transcripts or results before publication to ensure that there was no miscommunication in the transcription process (Shenton, 2004).

Although the researcher had been tangentially involved in the restorative circle program, she has not had any direct interaction or involvement with the participants in this study.

### ***Data Analysis Approach***

The researcher used coding to analyze data in this study, which allowed the researcher to fully analyze and interpret the interview data. The coding process allowed the researcher to, according to Korsgaard (2019) :

Pick out relevant parts to show the reader. Even though interpretation will always be part of the researcher's task, too much telling and too little showing lowers the quality of the work. Showing the data to the reader forces [the researcher] to develop a chain of evidence depicting [the researchers] arguments and showing how [the researcher] have reached conclusions. (p. 29).

All qualitative data collected through the narrative individual interviews were coded following the design presented by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011). First, the researcher transcribed the audio-recordings from the interviews. Second, the researcher analyzed the

data to look for themes, trends, and connections between restorative circles and school connectedness. Table 6 offers a list and description of the codes and their definitions that were used for this study.

Each interview was coded to identify meaning and trends among participant responses, as well as data inventory. According to Kim (2016), the researcher must first attempt to find a word or phrase that can be an attribute for a portion of the researcher’s data, then find relationships between these codes to make a category. Then, this “identifies emerging patterns within the data” (Kim, 2016, p. 4). The researcher manually combed through the data three times, looking for these trends for narrative analysis. Deductive coding was used, and pre-set codes were set from the codebook.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns within coded data. A codebook was used by the researcher to serve two main purposes: to provide a guide for coding responses and to serve as documentation of the layout and code definitions of a data file (Lavrakas, 2008). The researcher reviewed the coded themes and trends and reflected on how they connect to the research questions presented, allowing the researcher to establish the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness (See Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Researcher's Codebook*

Code	Code Definition	Examples of Code
Negative Feeling Towards School or Lack of School Connectedness	When a student does not feel as though he/she/they has a place in the school community. This can be in	failing school, not liking a teacher or a class, not caring about how he/she/they does

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	both an academic and/or social setting.	in school, feeling as though they do not have friends, not wanting to come to school.
Positive Feeling Towards School or School Connectedness	When a student feels like he/she/they have a stake in the community of the school. When a student feels like they are a part of the school community.	Engaged in classes, being involved, liking school, having supportive teachers, enjoying academic classes, feeling happy while in school
Connection to Restorative Circle Facilitator	When a student feels like he/she/they are able to connect with the staff member conducting the circles. They feel as though they are able to speak to the facilitator with ease.	Supportive facilitator, liking the facilitator, feeling as though I can talk to my teacher/facilitator, understanding where the facilitator is coming from.
Lack of Engagement in Restorative Circles	When a student does not enjoy or partake in their restorative circle group.	Boring/being bored, staying quiet, not wanting to talk/speak,

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		not liking the restorative circle teacher.
Engagement in the Restorative Circle	When a student actively participates in their restorative circle group.	Enjoying the restorative circle, connecting with peers, making friends, opening up, learning more about myself, learning more about others, understanding the purpose of the circle, thinking about my future.
Connection to Peers	When a student feel engaged with his/her/their peers in the school community.	Class conversations or socratic seminar, making friends, believing in my friendships, supportive peers
Collaboration	When a student works with or is part of a team with another student(s).	Working together as a team, creating work or a project together

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Change in Mindset	When students are exploring different approaches and methodologies to actions, behaviors, and relationships.	Change can happen (within the school and myself), grow as a person, become a better person, work on myself
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*Note.* This table showed the code book that was utilized by the researcher to thematically analyze the data collected from the study. Codes were created based on themes from prior studies analyzed in the review of literature in Chapter 2.

**Table 7**

*Sample Research Logbook*

Research Diary:	
Participant Name (Pseudonym):	
Date of Interview:	
Weather Outside:	
Time:	
Place of Interview:	
Main Themes:	Response
Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School	
Surprises About Responses	

What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	
What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)	

*Note.* This table showed a sample logbook that was completed immediately after the student interview.

***Researcher's Role***

The role of the researcher in this study was to serve in the capacity as an observer to the restorative circle's program at Windwood High School, which was planned in both training and implementation without input from the researcher. The researcher has observed one planning meeting and one teacher training of this program.

The researcher had spent a decade studying the use of restorative practices in schools, specifically their impact on students of color. The researcher started her career in the South Bronx, where restorative practices were used as a way to differentiate disciplinary practices for students. Additionally, she attended numerous conferences on implicit bias, systemic racism, and culturally responsive education. The researcher was restorative circles trained, as well as an abolitionist teacher. In her previous school, she was a restorative circles facilitator and coordinator, as well as the school culture committee leader, which was focused on increasing school connectedness for all students within the community. The researcher devoted her pedagogical practice to addressing

inequities within education, as well as working on finding ways to have students feel connected to their school.

In order to address personal biases that the researcher may have had about restorative circles and the importance of school connectedness, she kept a reflective research logbook (Gibbs, 2012). The researcher used the format and questions shown in Table 5 to look at the commentary from each narrative interview, as well as gather commentary about the participant's feelings and reactions to the restorative circle program. Additionally, thematic analysis was used to further address implicit bias.

Although the researcher participated in the planning and training of restorative circle programs in the past, she was not a part of the creation of the restorative program in Windwood School District. She was not trained by the Restorative Justice Education and did not create the curriculum for this program. Due to this separation from the planning and creation of this program, the researcher aimed to be objective when looking at the impact of this new format on school connectedness.

