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## Teachers' Perceptions Of Restorative Practices In K–8 Classrooms

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN K-8 CLASSROOMS

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### ABSTRACT

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher sought to examine teachers' perceptions of restorative practices in Kindergarten–Grade 8 (K–8) classrooms. The authors in the current literature concerning restorative practices have referenced the connection to social–emotional learning and school climate, yet there is limited understanding of how teachers perceive these practices and use them in their classroom. The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of restorative practices including when, where, and how teachers use these practices and support social–emotional learning efforts. Ten public school teachers in K–8 classrooms in Connecticut shared their lived experiences through semistructured interviews. Data from the interviews were analyzed using a 5-step data analysis process that Creswell and Poth (2018) developed. The analysis of the findings revealed that (a) the participants used restorative practices for community and relationship building, (b) there is an emphasis on the use of restorative practices to build social competency for students and staff, and (c) there is a need for consistent restorative structure within a school community. This research has implications for school leaders and classroom teachers, and it truly explores how restorative practices can be used to support SEL and to improve school climate.

*Keywords:* restorative practices, social–emotional learning (SEL), school climate, relationship building through restorative practices, professional development

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, educators and researchers have increased the focus on school climate (Bear et al., 2017). School climate accounts for the “patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 358). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 provided a broad definition for student success, which includes factors such as school climate and safety (Ferguson, 2016). ESSA (2015) spoke to elements of social–emotional learning (SEL) by emphasizing “instructional practices for developing relationship-building skills” and “implementation of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports” (Ferguson, 2016, p. 1). SEL encompasses many different variables that support the social and emotional health of students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2021) defined SEL as “the process through which children and adults . . . understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p. 6).

If students can express emotions in a constructive way, understand how their actions affect others, and know the value in righting a wrong, there can be successful emotional and academic growth (Weissberg et al., 2015). The goal for educators is to provide students with a safe space in which the atmosphere is conducive to learning (Parrett & Budge, 2012). A positive school climate ensures that students can be academically successful and being emotionally self-aware is the first step toward that positive climate. The implementation of SEL in schools can vary. Elementary and middle schools use different approaches, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Responsive Classroom, and other explicit social skills instructional

programs, including Second Step and Michigan Model for Health (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010). Teachers are central to the implementation of quality SEL programs and practices in schools and classrooms (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers and administrators can use restorative practices to support SEL, while building relationships, repairing relationships that have been harmed, and increasing the understanding of feelings and emotions within their schools (Silverman & Mee, 2018).

High (2017) stated that a “growing number of schools are adopting restorative practices proactively, with a view to preventing misbehavior by improving climate and strengthening relationships” (p. 525). Restorative practices are derived from the concept of restorative justice used in the judicial systems (Mayworm et al., 2016; Braithwaite, 1989). The terms restorative justice, restorative approaches, and restorative practices are used equally in education to refer to the development and repairing of relationships and the implementation of structure to ensure the reduction in opportunities for conflict and harm (Kane et al., 2007; McCluskey et al., 2011; Morrison, 2007).

The International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP; Wachtel, 2016) defined restorative practices as strategies and activities that “build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making” (p. 1). Restorative practices promote the development of caring and safe school environments to support effectively academic success (Vaandering, 2014). This includes building relationships through the engagement of all parties, including teachers, students, and families. When conflicts occur, restorative practices offer the opportunity to focus on what happened, who was affected and how, and what is needed to learn from the incident to reduce the risk of it happening again (Bevington, 2015). As Mirsky (2007) wrote, “Instead of zero tolerance and authoritarian punishment, restorative practices place

responsibility on the students, using a collaborative response to wrongdoing” (p. 6). Skiba and Losen (2016) showed that traditional punitive disciplinary procedures (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) are ineffective, and their findings led to educational leaders shifting to a more holistic, restorative approach to discipline. The restorative approach includes practices such as restorative circles that build relationships and provide an outlet for students to express emotions, affective statements in staff and student conversations, and restorative conferences that would be a more effective response to traditional suspension-worthy behaviors (Costello et al., 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

After the events of September 11, 2001, and several school shootings, the emphasis on the use of traditional punitive disciplinary policies was increased (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). These policies have led to exclusionary practices (i.e., suspensions/expulsions) that can have negative impacts on school climate, academic achievement, and school engagement (Teasley, 2014). School administrators have a growing interest in the use of less-punitive strategies through restorative practices (Teasley, 2014). Understanding how teachers create safe spaces, encourage social discourse, and teach students to take responsibility for their actions and to repair relationships is imperative to future practice (Morrison, 2007). Gregory et al. (2014) noted that more investigation is necessary into the use of restorative practices to understand their potential as a classroom management intervention. Song and Swearer (2016) also agreed that additional research is needed to determine the pertinent strategies for restorative justice in schools to ensure high-quality implementation. The use of restorative practices can affect school climate, and the implementation rests heavily on collaboration between administrators, teachers, students, and families.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers' perceptions of restorative practices in Kindergarten–Grade 8 (K–8) classrooms. The lived experiences of teachers who are implementing restorative practices to build community and engage students with behavior challenges were the focus of this study. The phenomenon of restorative practices in classrooms was examined including when, where, and how restorative practices are implemented and how these practices are used to support SEL efforts. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) explored the connection between restorative practices and SEL. They found that by using these two approaches simultaneously, an opportunity was made for restorative practices to contribute to student development of “social skills including communication skills, kindness, empathy, and caring” (p. 110).

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the researcher sought to explore K–8 teachers' perceptions of their experiences using restorative practices in the classroom. The research questions for this study aligned with the problem and purpose statements. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do K–8 teachers implement restorative practices in the classroom?
2. How do K–8 teachers use restorative practices to support SEL in the classroom?
3. How do restorative practices affect school climate?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in the theory of social constructivism, which uses the experiences of individuals to generate meaning and understanding (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism also supports phenomenology as the methodology of the study, which allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions, while providing an opportunity

for teachers to make meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). Vygotsky (1997, as cited in McLeod, 2018), one of the pioneers of constructivism, believed that learning has much to do with social interaction and that “community plays a central position in the process of making meaning” (p. 1). Vygotsky’s (1997) sociocultural perspective supported this study by allowing the researcher to focus on the interactions that students have with adults. In reference to child development, Vygotsky believed that children understand their environment through interactions with adults. Vygotsky (1997, as cited in Nurfaidah, 2018) suggested, “The intellectual skills acquired by children are regarded to be directly related to their interaction with adults and peers in specific problem-solving environments” (p. 150).

This study was also supported by the origins of restorative justice in which relationships were the central focus (Zehr, 2015). Evans and Vaandering (2016) discussed how restorative justice in an educational setting could be viewed as a theoretical framework “through which to view not only the repairing of harm but also the restoration of healthy relationships, emphasizing just and equitable learning environments” (p. 22). The theory of restorative justice was built on the notion that, when an offense is committed, people and relationships are harmed, and justice can be obtained by healing the harm that has been done (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). In this study, the focus is how teachers use restorative practices to support SEL and affect school climate.