The researcher also needed to acknowledge that she is an administrator at the school being studied. The researcher did not participate in the planning, creation, or oversee the program from any administrative lens in order to ensure that there would be no conflict of interest. Additionally, she did not comment or address any of the observances made when observing any circles or interject in any restorative circle being implemented.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness at the high school level. The sample for this



study consisted of ninth grade students, seven females and two males, whose ages ranged from 14 to 15, and all of whom were children of color and from a suburban New York public school district. Through 45-minute narrative interviews, the participants were able to share their experience with the program and the influence it had on their school relationships. Data were analyzed in this study through a triangulation of a logbook, interviews, and codebook. Each of these forms of data collected were used together to draw conclusions regarding students' views on restorative circles and the school environment.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. With school connectedness being the focus of school districts, particularly after the COVID-19 school building closures, restorative circles can potentially be a great resource for school building stakeholders.

This study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student perceptions of the development of school connectedness?
2. What are the role students have in maintaining school connectedness?

The researcher collected data via semi-structured interviews with nine participants. The researcher completed deductive coding where with the assistance of Dedoose, she reviewed each transcript to identify statements that matched the codes/keywords of the study within the code books. A logbook was also utilized to identify biases throughout the study and track students' emotions through the narrator's perspective (see Appendix D). The researcher then looked at these coded keywords and used inductive reasoning in order to look at themes that arose from the narratives of the participants. This chapter reported the study's results and findings by highlighting the thoughts and perceptions of the participants in relation to school connectedness, as well as the information gathered by the researcher during the interviews and the themes deduced via coding.

## Findings

The next section provided a report of the themes that were discovered in relation to each research question that guided this study (see Table 8). This included information gathered from the codebook, logbook, and interviews done by the researcher.

**Table 8**

*Codes in Relation to Research Questions (RQs)*

RQ	Theme	Keyword	Frequency	# of Participants
1	#1	Change in Mindset	12	5
1, 2	#1	Engagement in Restorative Circle	20	7
1, 2	#1	Connection to Peers	19	8
1	#2	Positive Feelings	12	7
1	#3	Connection to Restorative Circle Facilitator	3	3
1, 2	#3	Lack of Engagement	3	3
1	#3	Negative Feelings	12	9
1, 2	#4	Collaboration	4	4

*Note.* The sample size was 9.

## **Research Question #1**

The first research question looked at the impact of the restorative circle program at Windwood High School, focusing on how the program impacted the way students feel connected to their school. Through this question exploration, two themes emerged:

- Restorative circles allowed for students to understand the commonalities that exist between themselves and their peers.
- Restorative circles had students reflect on goals they have for their postsecondary future.

### ***Theme #1: Students Found Common Ground with Their Peers When Participating in Restorative Circles***

The first theme that emerged from this study was that restorative circles gave students the space to see commonalities with their peers, beyond the connections that were made in an academic classroom setting. The students appreciated being able to collaborate on their shared experiences, which allowed them to reflect on their engagement in school, school activities, and their passions. Restorative circles allowed students to share their thoughts and ideas, and have other students listen. One student, Jill, stated:

It [Restorative Circles] gives you an opportunity to share your perspective on life. And it gives you an idea of things that will be upcoming. And it also gives you a sense of priority. So, you can understand that life comes and goes and that there is a lot of stuff and a lot of things that you can do throughout it to help benefit it. Let's see, my change. I spoke a lot during these circles, so explaining my thoughts and revealing other things helped me to understand that we all share a common

idea and hearing other people's thoughts and ideas help me as a person grow and develop and also help them grow and develop. So, it creates just a sense of unity and balance within the circle because you can talk about almost anything that you have. You share your thoughts and ideas, and it's a safe space. So, you get to talk with your peers. It helps you.

By giving students a guide, the space, and time to focus solely on making emotional connections with their peers, they were able to see how there are many common struggles and excitements that connect them together as a school community.

Another student, Joe, felt a similar way as Jill. He stated:

It helped me see where everyone's head space was at, basically seeing how they thought about certain things and what were their goals in life? Basically, how they looked at life as a whole and seeing where they were mentally. That's how it made me understand my peers more.

The researcher found, as represented in the codebook, that eight of the nine participants felt a connection to their peers when participating in the circle, with a frequency of 19 statements made concerning this code. This was further corroborated through the researchers' reflections in her logbook. She found that students truly wanted to find connections to their peers, as that is what the students felt made their high school experience. Eight of the nine participants shared with the researcher that they liked school when they felt connected to the people they engaged with daily. Two of the participants came from an urban district and one came from a private school, where they had negative feelings towards their school and peers because of the culture of the buildings, causing

them to not enjoy school. Six of the 12 statements made about negative feelings were concerning school experiences prior to Windwood High School.

Another student, Brandi, stated that she was able to make friends because of this communication. She spoke about a new friend that she made in restorative circles and said:

I met her this year and I never really talked to her. Then we just started sitting next to each other and as we started talking, we got closer and then we eventually became friends, and she was a really cool person that I was able to talk to with no problem.

While this time allowed students to develop new relationships, it also allowed them to develop deeper connections with peers they already had a prior relationship with as well. One student, Phaedra, spoke to the researcher about this and said, “I already had prior connections, so it was a little bit stronger because we spent time together during the restorative circles.” Phaedra expressed her enjoyment in learning about her friend on a deeper level, which helped her feel invested and engaged in the restorative circles.

According to the sample’s accounts, the restorative circles allowed the time for students to build relationships within the student community at Windwood High School, although the depth of these relationships varied based on the student and those in their restorative circle group. Although there were two students who said they struggled with making connections within their group, both students acknowledged they appreciated the purpose of the program, with one student, Vicki, stating it was for “everyone to come together and help each other.” Another student, Frank, spoke about how he did not feel like the circle shaped relationships for him, but it made him feel like he found common

ground with his peers, who he did not know he had. He said, “I don't think it affected the way that I form relationships all that much. Although it made me think that it's a little bit easier, because you'd be surprised how many things you have in common with some people.” Looking at her logbook, the researcher found that all but one participant had stated that they wanted more opportunities to participate in the circles, as having one session a month was not enough time to fully connect with their circle members. Students expressed that if they had more time, they would be able to form more trusting connections and be more open to what the restorative circles had to offer.

***Theme #2: The Restorative Circle Program Created an Opportunity for Students to Collaborate on Goal Setting for Their Future***

The second theme that arose from the narrative study was that restorative circles started the conversations for students to think about their life after high school, and what they needed to do during their tenure at Windwood in order to achieve those goals. One learner, Brandi, spoke about how the restorative circle program catalyzed goal setting for her. She stated:

This one time we were talking about goals and how it's important to set goals and I feel like it really inspired me hearing everyone else's goals and how they wanted to achieve it. Even though they knew [that] maybe they weren't the best academically, they knew eventually, "I'm going to work harder to get where I want to be.

Brandi later spoke about how she liked collaborating with her peers on her post-secondary goals, as well as the circle facilitator. She stated:

You're learning about it and being able to include others in that plan. School, you could make goals for school, whether it's grades and stuff like that and also talking to the person who led the circle about it, it made it better, my connection.

Brandi developed a more collaborative mindset through this work, with the circles helping her realize that she can not only utilize her peers for social endeavors, but also for academic exploration.

Another student, Joe, spoke about his prior experience being in an urban school and switching to Windwood High School. He spoke about how the student body at his prior school was more focused on sports rather than planning goals for after high school. He spoke about how circles helped him want to plan to go to college. He stated:

Previously back in [my old school], it was a lot of it was from sports, but also of course from sports and people that's good at sports and helped me want to be better and improve, inspire me to be better and improve in my sports...If I seen some kids that's very focused and doing good in school and having high goals that they want to reach, say going to a good college to play sports and stuff like that. That's basically who I look to surround myself with, because I feel like they also help me get better. So that's how I found my friends, basically their goals and their aspirations.

Joe had a shift in mindset, particularly from the mindset that was encouraged at his previous school. He went from believing that sports were the only forum for building relationships and connections to seeing that the academic piece of school could be equally as engaging.



The restorative circle's program opened the door for students to explore what life looks like after high school and the goals that need to be set in order to accomplish these goals. The researcher's logbook showed that four of the nine participants referenced that they enjoyed speaking about what their life would be like after high school. They expressed a need for additional time to do so when providing suggestions on how to improve the restorative circle program. The circle time dedicated to this reflection was beneficial for the participants' personal growth. As referenced in the codebook, four of the participants spoke about collaboration and how they enjoyed listening to their classmates' thoughts on post-secondary plan.

### **Research Question #2**

#### ***Theme #3: Students Enjoyed Restorative Circles When They Believed Their Restorative Circle Coordinator Was Invested in Their Success and Well Being***

The second research question examined the role of students in maintaining school connectedness. The third theme that arose from the study was that students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator helped them feel more connected to their school. Jill stated that her facilitator made time in and out of the session to connect with her on a personal level. She shared that her facilitator would, "Ask me about how I'm doing in school, what I want to do. It just strikes up a conversation, about what I want to do, what I want to see in my future. And it just bounces back and forth." This connection to her facilitator helped her feel more comfortable to share out in her restorative group. She was able to be fully engaged in the circle process because she felt safe in the circle.

Brandi shared that she felt more comfortable with her restorative circle facilitator than with some of her other teachers, and how that made a difference for her experience as a participant. She explained:

I feel like in some of my classes I lacked a connection with my teacher. Even though it's strictly about academic stuff, sometimes you need someone to talk to. I didn't really like talking to any of my teachers about my life because I felt like it was really personal, but for my circle leader, I felt like I was able to talk to her. She was really nice, and she made it more engaging. She talked about her life too, which made it fun.

One student, Shakayala, who shared that she is very quiet and usually does not like to share out in class felt more inclined to do so because of the connection she had to her facilitator. She moved to several schools in elementary school and middle school, and found it hard to make connections, and having the time to connect with her circle and restorative circle facilitator helped her feel connected to school. She stated that she felt “a little connected. I feel a little more safe here. More comfortable.”

The codebook showed that seven participants, with a frequency of 20 statements, felt engaged in their circle experience, with these same participants, at a frequency of 12, having positive feelings about being connected to their school because of these engagements. Cross referencing these codes with the logbook showed that a student's experience was directly related to how they worked with both their group and restorative circle facilitator. Students who felt like their facilitators cared about both them and the programs had an overall greater experience with the program, while facilitators who did not invest in these needs created a negative experience for students. The three students

who shared statements of negativity towards the circle program also shared that they did not feel as though their facilitator did much to keep the students engaged. One student, Dorinda, shared that “many of the students did not share anything and it felt awkward. The teacher did not push us to talk or anything, so it felt quiet.” The researcher found that one of the most asked questions in her logbook was, “What did his/her/their facilitator do to engage students as time went on?” The facilitator and their attitude and engagement had a very clear connection to the students’ experience and connectedness to the program and their peers, in both a positive and negative way.

***Theme #4: Students Felt More Connected to School When They Made Emotional Connections to Their Peers***

The fourth theme to come from this narrative, qualitative study was that the students shared how crucial peer to peer interaction is when looking at school connectedness. This comes from both the students’ desire to speak with their peers and with their being given a space to do so. Joe, who transferred from another school, had prior experience with restorative circles before. He stated, however, that they were focused on speaking to students about rules and behavioral concerns, and not social/emotional growth and understanding. He stated:

I feel like it was more gritty and the main thing they were focusing on whenever they would speak to kids is give them a rule book and stuff like that. And telling them to stay out of trouble, but not really explaining why to them too much. Just saying that it's bad for you, not trying to understand the kids too much. But I feel like over here, they don't talk about it as much...so I feel like that's a difference.