The theoretical framework that supported and guided this study was drawn from the Social Discipline Window from the work of Glaser (1964) and Braithwaite (1989) and that McCold and Wachtel (2003) adapted. The Social Discipline Window addressed the four approaches that restorative practitioners use to address behavior (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). Teachers in classrooms have choices regarding how they maintain classroom discipline. The Social Discipline Window is a visual representation of the two continuums of control and

support. The multiple combinations of the two continuums create the four quadrants of punitive, neglectful, permissive, and restorative (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). In this study, the researcher examined how teachers perceived the use of restorative practices and highlight the elements of the Social Discipline Window.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope**

Several assumptions were made for the purpose of the study. First, the researcher assumed that potential study participants had personal experience using restorative practices in the classroom. The researcher also assumed that the potential participants had received some level of training (self-training or formal training) in the use of restorative practices. The researcher also assumed that the participants would understand the questions presented and provide honest responses.

The limitations to this study were the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school settings. The teachers and students have been out of the physical school buildings for several months, concluding the 2019–2020 school year. Nagel (2020) reported that, in the United States, 47 states closed schools for the remainder of 2019–2020. A lack of in person learning might have limited the use of restorative practices. Another limitation is that the qualitative study participants came from the same state. This single location might not have provided perceptions that would align with the views of teachers across the country.

### **Rationale and Significance**

In this study, the researcher explored the lived experiences of teachers and their perceptions of restorative practices in their classrooms. The understanding of the experiences of teachers is crucial to SEL development in schools. Bevington (2015) wrote, “School staff working with RP [restorative practices] have reported that it is more than a behavior



management tool, that there is a deeper and richer philosophy of life that this work expresses” (p. 105). Bevington (2015) suggested that exploring people’s experiences with *restorative practice* is an opportunity to “return to the roots” (p. 106) of the work by highlighting the humanistic areas. To date, research that shows how teachers’ perceptions can affect the effectiveness and implementation is limited. Acosta et al. (2016) discussed the lack of research, stating, “There has not been rigorous scientific study of RPI’s [Restorative Practices Intervention] effects and underlying mechanisms” (p. 415). Likewise, Fronius et al. (2019) contended that the study of restorative practices in schools is in the beginning stages.

Teachers’ perceptions may affect the implementation of any SEL program in schools (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This study can help researchers understand how teachers feel about using restorative practices in the classroom to assist with future implementation efforts. Meyers et al. (2019) referenced Wandersman et al. (2008) and underscored the idea that high-quality programming implementation requires an internal capacity that includes positive attitudes of staff. In this study, the teachers’ perceptions indicated the attitudes associated with implementation. Research is also limited regarding the use of restorative practices in American schools. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) noted the need to incorporate restorative practices into existing school structures. Therefore, this researcher’s study has the potential to inform practice by understanding teachers’ perceptions. School administrators who seek to add restorative practices to an SEL program or disciplinary protocol might benefit from understanding teachers’ lived experiences.

## Definition of Terms

**Affective statements:** These statements are the most informal type of response in which feelings are expressed in response to specific positive or negative behaviors (Costello et al., 2009).

**Restorative circles:** This proactive restorative practice builds community and connectedness by providing a safe space for sharing concerns, feelings, and opinions that build character and social–emotional competence (High, 2017).

**Restorative conference:** This structured meeting occurs between victims and offenders to express facts and feelings that will lead to agreements about restitution (Wachtel, 2016).

**Restorative practices:** These practices represent an emerging social science in which the way to strengthen relationships between individuals and to create social connections within communities is researched (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2010).

**School climate:** This climate reflects values, relationships, goals, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures through the lens of all stakeholders, including students, staff, and parents (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

**Social–emotional learning:** Social–emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (DePaoli et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

A positive school climate can greatly affect students' social, emotional, and academic success. It is paramount that school staff members create environments that provide a safe and supportive space where students can learn to manage stress and handle frustration and conflicts

(Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Restorative practices offer opportunities to build relationships, provide outlets for emotions and feelings, and teach empathy and responsibility (Gregory et al., 2014). The researcher's aim in this study was to examine teachers' perceptions on the use of restorative practices in their classrooms.

The subsequent chapters highlight the study elements. In Chapter 2, the researcher provides an examination of applicable literature, including an overview of the foundational principles of SEL, restorative practices that teachers use in the classroom, and the impact observed within school communities. The research methodology is presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents results, and Chapter 5 offers conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

High (2017) wrote, “Educators have long emphasized the importance of school climate and community building to the social and emotional wellbeing, behavior, and competency of students” (p. 527). Jones et al. (2017) showed that a correlation exists between students’ social and emotional skills and “positive academic, social, and mental health outcomes” (p. 50). Hamilton et al. (2019) surveyed 15,000 teachers across the United States to gain insights on the importance of SEL implementation and practice. The outcomes clearly indicated that most teachers believed that SEL skills, including identifying and managing emotions, and showing empathy, were very important for students’ overall wellbeing (Hamilton et al., 2019). Positive relationships with students and staff help to build a sense of community, and students might be less likely to misbehave (Augustine et al., 2018). A restorative approach to handling severe misbehavior can result in students understanding how their actions affect others (Augustine et al., 2018). Restorative practices have gained recognition as a method to engage students, especially those with behavior challenges (Mayworm et al., 2016). Therefore, in this literature review, the researcher examines the foundational mechanisms of SEL, the restorative practices that teachers use, the effects of restorative practices on school climate, and the impacts to teacher practice.

#### **Social–Emotional Learning**

According to the CASEL (2021), SEL centers on the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. The five competencies address the social skills that are necessary to understand emotions and behaviors. For example, relationship skills encompass communication, social

engagement, relationship building, and teamwork (CASEL, 2021). These skills—which are paramount to improving both student attitudes and beliefs about self, others, school, and academic success—are often integrated into teaching pedagogy and are explicitly taught to students through classroom instruction (Rogers, 2019). The five competencies and skills are taught through SEL curriculum, school-wide practices and policies, and family and community partnerships (DePaoli et al., 2017). Schonert-Reichl (2017) wrote, “Extensive research evidence now confirms that SEL skills can be taught and measured, that they promote positive development and reduce problem behaviors, and that they improve students’ academic performance, citizenship, and health-related behaviors” (p. 138).

Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) discussed the way that SEL supports the goals of restorative practices. Payton et al. (2008, as cited in Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018) contended that SEL provides a comprehensive approach to teaching children how to identify and manage their emotions, acknowledging the perspectives of others, setting goals, making responsible decisions, and handling interpersonal situations effectively. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) argued that restorative practices enhance a student’s connection to school and “become a vehicle to develop students’ SEL skills which includes communication skills, kindness, empathy, and caring” (p. 111).