Joe further clarified that the circles focused on peer-to-peer interactions and understandings. He stated that he wanted to be around some of his peers in his circle because he connected with their positive mindsets. He shared:

With me, it's personally just their mindset. I just want to be around people with positive mindsets. I don't want to be around someone who's always negative, that doesn't think about the positive, that really doesn't have any goals, that's just living life recklessly or anything like that, and is just living day by day without any goals to achieve. I want to be around people that's going to inspire me to achieve my goals each day and be better day by day.

The codebook showed that five participants had a change in mindset, at a frequency of 12 statements. Joe is an example of this change in mindset, where his peers were able to help him make a shift in social/emotional literacy, which was even more profound due to his experience in his prior district.

One student, Dorinda, reflected on how her friendships have had an impact on her school experience. She had just moved to Windwood High School this year and shared that she struggled to make connections due to being new. She shared that in the beginning of the year, she did not like school because “when you don’t feel connected to the school, you don't feel like you have a place.” Additionally, one student, Theresa, shared that connecting with her peers also affects her academic progress. She stated that she does well in science class, where she does laboratory assignments with her peers, whereas “a lot of times during geometry class, I [She] felt like we [they] weren't interacting as much and it was hard to learn.” The researcher’s logbook showed that all the participants cared about building friendships at school, and how they enjoyed their classes more when they

were given time to explore these relationships in an academic setting, as well as the social setting. This was especially true for students who had transferred from other districts and were looking for a place for themselves in their new school.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this narrative, qualitative study was to explore the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. With schools focusing on social-emotional learning (SEL) to help students deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the importance of restorative practices can help shape SEL curriculum for years to come. The secondary purpose of this study was to examine the role that students play when looking at school connectedness. Figure 4 showed the commonalities within the interviews and the gravity that each word carried based on the student responses.

### **Figure 4**

*EdWordle Showcasing Common Words Stated by Participants in the Study*



The researcher collected data through an interview, which was broken into a biographic narrative section and two semi-structured interview sections, from nine participants from a suburban high school. A qualitative codebook was used by the researcher to serve two main purposes: to provide a guide for coding responses and to serve as documentation of the layout and code definitions of a data file (Lavrakas, 2008). The researcher used deductive coding to create themes, utilizing Dedoose, and inductive coding when looking for keywords in the study. The researcher found that the following four themes emerged from the study:

- Restorative circles allowed students to understand the commonalities that exist between themselves and their peers.
- Restorative circles had students reflect on goals they have for their postsecondary future.
- Students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness.
- Peer to peer interaction shapes the student experience in schools.

The next chapter concluded the dissertation and provided an interpretation of the results in relation to previous literature, the implications of the research, limitations experienced in the study, and recommendations for future research and practice.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This narrative, qualitative study looked at both restorative circles and school connectedness, specifically looking at a program that was implemented over an eight-month period at a suburban high school. The researcher looked at both the impact of the monthly program and inquired about how students felt about being involved and connected to school. The researcher found that four themes emerged from the study. These were (a) restorative circles allowed for students to understand the commonalities that exist between themselves and their peers, (b) restorative circles had students reflect on goals they have for their postsecondary future, (c) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness, and (d) peer to peer interaction shapes the student experience in schools.

This chapter concluded the researcher's dissertation and shared an interpretation of the results, an analysis of the relationship between results and prior research, the implications of the findings, limitations experienced in the study, and recommendations for future research and practice.

### **Implications of Findings**

Freire's (2000) critical theory analyzed the traditional school model and the impact that it had on student engagement, motivation, and connectedness. It is built on the understanding that there is no neutrality in education, for the system is designed to either train the younger generation into conforming to the ideologies that exist within the system of society or to give learners the ability to question and transform the world around them. This ability to question and transform is the basis of critical thinking. Vaandering (2010) looked at this theory as "a continuum of orientations ranging from

*technical to interpretive to critical...a technical orientation emphasizes people's engagement with the world for the purpose of producing empirical knowledge that allows them to be in control and live with certainty”* (p. 4).

This study showcased a restorative circle program that aimed to catalyze students to think critically about themselves and the world around them, through the use of a non-traditional classroom, as critical theory explains. The researcher found that through the use of the varied setting and a curriculum built on having students think critically about their relationships with themselves, their peers, and their school, students were able to find social/emotional connections that were not there prior to program implementation. The designated class time that was used for restorative circles did not involve a teacher lecturing or memorization, but instead gave students a primary role in their learning. This had positive impacts on students and school connectedness, for students were able to make connections and feel more included in their school community. Even those participants that struggled to open up to others in this setting found appreciation in the sentiment of including restorative circles in their day, making them feel as though their school wants them to have a say in school culture.

Cavanagh's (2004) culture of care theory explained that students should be drivers of their own learning. It also focused on the importance of relationships in school connectedness. Specifically, according to the theory, building enduring, respectful relationships are central and critical to establishing and maintaining a culture of care in classrooms and schools (Cavanagh, 2004). The basis of this relationship building is about students learning through partaking in healthy relationships, having a sense of community, and learning through routines and customs. The Windwood High School



restorative circle program created a curriculum and a space for students to practice, build, and develop healthy relationships, with both their peers and their restorative circle facilitator. This helped students create and share bonds with their peers that would not necessarily be present without the program's existence.

Slade and Griffith (2013) looked at the whole child approach theory/framework as a way to develop:

A whole child hierarchy, outlining the key elements or stages needed for successful student growth and development. When students' basic physiological and psychological needs (safety, belonging, autonomy, and competence) are satisfied, they are more likely to become engaged in school, act in accord with school goals and values, develop social skills and understanding, contribute to the school and community, and achieve academically. Further, when schools fail to meet those needs, students are more likely to become less motivated, more alienated, and poorer academic performers.

The researcher found that students genuinely enjoyed being in a school setting, where they were looked at holistically, and not just from an academic standpoint. Students responded positively when their restorative circle facilitators made time to invest in them as people, not just as another number in the classroom. This approach to education was one of the bases for the restorative circle curriculum and aligned with the methodology of the program creation. Through this alignment, participants explained that they were able to be seen as more than just their academic prowess or failure.

## **Findings**

The researcher looked closely at the themes and narratives of the student and came to four conclusions; (a) restorative circles allowed for students to understand the commonalities that exist between themselves and their peers, (b) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness, (c) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness, and (d) students feeling connected to their restorative circle facilitator is imperative for school connectedness. Each is connected to the research questions posed at the start of the study.

### **Research Question #1**

#### ***Restorative Circles Allowed Students to Understand the Commonalities That Exist Between Themselves and Their Peers***

The restorative circle program allowed students to break from the traditional roles in the classroom. As referenced in critical theory (Freire, 2000), breaking down the traditional school model allows students to think critically, and not just learn how to exist in a system that is built for educational oppression. The participants were able to connect with their peers, learn about their goals and their backgrounds, with students that they would not necessarily be friends with. Students referenced being able to learn from each other, as well as see that their peers were going through similar struggles for their freshman experience.

## ***Restorative Circles Had Students Reflect on Goals They Have for Their Postsecondary Future***

Bohm (1996) defined dialogue as an inquiry into the thought process and believed dialogue as a way for people to speak their mind and understand each other's thoughts. Just as participants were able to connect through personal anecdotes, they were able to get feedback on their goals and aspirations for their life after high school. This form of dialogue allowed students to self-reflect on what they truly wanted for their future. Lew and Schmidt (2011) found that self-reflection was the:

Processes that a learner undergoes to look back on his past learning experiences and what he did to enable learning to occur (i.e., self-reflection on *how* learning took place), and the exploration of connections between the knowledge that was taught and the learner's own ideas about them (i.e., self-reflection on *what* was learned). It is contended that since processes such as these can lead to informed and thoughtful deliberations on one's behaviors and actions, they are believed to assist learners to become better at self-reflection, which leads subsequently to better academic achievement. (p. 530)

This is applicable in this study because particularly after the goal setting lesson/conversation, participants felt like they were able to brainstorm post-secondary planning with others, which they had not done before. Students made informed thoughts about their postsecondary future as a result of the dialogue and reflection that occurred within the restorative circles. The culture of care theory (2003, 2012) aimed to have students focus on relationships with themselves about their future, as well as their community. Through this program, participants were able to do just that, but having

students plan out what comes after high school, and what they need to do in order to achieve that plan.

## **Research Question #2**

### ***Students Feeling Connected to Their Restorative Circle Facilitator is Imperative for School Connectedness***

Critical theory (Freire, 2000) spoke about the dangers of having a teacher present strictly to facilitate the transferring of knowledge and being an authority figure. The whole child approach echoes the sentiment of the importance of school connectedness and looking at students holistically. Through the use of the restorative circle program, participants were able to have the time to connect with their restorative circle facilitator on both a social/emotional and academic level. Those who developed relationships with their restorative circle facilitator had an overall better experience with the program. Additionally, students referenced how having a teacher in their classroom that did not invest in them as a person gave them an adverse relationship to that class and subject.

### ***Peer to Peer Interaction Shapes the Student Experience in Schools***

Critical theory (Freire, 2000; Freire et al., 2014), culture of care theory (Cavanagh, 2004; Cavanagh et al., 2012) and the whole child approach all look at the importance of relationships in schools. Relationships that students have with themselves, their teachers, peers, and community shape the way that students feel about their school experience. Participants in this study spoke about how their relationships with the stakeholders within a school had an impact on their connectedness to the school. Students who had strong relationships felt connected to their school community, whereas students that did not felt disconnected. All of the participants agreed that peer to peer interaction is

needed in order to have students be successful in school, and that without this interaction, schools would feel disjointed. Participants who connected, understood, and set goals with their peers had a positive impact on school connectedness.

### **Relationship Between Results and Prior Research**

This study related to prior research in the field of restorative justice. Pranis et al. (2003) and Sherman et al. (2015) explored the importance of community when looking at the Māori people and their implementation of restorative justice. The Māori and the practice of family group conferences and their understanding of the interconnected nature of community relates directly to what the students in the researcher's study communicated.

The participants in the study shared that connecting with their peers, either for the exploration of goals or understanding that they had more in common than they initially thought. Other indigenous people, such as the Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Yukon, also use community circles, with the use of a mediator, just as in the researcher's study. The mediator, for this study, was an important piece in the success of the circle, as students shared that it was meaningful when they felt connected to their restorative circle facilitator.

School connectedness, as defined by Preece (2009), focused on the ties that students have with the school community, which also involves the trust in administration, their sense of safety, and how invested they feel the school is in their success. Wachtel et al. (2010) also found that trust in schools is essential for student success. In the researcher's study, the students spoke about how the restorative circle program created

trust in the school and the school staff because they were allowed to ask questions about school policies and procedure. One student, Frank stated:

I believe we were asked some questions about how we feel about the school and the rules at one of the restorative circles. That really made me think about why things are the way that they are and why we have some of the rules. I got a better understanding. The development of this trust can truly change the student experience in a school.

Beaver and Swank (2020) explored the implementation of a restorative justice program, using the development of relationships, restorative justice activities, purposeful consequences, and setting expectations. The restorative circle program at Windwood High School was built using the culture of care ideology, which also focused on relationships and how they are essential for developing school culture and connectedness.