Domitrovich et al. (2017) stated that, through SEL, social–emotional competence grows, and that this growth is critical to child development, and can predict future life outcomes. Schools are social environments, and the emotional health of students and teachers strongly influence the success that can be achieved. When SEL programs are effective and consistent, they can lead to many benefits, including academic achievement (Greenberg et al., 2017). Zins et al. (2007) discussed how students learn in a collaborative manner with teachers and their peers,

for schools are intended to be social centers. However, within those social centers an integrated and coordinated system is needed to support the development of SEL. The most effective, sustained approaches involve students, parents, educators, and community members as partners in planning, implementing, and evaluating SEL efforts (Zins et al., 2007).

### **Restorative Mindset**

According to Evans and Vaandering (2016) the “application of restorative justice principles and practices in schools is relatively new with its early recorded work primarily in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom” (p. 16).

Restorative justice derives from the principles of restitution and relationships instead of just punishment (Zehr, 2015). Therefore, when wrongdoing occurs, those parties involved work towards an agreement to foster remorse and forgiveness (Kehoe et al., 2018; Zehr, 2015).

Restorative justice is becoming more popular within the criminal justice system through the successful use of victim–offender reconciliation programs. Evans and Vaandering (2016) wrote, “Restorative justice continued to gain traction, becoming officially recognized by the American Bar Association in 1994 and by the United Nations in 1999” (p. 16). School personnel began to adapt the practice that had been shown to work in the judicial system and used them in a school setting (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

In using restorative practice in a school setting, educators attempt to build community and respond to negative behavior in a way that is different from a more traditional punitive behavior management system (Chavis, 1998; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Karp & Clear, 2000). Wachtel (2016) created the term “restorative practice,” and the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) was developed to train professionals in restorative conferencing (Wachtel, 2016). The IIRP expanded its offerings and became the first graduate school that was

devoted entirely to restorative practices. IIRP's (2020) mission is to develop the field of restorative practices by educating professionals and conducting research that can influence practice. The main difference between restorative justice and restorative practices is that restorative justice focuses on rehabilitating the offender, while restorative practices are a whole school effort to build community (McCluskey et al., 2008). The goal of this restorative mindset is to create school communities in which students feel safe to support their academic achievement (Vaandering, 2013). Educators in K–12 education are pushing to shift away from punitive consequences such as suspensions and to develop systems that are more supportive and responsive so students can cultivate deeper understanding of the impact of their actions on others and the community as a whole (Velez et al., 2020).

Restorative practices are frameworks used in various school settings to build social connections, encourage emotional learning, and provide necessary strategies that encourage reflective consequences (Wachtel, 2016). Teachers and staff in a public school are responsible for implementing these strategies, while forming relationships with students (Freeman, 2018). Restorative practices encompass a reflective approach to behavioral challenges and provide a shift “from managing behavior to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships” (Hopkins, 2002). “Instead of zero tolerance and authoritarian punishment, restorative practices place responsibility on the students, using a collaborative response to wrongdoing” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 6).

Restorative practices respond to behavioral issues differently than traditional punitive consequences. Behaviors (e.g., fighting, disobedience, or disrespect) that, in a traditional system, might result in a suspension or expulsion are answered with a restitution style framework. The responsibility for making amends for wrongdoing is now put on the students in a collaborative

effort with trained staff (Mirsky, 2007). As Kline (2016) discussed, the fundamental principles of a restorative approach are promoting self-esteem and self-efficacy, handling conflict in a responsible way, having students take ownership for their actions, collaborating with community partners, and maintaining school environments that are conducive to learning for all students. For example, in Pennsylvania, at Palisades Middle School, students who required discipline because of a physical or verbal altercation alternatively wrote in a personal journal and answered a series of reflective questions (Mirsky, 2007).

Restorative practices require a shift in pedagogy, away from authoritarian methods of discipline to community-building techniques (Payne & Welch, 2015). Zero tolerance policies have changed since the 1980s and were reenergized by the events at Columbine High School in 1999 (Stahl, 2016). The use of zero tolerance policies provides no means of differentiating according to the circumstances of the incident or the parties involved (Rodríguez Ruiz, 2017). In a study conducted in Florida, Balfanz et al. (2015) showed that each suspension a ninth grade student received decreased their odds of graduating high school by 20% and decreased their odds of attending a college by 12%. In another study conducted in Texas, Fabelo et al. (2011) also indicated that suspensions and expulsions affected future life events. Students who were expelled or suspended for disciplinary infractions were about three times more likely to have some form of contact with the juvenile justice system within the next year.

### **Affective Statements and Questions**

The premise of restorative practices is to develop the ability to express emotions and feelings in a productive way (Wachtel, 2016). The most informal practices include affective statements and questions. Costello et al. (2009) contended that affective statements and questions are the “easiest and most useful tools for building a restorative classroom” (p. 12). Affective



statements and questions between school staff and students allow a respectful and reflective dialogue to occur. This dialogue presents the opportunity for the teacher to expose their humanistic side to students. “Affective statements help you build a relationship based on students’ new image of you as someone who cares and has feelings, rather than as a distant authority figure” (Costello et al., 2009, p. 13). For example, Gregory et al. (2014) conducted a study in two large, diverse high schools on the East Coast, in which student and staff survey data were used to determine the rate of implementation of the various restorative practices and to measure the impact on student–teacher relationships. The data showed that affective statements and questions were the most frequently implemented strategy and that students felt their use contributed to a more positive relationship (Gregory et al., 2014).

### **Circles**

Circles are representative of community and are “one of the most distinctive and flexible forms of restorative practices” (Costello et al., 2009, p. 23). Van Woerkom (2018) discussed the use of circles to build proactively relationships and skills students need to succeed and to address challenges. In a study from the Evanston–Skokie School District in Illinois, High (2017) used different terms for circles, including community circles or restorative circles, referring to them as sharing circles. Circles are often used in various ways, both for social–emotional and academic purposes, and in either a proactive or a reactive manner. A circle could be initiated in the event of a classroom conflict or as a means of getting to know students at the beginning of the year. High (2017) showed that sharing circles were used proactively to build community. They were often used for students to share feelings and concerns, while building value into characteristics such as respect, empathy, and accountability (High, 2017). In a case study of two Oakland Unified School District middle schools, Brown (2017) discussed the use of restorative practices.

Brown (2017) stated that the circle “was the most frequently used practice as it is the most flexible process for building community, teaching content, repairing harm and resolving conflict” (p. 58).

Tacker and Hoover (2011), in reviewing Costello et al. (2010), made a case for the use of circles in various contexts, including proactive check-ins, getting acquainted activities, and in response to wrongdoing. For example, Mirsky (2011) described how circles could be used in a group or class to handle conflict and manage tension. Acosta et al. (2016) recommended that, in schools that are fully implementing restorative practices, proactive circles should be used 80% of the circle time. Augustine et al. (2018) defined proactive circles as “meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors” (p. xi).