Wang and Lee (2018) explored how restorative practices reformed school climates. The building of relationships and community circles helped increase academic achievement. In the researcher's study, students were able to collaborate on post-secondary goals when given the opportunity to think and discuss as a group.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations that could have impacted the results should be considered in the interpretation and generalization of these findings. This sample entirely consisted students of color where the facilitators were predominantly white, who could also have an impact on the study because of potential implicit bias. Additionally, as a threat to internal validity, location was a limitation in this study. This study involved ninth grade students who all attended the same high school. Although some were transfer students from an

urban district in the state, there was uniformity in the sample size in location and age. Additionally, this study took place over an eight-month period, having a limitation of time frame. The study, especially if speaking about relationships, took place in an isolated time period. Another threat to internal validity would be in implementation. Although the restorative circle facilitators were trained and given a script/curriculum to use in their restorative circles, there was little oversight over facilitator implementation due to union contracts and lack of resources. This is a limitation because facilitators could have gone off script; therefore, there would be a change in fidelity for the study.

When observing the restorative circles, the researcher noted that there were a lot of students who did not actively participate in the circles. They simply passed the talking piece to the next student when answering the prompts and questions. From the sample that was interviewed, the students that made a choice to not actively participate in the circle were not represented in this case. This could be because if a student was uncomfortable with the program, he/she/they would not want to speak about their experience, particularly to an administrator in the school. This lack of perspective in the sample is a limitation because exploring the reasoning behind the lack of student participation could have deepened the study and allowed further growth of the program.

### **Implications for Future Research**

For future research with restorative circles and school connectedness, research should be done looking at the long-term impact of these programs. Follow up for students who participate in programs, particularly to look at how speaking about post-secondary goals collaboration shapes an individual, is necessary. Researchers should also explore different demographics of participants, such as indigenous populations. Additionally,

different locations should be explored, looking at the impact of these programs on urban and rural communities. Future studies with larger sample sizes should be conducted to enhance the external validity of the restorative circle program.

### **Implications for Future Practice**

The researcher discovered that for future practice, procedures should be put in place to ensure that restorative circle facilitators are utilizing the script and also invested in the work. Participants in this study shared that their experience varied depending on their restorative circle facilitator, so monitoring of fidelity would best support future practice. One participant, Theresa, shared this sentiment, stating that [she] believed her facilitator should be “more interactive and more fun rather than just sitting there and answering questions.” With the students being aware of the investment of their restorative circle facilitator, or lack thereof, there is a need for there to be an accountability system for facilitators to go by. This would ensure equity of the restorative circle experience and allow all students in the program the opportunity to have productive discourse and the opportunity to build trust. Additionally, there should be more reflective pieces and formative assessments implanted into the circle experience to ensure that students are reflecting on their own discoveries within the circle. Adding a pre, during, and post-program survey would also allow the restorative circle program to grow through getting honest feedback, reflection, and an understanding of their success.

As part of the semi-structured part of the interview process, the researcher asked the participants for their suggestions for future practice. Frank, a participant, shared that he wished the questions should have been more thoughtful, with him sharing, “I feel like the questions could be changed. A lot of the questions were like, I guess they could be



deeper, but not overly deep because some of them were really just one-word answers.”

Jill, also critiqued the types of questions in the curriculum, comparing the questions to a Socratic seminar. She stated:

It was almost kind of like something that we do in English class, like a Socratic seminar. So basically, it was kind of like that. So, when they say Restorative Circles and they go around, it's like, "Oh, okay." They ask the prompt, and they give an answer. If you don't want to say your answer, it's almost kind of like what we do in English with the Socratic seminar.

Varied questioning will allow students to explore more than just commonalities and may help students develop a deeper bond with their peers.

Lastly, more time should be devoted when implementing a restorative circle program. Phaedra explained that she needed more time in order to get to know her peers and open up. She stated:

Usually when I get used to them [my peers], like if I see you every day or I do something every day and then I don't have that one day or I don't see that person or talk to them, then I feel like it's missing. So, then that's when I know that I'm connected to them, but it's a consistency thing. If I talk to you every day, then I'm going to feel connected to you because you're now a part of my life.

Consistency in meeting will allow students to feel more comfortable with their peers and facilitator, allowing for more personal growth, community building and school connectedness.

Research suggested that the traditional roles in school need to be shifted in order to create true equity and allow for students to be seen by more than just their academic

record. Students need a voice to develop their social-emotional literacy, learn self-advocacy, and communicate with their peers in order to be fully connected to their school. The researcher found this to be true in the case of this sample at Windwood High School, for the students in the study felt a sense of personal growth and connection when they participated in the restorative circle program. Issues arose when students were in a setting that did not execute the program properly and did not create a safe space where these factors could be practiced. Purposeful execution, rather than simply going through the motions, was important for the success of the restorative circle program.

### **Conclusion**

From the reflections of the Māori people to Freire's work on systemic oppression in schools, restorative practices have proven to support student learning and growth when it comes to community building and understanding. Having students understand each other's histories, insights, feelings, and stories can have a positive impact on their development. This impact can be both academic and social/emotional. This research aimed to look at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness. Based on the qualitative analysis of the researcher, it appears as though the sample at Windwood High School started to experience a shift in mindset, reflection, and learning because of the restorative circles that were implemented during their ninth grade year. Students felt more connected to their community, school, and peers, with those that transferred from an urban school experiencing the greatest impact. The sample also reflected and shared that more time, space, and training of the restorative circle facilitator would only further the success of the program.

## **Epilogue**

The juxtaposition between the newness of restorative practices in the western world and the deep-rooted history of restorative practices in indigenous populations is truly a fascinating sentiment. Being able to partake in research that is both very new and, at the same time, very old was enjoyable. It also helped the researcher further reflect on her own feelings and how they can be shaped by the fallacy of tradition.

## APPENDIX A INFORMED CONSENT



Invitation to Participate in a Research Study (Interviews) for Minors 12-17 years old.

Dear Parent/Guardian of Participant:

Your child/minor is being invited to participate in a research study to look at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness within secondary schools. This study will help to better inform educational leadership on implementing restorative practices in future academic years. I will be conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation for St. John's University, Department of Administration, and Instructional Leadership.