### **Conferencing**

The conferencing part of restorative practices can be informal or formal. Informal conferences are used to refocus students and address small infractions such as outbursts or disagreements (Costello et al., 2009). Costello et al. (2009) suggested that these informal conferences could take place in various areas of the building (i.e., hallway or cafeteria) where someone has been affected by another’s actions. A formal conference is held in the event of a serious infraction such as a physical altercation. Formal conferences require a facilitator and follow a specific script that allows all parties involved to express their feelings and emotions about the event (Costello et al., 2009). Most of the current literature has a positive tone when it comes to the use of conferences, yet Standing et al. (2011), who conducted a study in the United Kingdom, had a different view. Standing et al. (2011) studied an individual in a secondary

school, hoping to use restorative practices to change the student's behavior. The secondary school in the United Kingdom made an entire shift from punitive consequences to restorative practices. However, Standing et al. found no evidence that the implementation of informal and formal conferencing positively affected the student's behavior. It was apparent that the student could say all of the right things and have a thoughtful discussion with an adult regarding his behavior. Yet, when he returned to the classroom environment, the behavior remained unchanged (Standing et al., 2011). This outlying study on the effectiveness of conferences builds questions for future research.

### **Effects of Restorative Practices**

Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) wrote, "Restorative practices are the overarching philosophy and actions that regard relationships and learning from harm as paramount in any community setting" (p. 111). Mirsky (2007), Gregory et al. (2014), and Acosta et al. (2019) referred to the effects that restorative practices have on the school environment and stakeholders, including teachers and students. School climate, student-teacher relationships, creating trauma-informed environments, and classroom management are all themes that emerged from the literature reviewed in relation to teachers and their use of restorative practices in the classroom.

### **School Climate**

School climate means the "feelings and attitudes that are elicited by a school's environment" (Loukas, 2007, p. 1). Thapa et al. (2013) discussed the emphasis that is put on school climate. States use school climate reform as a measure for school improvement and bullying prevention (Thapa et al., 2013). School climates, whether positive or negative, affect students' development (Acosta et al., 2019). Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018)

suggested that restorative practices could be a measure to improve school climate by providing a positive method of handling school discipline.

The SaferSanerSchools pilot program highlighted three schools in southeastern Pennsylvania that implemented restorative practices (Mirsky, 2007). The restorative framework each school implemented was a bit different, yet each school reported a positive change in school climate. A decrease was observed in disciplinary referrals, and a shift in levels of caring and respect as measured through observation and student interviews. The continuum of restorative practices was used (Mirsky, 2007). The continuum of restorative practices gives a visual representation to the range of informal to formal practices that are available to restorative practice practitioners (Costello et al., 2009). At Palisades High School, teachers reported a newly established collaborative relationship among staff members (Mirsky, 2007). The environments were more supportive and friendly, and each school reported that many more opportunities opened for students to engage with staff on a personal level (Mirsky, 2007).

Boucaud (2017) conducted a study in three elementary schools in a large, Mid-Atlantic urban school district, and examined the relationship between restorative practices and school climate. Boucaud's research question was focused on the staff perceptions of the school climate after restorative practices were implemented for 3 years. The results of the quantitative study showed that teachers believed that a strong correlation existed between the use of restorative practices and a positive school climate (Boucaud, 2017). McCluskey et al. (2008) conducted a study in the United Kingdom that was a 2-year evaluation of a pilot program. Restorative practices were used in 18 schools including 10 secondary, seven primary schools, and one special school (McCluskey et al., 2008). This study was one of the few evaluative studies. McCluskey et al. (2008) found that the use of restorative practices was an extension of practices

already in place, including social skills courses. The successful schools in the pilot program had a-multilayered system for SEL, and the staff reported that restorative practices worked to connect the various initiatives. McCluskey et al. found evidence that students built conflict resolution skills and felt more positive, in general, with their school experience. In a study of 665 students in first grade to fifth grade in a public elementary school in Baltimore County, Maryland, Levin (2019) found no impact to a student's perception of school climate through the implementation of restorative practices.

### **Student/Teacher Relationships**

An important component for a restorative approach is the relationship building between students and staff. According to Gregory et al. (2014), teachers who implement restorative practices have a better relationship with their students than those who do not implement them. The social connection is developed and reinforced through affective communication (Gregory et al., 2014). This communication comes in the form of affective language, community circles, and conferences. Most researchers have shown that the use of restorative practices to build relationships relies heavily on the community building aspect through conversations. Rainbolt et al. (2019) conducted a study in a high school in the Mid-Atlantic states. In the mixed methods study, Rainbolt et al. investigated the teachers' perceptions of the implementation and effectiveness of restorative practices. In this study, Rainbolt et al. found that 78% of teachers believed restorative practices contributed to positive relationships. Brown (2017) contended that restorative practices are intended to create a space where students and adults can both feel safe and be heard and valued. In the Oakland Unified School District study, Brown (2017) discovered two themes that emerged from the findings: student voice and teacher voice. In the study, 96% of

respondents felt that teachers and students listened to each other and they were able to express themselves.

Gregory et al. (2014) took a different stance by adding the need for authoritative voice in the school climate. The mix of styles honors students' voice and input, allows adults to show a caring spirit, yet relies on a firm expectation for behavior. This study differed from most of the studies because Gregory et al. added the need for behavior expectations and a firm stance, while most other studies were focused on the development of relationships in a more emotional way. McCluskey (2008) in the United Kingdom proved that a strong link existed between newly implemented restorative practices and a positive impact on relationships. McCluskey described the way that students reported that teachers refrained from shouting, were fairer, listened to both sides, and made everyone feel that they were part of the group.

### **Creating Trauma-Informed Environments**

Dorado et al. (2016) studied how schools with restorative practices or similar programs helped to create trauma-informed environments. These programs gave educators a road map of how trauma should be handled, while allowing them to see how trauma affects a student's social and emotional learning and development. Educators could then respond appropriately to a student's actions, allowing them to heal rather than to cause them more harm (Dorado et al., 2016). Overstreet and Chafouleas (2016) stated, "Trauma-informed schools reflect a national movement to create educational environments that are responsive to the needs of trauma-exposed youth through the implementation of effective practices" (p. 1). The key idea is that effective practices need to identify the trauma and educators need to respond in ways that will not retraumatize the student (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Walkley and Cox (2013) discussed the work that the state of Washington was doing to bring trauma-informed principles to education

through the Compassionate Schools Initiative. Two elements of the 10 principles of compassionate schools are a positive school climate and the use of restorative practices (Walkley & Cox, 2013).

An emphasis has been placed on trauma research because of the increased rates of exposure to trauma-inducing events (e.g., violence in and around the home, loss of family, friends or neighbors, and stressors because of financial, social, or domestic contributors; Aber et al., 2011). Researchers know that youth who witness or have experience with community violence have a higher tendency to show aggression and have behavioral challenges (Harden et al., 2015). Almost 60% of children witness or experience some sort of violence every year (Blitz et al., 2016; Finkelhor et al., 2013). Schools must be equipped with strategies and programs to address these concerns. Harden et al. (2015) conducted a study on the Chicago south side to look at intervention programs that addressed trauma. Restorative practices were an integral component of the program. In the 9-month implementation plan, 44 youth were selected to participate. Harden et al. found that developing community and social skills through restorative practices had a positive impact on youth development and their ability to use these skills to advocate and engage their families and community.

### **Classroom Management**

The research is scarce on teachers' use of restorative practices in the United States, but it is known that they are using elements of restorative practices as an alternative to traditional punitive behavior management (Fronius et al., 2019). Spore (2018) conducted a study to examine elementary school teachers' beliefs about restorative justice. The participants were teachers in Grades K–6 from one school in the greater Seattle area. Spore found that teachers acknowledged the need to build relationships with students to have a positive behavior response. The

participants also emphasized that traditional punitive consequences proved to be ineffective (Spore, 2018). In the United Kingdom, Short et al. (2018) conducted a study to explore the views of secondary school teachers who had implemented a whole school restorative approach for 5 years. Short et al. used a small sample with only five participants. The results indicated that the whole-school approach had a positive impact on restorative communication, provided an opportunity for learning and growth, and helped to create a positive atmosphere while building relationships (Short et al., 2018). Short et al. (2018) also highlighted some challenges that the teachers indicated, including maintaining consistency throughout the school and the individual differences in the maturity of students in handling a restorative process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study was to determine K–8, public school teachers' perceptions of restorative practices. The conceptual framework for this study was rooted in the theory of social constructivism, which uses the experiences of individuals to generate meaning and understanding (Creswell, 2013). The theory of social constructivism is a worldview that could be applied to this study as a gateway to understanding the participant's perspective (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism allows people to form the meaning of their experiences. Creswell (2013) wrote, "These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas" (p. 25). Social constructivism also supports phenomenology as the methodology of the study, which allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions, while providing an opportunity for teachers to make meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2013). This theory led to open-ended questioning that allowed the participants to develop their thoughts in an organic manner that led to an interpretation according to their history and cultural norms (Creswell, 2013).



Vygotsky (1997, as cited in McLeod, 2018), one of the pioneers of constructivism, believed that learning has much to do with social interaction and that “community plays a central position in the process of making meaning” (n.p.). Vygotsky’s (1997) sociocultural theory supported this researcher’s study by allowing the researcher to focus on the interactions that students have with adults. Vygotsky (1997, as cited in Nurfaidah, 2018) suggested, “The intellectual skills acquired by children are regarded to be directly related to their interaction with adults and peers in specific problem-solving environments” (p. 150). Jaramillo (1996) discussed how Vygotsky’s (1997) views could be applied to an educational setting in classrooms with teachers and students. Students need to have a connection and feel they are treated fairly, while having opportunities to participate in establishing rules and in the learning process (Jaramillo, 1996). This conceptual framework supported the principles of restorative practices and guided this researcher’s study in examining the collaborative relationships within the classroom.

This study was also supported by the origins of restorative justice where relationships were the central focus (Zehr, 2015). Evans and Vaandering (2016) discussed how restorative justice in an educational setting could be viewed as a theoretical framework “through which to view not only the repairing of harm but also the restoration of healthy relationships, emphasizing just and equitable learning environments” (p. 22). The theory of restorative justice was built on the notion that, when an offense is committed, people and relationships are harmed, and justice can be obtained by healing the harm done (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). Therefore, in this researcher’s study, the focus was on how teachers use restorative practices to foster and repair relationships and to build social–emotional skills.

The theoretical framework that supported and guided this study was drawn from the Social Discipline Window that Glaser (1964) and Braithwaite (1989) developed, and McCold

and Wachtel (2003) adapted. The Social Discipline Window addresses the four approaches that restorative practitioners use to address behavior (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). Teachers in classrooms have choices regarding how they maintain classroom discipline. The Social Discipline Window is a visual representation of the two continuums of control and support. The multiple combinations of the two continuums create the four quadrants of punitive, neglectful, permissive, and restorative (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). This researcher sought to examine how teachers perceive the use of restorative practices and to highlight the elements of the Social Discipline Window.

### **Conclusion**

Although school staff has used elements of restorative practices for decades, the emphasis has more recently been on the use of a restitution style method of behavior management (Kehoe, 2017). The authors in literature addressed (a) the shift to restorative practices, and (b) the way that teachers use these practices in the classroom. The use of restorative strategies, including circles and affective conversational tools can build relationships resulting in positive impact on students and staff (Gregory et al., 2014). When teachers use restorative practices the effects can include the impact on school climate, student–teacher relationships, creating trauma-informed environments, and classroom management. Chapter 3 presents the study methodology, including the research questions and design, site information and population, sampling method, data collection and analysis, and limitations.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher sought to gain insight on teachers' experiences using restorative practices in the classroom. Restorative practices, as Wachtel (2016) defined them, are focused on social development and discipline through participatory learning opportunities. Restorative practices are frameworks that are used in school settings to build positive school climate, encourage social–emotional learning, and provide strategies that use reflective consequences (Skiba & Losen, 2016). Restorative practices consist of affective language, community building circles, and informal and formal conferences (Anyon et al., 2016). Embracing the fundamentals of restorative practices requires teachers to replace “ways of interacting which are based on control and compliance with distinctly different ones, based on appreciative inquiry and respect for difference” (Drewery & Kecskemeti, 2010, p. 107). In this chapter, the researcher presents the methodology of the study, including the research design, data collection, analysis, limitations, and ethical issues.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers' perceptions of restorative practices in K–8 classrooms. The lived experiences of teachers who are implementing restorative practices to build community and to engage students with behavior challenges were the focus of this study. The phenomenon of restorative practices in classrooms was examined, including when, where, and how restorative practices are implemented and how these practices support SEL efforts. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) explored the connection between restorative practices and SEL. They found that by using these two approaches simultaneously, an opportunity opened for restorative practices to contribute to student

development of “social skills, including communication skills, kindness, empathy, and caring” (p. 110).

### **Research Questions and Design**

In this study, the researcher sought to explore K–8 teachers’ perceptions of their experience in using restorative practices in the classroom. The research questions for this study aligned with the problem and purpose statements. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do K–8 teachers implement restorative practices in the classroom?
2. How do K–8 teachers use restorative practices to support SEL in the classroom?
3. How do restorative practices affect school climate?

This study was a qualitative phenomenological study. A qualitative study offers the opportunity to seek out an “interpretive, naturalistic approach” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). As Creswell (2013) wrote, “Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 44). In this study, the researcher aimed to provide an approach that would gather appropriate data, while being cognizant of the experiences of the study participants. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) also discussed how the intention of qualitative research is to “examine social situations or interactions, with the researcher becoming immersed in the world of others in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of a phenomenon or experience” (p. 42). Therefore, in this study, the researcher provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of restorative practices through the lens of the classroom teacher.