This portion of the research study will consist of an online interview lasting from 30 – 60 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews will be made so that the data can be transcribed and analyzed. You and your child/minor may review the audio recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed. Additionally, your child/minor and I will meet at the end of the study to go over transcripts of their interview. All audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be kept secured on a password protected drive and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Pseudonyms will be used during transcription for all proper names in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. All consent forms will be kept separate from the

transcription data to ensure that the names and identities of all participants will not be known or linked to any information provided. Your child/minor's responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. The responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will do the same. Participation in this study is voluntary and at any point during the study your child/minor has the right to end your participation. Nonparticipation or withdrawal from this study will not affect your child/minor's grades or academic standing in any way.

If there is anything about the study or your child/minor's participation that is unclear or if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact me at [gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu](mailto:gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu) or call me at 929-445-0401. You may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Clemens at [clemensr@stjohns.edu](mailto:clemensr@stjohns.edu). St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440). For questions about your child/minors rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair [digiuser@stjohns.edu](mailto:digiuser@stjohns.edu) 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, [nitopim@stjohns.edu](mailto:nitopim@stjohns.edu) 718-990-1440.

Thank you! I truly appreciate your time and your child/minor's participation in this study

Respectfully,

Gabriella Franza

**Agreement to Participate**

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Parent/Guardian Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX B INFORMED ASSENT



Invitation to Participate in a Research Study (Interviews) for Minors 12-17 years old.

Dear Student Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study to look at the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness within secondary schools. This study will help to better inform educational leadership on implementing restorative practices in future academic years. I will be conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation for St. John's University, Department of Administration, and Instructional Leadership.

This portion of the research study will consist of an online interview lasting from 30 – 60 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews will be made so that the data can be transcribed and analyzed. You may review the audio recordings and request that all or any portion of the recordings be destroyed. Additionally, you and I will meet at the end of the study to go over transcripts of their interview. All audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be kept secured on a password protected drive and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. A pseudonym will be used, so your identity will be anonymous for the study. All consent forms will be kept separate from the transcription data to ensure that the names and identities of all participants will not be known or linked to any information provided. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following

exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. Your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will do the same. Participation in this study is voluntary and at any point during the study you have the right to end your participation. Nonparticipation or withdrawal from this study will not affect your grades or academic standing in any way.

If there is anything about the study or your participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact me at [gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu](mailto:gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu) or call me at 929-445-0401. You may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Clemens at [clemensr@stjohns.edu](mailto:clemensr@stjohns.edu). St. John's University cannot provide either medical treatment or financial compensation for any physical injury resulting from your participation in this research project. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440). For questions about your child/minors rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair [digiuser@stjohns.edu](mailto:digiuser@stjohns.edu) 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, [nitopim@stjohns.edu](mailto:nitopim@stjohns.edu) 718-990-1440.

Thank you! I truly appreciate your time and participation in this study

Respectfully,



Gabriella Franza

**Agreement to Participate**

Yes, I agree to participate in the study described above.

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Participant's Signature

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Date

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Researcher's Signature

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Date

## APPENDIX C RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear Student and Parent/Guardian,

My name is Gabriella Franza, and I am the X at X. Additionally, I am a doctoral candidate at St. John's University. I am conducting a research study examining the impact of restorative circles on school connectedness and you are invited to participate in the study. If you and your parent/guardian agree, you are invited to participate in a Microsoft Teams interview with myself about restorative circles.

The interview is anticipated to take no more than an hour and will be recorded and transcribed for the purpose of this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain anonymous and confidential during and after the study. If you agree to do this study, please sign the form titled "Student Assent Form" connected to this letter and have your parent/guardian sign the "Parent/Guardian" permission form.

If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at [gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu](mailto:gabriella.franza20@my.stjohns.edu).

Thank you for your participation,

Gabriella Franza

## APPENDIX D LOG BOOKS

<p>Research Diary: 1</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Dorinda</p> <p>Date of Interview: 6/27</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 2:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circles were somewhat helpful</li> <li>• Understood the purpose of circles, but also did not feel as though they were truly effective</li> <li>• Wished that the circles happened more often</li> <li>• Did like how they connected to post-secondary goals</li> </ul>
<p>Participant’s Overall Feelings Towards School”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She enjoys school when is around her friends.</li> <li>• She likes school more now than she did in her previous settings. The researcher wonders if COVID has anything to do with this.</li> </ul>
<p>Surprises About Responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believed she was connected to school a 7/10</li> <li>• Finds comfort in routine- The researcher wonders if the fact that the circles only happen once a month is a break in her routine- so that may be why she has not grown into favor with the circles.</li> </ul>

<p>What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did her circle facilitator handle her less her attitude towards the circle? Did they welcome her, and try to make her feel at home or ignore it?</li> </ul>
<p>What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She believes the circles to be awkward, so implementing pieces that would break down that barrier would make it better?</li> <li>• She wants the circles to be successful and appreciates the thought process but thinks that there need to be more opportunities for bonding.</li> <li>• She wants goals to be spoken about more.</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 2</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Jill</p> <p>Date of Interview: 6/27</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: :3:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciated and like the circles overall</li> <li>• Wanted to get to know her peers and believed this was a way to do so.</li> <li>• She liked learning about the common activities that her and her peers had in common.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She liked speaking about what her future would look like.</li> </ul>
Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not like school in the prior district, but loves Windwood H.S.</li> </ul>
Surprises About Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared circles to socratic seminars</li> <li>• Likes the ability to talk about things that are usually not spoken about in school.</li> <li>• Was very positive about the circle program and she really connected with her circle facilitator.</li> </ul>
What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This student feels very connected to circles. How was the facilitator for this circle?</li> <li>• How can we improve our circle facilitator training or application to ensure that all students get a facilitator that cares like this.</li> </ul>
What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add more social prompts- have a more personal aspect to it.</li> <li>• Have more circles- because she wants to participate more!</li> </ul>