Qualitative research offered multiple approaches and a phenomenological design provided an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experience with a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological research design was chosen to emphasize the participant's voice to investigate the phenomenon of a restorative practices in a K–8 school setting. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed the use of phenomenology with human experiences that could be deemed affective or emotional. Padilla-Díaz (2015) discussed the way that phenomenology is useful and purposeful in the field of education. Padilla-Díaz (2015) wrote that phenomenology is a “genuine manner of representing the realities that participants experience in their lives” (p. 108). Loomer (2017) used a phenomenological research design to seek the way that teachers who use restorative approaches adopt a restorative justice mindset. Loomer (2017) focused on the process of how teachers came to use restorative practices. Similarly, in this study, the researcher sought to explore the perceptions of how teachers use restorative practices to affect SEL and school climate. In addition, as Creswell and Poth (2018) discussed, the added element of phenomenological reflection is deemed appropriate in this study. Phenomenological reflection allowed the researcher to formulate meaning from the experiences of the participants. In this study, the researcher offered potential participants the opportunity to reflect on their own practice and the researcher's reflection on the information gathered. Finlay (2006) discussed the relationship between experience and reflection in a phenomenological design and the way that this relationship affects both the researcher and participant.

### **Site Information and Population**

The site chosen for this study was in the state of Connecticut. According to the Connecticut State Department of Education (2020), the state has 205 school districts with 1,506 public schools. The public schools are staffed with 52,005 teachers including special education,

instructional specialists, and other support staff. There are currently 35,414 general education teachers in all grades K–12.

In 2019, the Connecticut General Assembly passed and Governor Ned Lamont signed Public Act No. 19-166, an Act Concerning School Climates. The act advocates the establishment of the Social–Emotional Learning and School Climate Advisory Collaborative. This collaboration shows the intentions of the state government to identify and support best practices in promoting social–emotional learning and positive school climate (Connecticut General Assembly, 2019). This act provided resources for school districts in Connecticut to identify best practices and implement initiatives to improve school climate and implement SEL approaches in schools (Connecticut General Assembly, 2019).

In September of 2020, the Connecticut State Department of Education released school reopening guidelines according to COVID-19 infection rates per county. The Commissioner of Education, Dr. Miguel A. Cardona, and Governor Ned Lamont highly encouraged the entire state to return to in-person learning on some scale (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2020). Currently, 34% of public school districts have returned fully in-person, 59.9% of districts are using a hybrid model, and 6.1% are fully remote (EdSight, 2020). Two of the largest school districts are fully remote (Putterman & Brindley, 2020). This could have limited the data that were collected because a gap might have existed in the participants' use of restorative practices over the last 8 months.

### **Sampling Method**

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, purposeful sampling was used. Purposeful sampling is the selection of participants who can provide insight and understanding to the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) also discussed

the importance of selecting participants to understand thoroughly the central phenomenon. The potential participants met the following criteria:

1. Public School Teacher in Connecticut.
2. Teaching grades K–8.
3. Implementing restorative practices in their classroom including: restorative circles, affective questions and statements, and restorative conferencing.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The study began with the recruitment flyer (Appendix A) that was posted on the Connecticut Elementary School Teachers Facebook group. This Facebook group consists of classroom teachers from Connecticut, and members are prescreened through a series of questions. The moderators of the group verify school staff directories prior to accepting new members. The group is intended to provide support and resources to teachers by encouraging members to share information, insight, and by asking questions. The researcher obtained permission from the private group moderator to post the recruitment flyer (Appendix B). The recruitment flyer invited any teacher who taught Grades K–8 in a Connecticut public school and who implemented restorative practices to participate. The private group has approximately 4,100 members and has active participation with new postings daily. The posting remained active until a minimum of 10 participants was reached. The flyer requested that interested members email the researcher at the address provided. This email was a separate account that was designated only for the purpose of the study. The potential participants who responded to the recruitment flyer received the University of New England Consent for Participation in Research (Appendix C), a short recruitment questionnaire to establish their eligibility (Appendix D, Teachers' Perceptions of Restorative Practices in K–8 Classrooms Recruitment Questionnaire), and

schedule of interview times. Interviews were through Zoom, a video conferencing program (Zoom Video Communications, 2021). The potential participants chose an available interview time and the researcher sent a secured link and password for the interview. Interviews varied in time ranging from 30–60 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded through Zoom. The recorded interviews were automatically transcribed by using Sonix, which is a transcription service that can be integrated into Zoom to transcribe automatically (Sonix.com). The interviews were semistructured, which as Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed, is a moderate structure that allows for flexible wording or a mix of structured and unstructured questions. The interview questions (Appendix E) were derived from the research questions and the conceptual framework.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell and Poth (2018) offered a five-step data analysis process, which is often visualized as a spiral, to interpret the text that will emerge from the interviews. The five steps were:

1. Preparing and organizing the data for analysis.
2. Reviewing the data and identify emerging ideas.
3. Describing groups of meaning, coding, and determining themes.
4. Developing and assessing the interpretation of the themes.
5. Representing the data through description or visual.

The interviews were conducted and the researcher had the audio transcribed. All of the transcribed interviews were sent to the participants for member checking through email. Participants had 5 days to review the transcript and make corrections. After the member check was complete, the researcher read each transcript carefully to get an overall impression of the depth and quality of the content (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The next step was to chunk the



data, forming categories or codes. Coding refers to the “process of noting what is of interest or significance, identifying different segments of the data, and labeling them to organize the information contained in the data” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). The codes were then examined to identify the themes that emerged from the interview data. Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggested identifying five to seven themes for the study that represent multiple perspectives. The final step was to use a narrative approach to represent the themes in a descriptive discussion of the findings.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

Limitations refer to the weaknesses or flaws that could be found in a research design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The use of a phenomenological research design did have limitations. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) discussed how phenomenology requires a strong philosophical understanding. The philosophical understanding of phenomenology is to draw from the lived experiences of people to depict the essence of the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the phenomenon of restorative practices was examined through the perspective of the classroom teacher.

This qualitative phenomenological study relied on a small number of participants who met the study eligibility criteria. The limitation was that this sample was not reflective of all teachers. Those teachers who participated might have done so because they had a strong opinion about the phenomenon of restorative practices, and this could have influenced their responses.

### **Credibility**

Credibility, otherwise referred to as internal validity, shows how the research connects to the meaning of reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) described the criterion of credibility as “the researcher’s ability to take into account and explain all the

complexities that present themselves in a study and to address the patterns, themes, and issues that might not be easily or simply understood” (p. 202). In this phenomenological study, the researcher used the data to develop themes directly from the content of the interviews. The researcher took a neutral stance and reported the findings as the participants gave them.

### **Member Checking Procedures**

Member checking is a “process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This process occurred after all of the initial interviews were completed and transcribed. All of the participants were sent an email of their transcribed interview to review for accuracy. They had 5 days to make corrections and, after this date, all of the transcripts were considered accurate.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the idea that the findings of a study can be applied to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study relies on purposeful sampling of public school teachers in Connecticut who use restorative practices in their classroom. The participants were specific; therefore, the transferability was low, yet the findings might yet affect decisions that will be made within the state in the use of restorative practices in schools.

### **Dependability**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) stated that dependability “refers to whether one can adequately track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (p. 204). Documentation of the data collection and analysis process is essential to help understand and replicate the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, interviews were semistructured and recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and member checked. The researcher used Creswell and Poth’s (2018) five-step, data analysis process.

## **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the researcher's ability to interpret the findings in an authentic way that is procured from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). For this study, Creswell's (2013) data analysis process provided the steps necessary to analyze the data in a way that allowed clarity in the findings.

## **Ethical Issues**

In a qualitative study, it is imperative that trust be established when the participants share personal information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Ethical issues must be considered throughout the different phases of the research (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the researcher provided the participants with a clear understanding of the purpose of the study and their role in the process. The study focused on teacher perspectives; therefore, the teachers were provided an informed consent letter. The researcher provided confidentiality by assigning pseudonyms to the teachers for use during data analysis. Thomas and Hodges (2010) discussed the use of pseudonyms to preserve de-identification beginning with the interviews. All required protections were put in place as this study moved forward.

## **Researcher Affiliation**

The researcher is a 16-year employee of a public school system in Connecticut and has held roles including classroom teacher and assistant principal and is currently a principal in a K–8 school. The researcher has worked in two schools that implemented restorative practices. Potential participants might have been under the direct supervision of the researcher. The recruitment of the participants came from a flyer posted in the Connecticut Elementary Educators Facebook group. It is unknown whether any current school employees are members of

this group. The researcher did not directly seek out participants from the school. No coercion or undue influence was used in the recruitment of potential participants.

The researcher has been formally trained in restorative practices and continues to build on the skills that are necessary to maintain adequate preparation. The researcher has participated in and led the implementation of restorative practices in two K–8 public schools. This implementation included professional development given to staff, and the administrative responsibilities of facilitating restorative conferences and monitoring these practices throughout the implementation process. The researcher has experienced both positive and negative results with the use of restorative practices. With this background knowledge, the researcher could use the concept of bracketing, which set aside during data collection and analysis the previous experiences and removed personal feelings (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher sought to examine teachers' perceptions of their experience in using restorative practices in K–8 classrooms. A phenomenological research design was chosen to generate an authentic understanding of the lived experiences of the teachers. The participants were public school teachers who used restorative practices in their K–8 classrooms in Connecticut. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling and according to the data were collected through semistructured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed and coded, using a five-step analysis, to identify themes, patterns, and ideas. Throughout the study, the researcher addressed issues of credibility and validity by using content directly from the interview transcripts.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers' perceptions of restorative practices in Kindergarten–Grade 8 (K–8) classrooms. This study was important because, as Morrison (2007) concluded, there is a need to explore the “range of implementation, development and sustainability issues” (p. 346) with the use of restorative practices in schools. Therefore, understanding the experiences of the 10 participants who are K–8 public school teachers in Connecticut adds to the understanding of the use of restorative practices in schools. Restorative practices offer an alternative to traditional disciplinary approaches by providing strategies that include affective language, restorative circles, and restorative conferencing (Costello et al. 2009). As Evans and Vaandering (2016) stated, restorative practices are focused on building relationships, repairing harm and managing conflict, and creating fair learning environments.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) said that the purpose of qualitative research is to “examine social situations or interactions, with the researcher becoming immersed in the world of others in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of a phenomenon or experience” (p. 42).

Phenomenology provides the framework to focus on how one's experience converts to consciousness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, it was essential that the researcher engage participants who would willingly share their experiences to promote and add understanding to the phenomenon of restorative practices. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do K–8 teachers implement restorative practices in the classroom?
2. How do K–8 teachers use restorative practices to support SEL in the classroom?
3. How do restorative practices affect school climate?

In this chapter, the researcher provides a detailed description of the data analysis process and the results together with a phenomenological methodology. The themes that emerged from the data were (a) the use of restorative practices for community and relationship building (b) social competency for students and staff, and (c) the need for consistent restorative structure within a school community. These themes reflect the overall experiences that the participants in this study have had, using restorative practices in their classrooms.

### **Analysis Method**

The study began by recruiting participants with a flyer that was posted on the public Facebook page for the CT Elementary School Teachers (2001). The post was displayed as public and was allowed to be shared by others. The flyer invited Connecticut K–8 public school educators to participate in the study. The post remained on the Facebook page for 2 weeks until 10 participants were identified. The flyer directed interested participants to email the researcher and the researcher followed up with an informed consent form and list of available interview times. As the interviews were scheduled, the researcher provided an individual link and passcode to the Zoom interview to provide confidentiality.

Data were gathered from 10 participants through semistructured interviews over the course of 3 weeks. The interviews ranged from 25 to 40 minutes. The researcher had anticipated that interviews would be 30–60 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded through Zoom, a video conference platform (Zoom Video Communications, 2021), and the sound files were uploaded to Sonix for transcription. The researcher reviewed the transcripts for clarity and sent them to the participants for member checking before she analyzed them. All of the participants were given 5 days to respond about whether they had concerns about the transcripts. Each participant agreed that their transcript was authentic. The consent forms, contact information,

and transcripts are kept on a password-protected thumb drive. To provide confidentiality, all of the participants were assigned a pseudonym prior to the data analysis.

In this study, to interpret the text that emerged from the interviews, the researcher used a five-step data analysis process that Creswell and Poth (2018) developed (often visualized as a spiral). The five steps are detailed in the following list:

1. Preparing and organizing the data for analysis.
2. Reviewing the data and identify emerging ideas.
3. Describing groups of meaning, coding, and determining themes.
4. Developing and assessing the interpretation of the themes.
5. Representing the data through description or visual.

Data collection and analysis, as Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, is a moving, interrelated process. The collected data emerged from the participants' responses to nine interview questions. As each interview was completed the researcher sent the transcript to the participant for member checking. Next, for Step 1, the researcher began preparing and organizing the data. The researcher read through each transcript several times, printed hard copies, and organized the responses by assigning colors to each code to aid in the coding process. For Step 2, the researcher reviewed each transcript and made notations throughout to identify key ideas. Some of the ideas that emerged were conflicts, conversations, support, questions, discipline, feelings, talking, circles, climate, social–emotional learning, accountability, school environment, and future impact. For Steps 3 and 4, the researcher developed a series of codes to sort through the data and determine themes. The researcher identified significant statements from the participant responses. As Moustakas (1994) suggested, all of the participant's experiences correlated with the themes discovered. For Step 5, the researcher strove to grasp the essence of each participant's

experience with restorative practices. With each perspective, the description of each experience enabled the researcher to identify common threads that contributed to the understanding of the shared experience of the participants.

### **Presentation of Results**

The participants' experiences with using restorative practices were gathered through a nine-question interview. Each interview question was formulated to support the overarching research questions. The interview questions were categorized and a description provides an overview of the participants' responses, including what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). After the data from this study were presented, a discussion on the themes that emerged was presented. The themes identified included (a) the use of restorative practices for community and relationship building, (b) the development of social competency for students and staff, and (c) the need for consistent restorative structure within a school community.

### **Participant Information**

The criteria for each participant who was selected for the study were (a) teaching in a public school in Connecticut, (b) teaching in a K–8 classroom, and (c) using restorative practices in their classroom. In addition, the researcher sought to identify the restorative practices that were used in the classroom. The first interview question provided the participants the opportunity to share more information about themselves and their school experience. A summary of the criteria from Interview Question 1 with the participants' pseudonyms are shown in Table 1.