Research Diary: 3

Participant Name (Pseudonym): Brandi

Date of Interview: 6/28

<p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 2:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opened up to the idea of restorative circles once the program started.</li> <li>• She often used the words “got used to” the concept</li> <li>• She likes speaking about what her goals were for the future.</li> <li>• She felt connected to her school once she was able to see her peers from a different perspective.</li> </ul>
<p>Participant’s Overall Feelings Towards School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liked middle school because of the peer interaction.</li> <li>• Needs personal interactions and social activity to feel connected.</li> <li>• Needs to be able to talk to her peers about more than school.</li> </ul>
<p>Surprises About Responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She connected to a student she had never spoken to before.</li> <li>• She felt as though she got to know her peers more as the circles went on-it just took her some time.</li> </ul>

<p>What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> <li>• What are my thoughts and feelings more about the facilitators, rather than the students?</li> </ul>
<p>What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More personal interactions to help more students open up throughout the process.</li> <li>• More opportunities to participate in the circles</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 4</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Vicki</p> <p>Date of Interview: 6/28</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 3:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cares about connections with teachers and friends in school.</li> <li>• Social aspect is key</li> <li>• Feels as though connecting to her school is the most important thing about school.</li> </ul>
<p>Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feels as though the school is enjoyable, good surroundings and good people</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She just wants to see people she likes.</li> </ul>
Surprises About Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participated in restorative circles before and liked these circles more than the previous ones.</li> <li>• Student does not have long responses-I wonder if the facilitator saw a shyness in her and how did the work.</li> </ul>
What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> </ul>
What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing she could think of.</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 5</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Shakayla</p> <p>Date of Interview: 6/29</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 2:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
Main Themes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moving was very hard for her and made her connect with school difficult.</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes the idea of restorative circles, and made some connections, but could be improved.</li> <li>• She wants to connect with all of her peers but moving may have an impact on how she connects with school now.</li> </ul>
Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disliked school because of moving often.</li> <li>• Has started to like school because of her peers.</li> </ul>
Surprises About Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circles helped make her feel more connected to her school</li> <li>• She wanted more circles to help her connect with her school.</li> </ul>
What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> <li>• Did her circle facilitator know about how moving affected her?</li> <li>• Did her circle facilitator engage in post-secondary planning- truly with her.</li> </ul>
What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 6</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Teresa</p> <p>Date of Interview: 7/1</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 2:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
Main Themes:	
Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes science classes</li> <li>• Likes to interact with students</li> <li>• Wanted circles to be more engaging, even though she appreciated why the school was doing them.</li> <li>• Wanted to have a facilitator that helped students open up more.</li> </ul>
Surprises About Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• She said her circles were quiet and could have used more engagement.</li> </ul>
What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> <li>• What happens in science class that makes her love it? How can this be replicated for circles?</li> </ul>

<p>What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More interactive</li> <li>• More "Fun"</li> </ul>
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<p>Research Diary: 7</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Phaedra</p> <p>Date of Interview: 7/5</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 2:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>
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<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared circles to group therapy</li> <li>• Liked restorative circles, but did not shape the way she forms friendships, but did allow her to make more connections.</li> <li>• Appreciated the effort of the school doing the program for students.</li> </ul>
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<p>Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes school, likes her peers, cares about the social aspect.</li> </ul>
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<p>Surprises About Responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not like private school</li> <li>• Likes to make connections with people</li> <li>• Wants to know more people.</li> </ul>
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<p>What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I wonder about the effects of private school vs. public school on this student.</li> </ul>
<p>What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feels as though people are shy, which is why they don't like to participate.</li> <li>• Wants to do more circles- to help people open up.</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 8</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Joe</p> <p>Date of Interview: 7/5</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 3:30 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>	
<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appreciated restorative circles.</li> <li>• Felt as though they were helpful, but boring at first.</li> <li>• Likes speaking about his goal and aspirations</li> <li>• Likes learning more about his peers.</li> </ul>
<p>Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likes this high school, particularly when comparing it to his city experience.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believes that the school is great for doing this program and wanting to help the students.</li> <li>• Would love to do more circles.</li> </ul>
Surprises About Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has very distinct memories from living in the city and feels differently about the current high school he is in.</li> </ul>
What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> <li>• I wonder what his city experience was like. Did they do any restorative circles? The city has a major initiative about this.</li> </ul>
What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants students to be involved in the creation of the circle's scripts- which is an interesting idea!</li> </ul>

<p>Research Diary: 9</p> <p>Participant Name (Pseudonym): Frank</p> <p>Date of Interview: 7/5</p> <p>Weather Outside: Sunny, Very Warm</p> <p>Time: 4:15 PM</p> <p>Place of Interview: Zoom</p>
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<p>Main Themes:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Said circles shaped how he saw people- you may be surprised what you have in common with someone.</li> <li>• Felt as though circles helped shape his relationships.</li> <li>• Liked being able to speak about what he wanted to do/be when he grows up.</li> <li>• Felt as though the school was investing in him because of this-made him feel special.</li> </ul>
<p>Participant's Overall Feelings Towards School</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not like school prior to high school</li> <li>• Said circles helped him understand the school rules more.</li> <li>• Said the circles help him feel like he understands his peers and make connections that he never would have before.</li> </ul>
<p>Surprises About Responses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not have a great private school experience</li> <li>• Appreciates public school because of the private school experience.</li> </ul>
<p>What am I thinking or feeling about the responses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did her facilitator do to engage students as time went on?</li> <li>• What impact does the private vs. public school have on a student?</li> </ul>

<p>What are the participants' suggestions for the program? (Feedback Reflection)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Felt as though the questions could be deeper and more exploratory.</li></ul>
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