**Table 1***Participant's Profiles*

Participants	Grade level	Years in education	District type	Uses restorative practices in classroom
Teacher A	3–5	16	Urban	✓
Teacher B	3	6	Urban	✓
Teacher C	3–5	9	Urban	✓
Teacher D	3	20	Urban	✓
Teacher E	K–8	17	Urban	✓
Teacher F	3–5	7	Urban	✓
Teacher G	5	20	Urban	✓
Teacher H	K	6	Suburban	✓
Teacher I	7–8	22	Suburban	✓
Teacher J	1	7	Urban	✓

**Use of Restorative Practices in K–8 Classrooms**

Interview Question 2 asked, “What are your experiences using restorative practices in your classroom?” This offered participants the opportunity to share their own experiences using restorative practices. All of the participants began their answer by stating that they use restorative practices for community building, and six participants referred the importance of using restorative practices in an authentic way to build relationships. Teacher A stated, “I think it [using restorative practices] comes naturally to create that classroom where kids feel safe, often being authentic with the kids to create a safe environment.” Teacher C acknowledged the way

that using restorative practices builds community from the first day with students: “I like to try and use them [restorative practices] from day one, kind of build the expectation and culture among students that we are in this together.” Teacher D commented that restorative practices give students the opportunity to get comfortable talking to each other, which in turn builds community. Teacher D went on to say:

We practice a lot about just being a community and I stress with them [students] that we are like a family and we need to be comfortable with each other, to talk with each other, and talk about our feelings and what things are happening.

Teacher B had similar comments about using restorative practices to encourage students to work together. Teacher B stated, “We’ve had a lot of success in the classroom just from building those relationships with the kids and making them feel a part of the family.” Teacher E similarly stated, “Restorative practices are a good way to just build relationships with the kids and have them learn how to treat people better.” Although acknowledging being a novice with restorative practices, Teacher H referenced using restorative practices to teach students at an early age the skills necessary to be social beings. Teacher I also expressed the idea that restorative practices are really about “creating an environment where a student who struggles doesn’t feel ostracized and feels part of the community.”

Interview Questions 3–5 focused on the specific restorative practices, including affective language, circles, and conferencing. Although there were similarities and differences in implementation, all of the participants responded that these practices were used within their classrooms.

### *Affective Language*

The participants acknowledged using affective language in two ways. First, they used affective language to set behavior expectations. Teacher A explained that affective language is used in the classroom to motivate students. When speaking to a student to help motivate them if they were not engaged, Teacher A would use a statement such as, “I really appreciate it when you are on task.” Teacher A explained that she sees students respond better to that type of language than if she were to tell a student to get to work. Similarly, Teacher G uses “I feel . . .” statements with students to express both positive and negative emotions. For example, Teacher G stated, “I do a lot of ‘it makes me feel happy when you come in and you are ready to go’ or ‘it makes me feel frustrated when I am trying to talk and people are talking to each other’.” Teacher H, who teaches Kindergarten, also models the appropriate behavior through affective language. Teacher H stated, “If I have a handful of students who are not following the direction, I would stop and say ‘I feel sad when I see friends not following the directions.’” Teacher H also commented that this is a good way to get students back on track and reengage them into the lesson.

Teacher F referenced having to think more before speaking to students and rephrasing a standard, “No, don’t do that” to “I like it when you do this . . .” Teacher F explained:

I feel like when you use “I” statements with the kids, they are more open and they kind of are like, “Wow, I really am hurting her feelings.” You know, sometimes I think that they think we’re [teachers] like these robots that don’t have any emotions or feelings when really we do. So just humanizing myself for them helps.

Teacher I commented that affective language takes time to implement because it is a more thoughtful way to talk to people. Teacher I also explained that this is the way to move on from

punitive sounding language. Teacher I stated, “Instead of saying ‘don’t do this,’ you flip it to what are the positive behaviors that we are trying to encourage.”

Secondly, the participants described using affective language to teach students how to express their feelings. Teacher C starts with simple sentence starters and builds the student’s capacity for more in depth answers. A sentence starter commonly used in the classroom might start with “I feel” or “I think” followed by an emotion or phrase and a “because.” For example, Teacher C shared that students might say, “I feel angry because I am sharing a tablet with someone.” Teacher C explained that students could use sentence starters to express emotions that are related to personal or academic areas. Teacher C stated, “After 2 and 3 years of this [using affective language], I am seeing a lot of my students be able to articulate how they feel more easily.” Teacher D also expressed how students could become more aware of their own emotions and the emotions of others through affective language. Teacher E stated, “At the end of the day, kids are basically good, they just have to learn how to express their emotions in a positive way, even when they are feeling badly.”

### *Circles*

All of the participants were very consistent with the use of restorative circles in their classrooms. The participants primarily used restorative circles to build community and address conflicts, but two participants also acknowledged using restorative circles for academic needs. Four of the 10 participants used restorative circles daily in their classroom. Teacher B stated, “I think it’s just a good way to get to know the kids.” Teacher B used restorative circles daily to check in with how students are feeling. Similarly, Teacher D would use a restorative circle to have students rate themselves from a 1–5 scale or with a smiley face chart to encourage shy

students to participate. Teacher D also spoke to the opportunity for the teacher to share in the circle. Teacher D explained:

If they see that I am vulnerable, if I am sharing in the circle, and tell them, I am a two today because my daughter spilled milk all over the kitchen and the dog was licking it up and it was a big mess, it humanizes you. It shows them my kids make mistakes, I make mistakes. It is just a good base for the future when there are big problems that we need to talk about.

Teacher G also used restorative circles for check-ins. Teacher G explained:

I feel like a check-in is really powerful and something that's so simple but has such a huge impact on your day. When a kid comes in and tells you that they are a one, now you know to keep an eye on that student for a while. Then it also gets the other kids thinking, "Wow, he/she is a one today, what can I do to help him/her have a better day?"

Teacher E acknowledged that restorative circles give students the chance to use their voice and get comfortable speaking in front of others. Teacher E stated, "A lot of kids will clam up and not want to speak, but the topics in circles interest them and they participate because it's not intimidating." Teacher A acknowledged that the use of restorative circles is a gradual process starting with simple questions and working towards higher level thinking. Teacher H stated that early questions might be "What is your favorite food?" or "What is your favorite holiday?" and help to build the community. When the community is established and there is a safe space, Teacher F suggested that students feel more comfortable and they are more open with their thoughts.

Restorative circles are also used to mitigate conflicts and resolve problems. Teacher A mentioned that restorative circles are first used to develop relationships and are then used if there

is a problem in the classroom. Likewise, Teacher C shared that, when there is a problem in the classroom, a circle can be a place to sort out the issues without singling anyone out. Teacher C stated, “When the relationships already exist, if there is a problem, I can quickly address it.”

Teacher D mentioned the positioning of students within the circle itself as a strategy to resolve conflicts. Teacher D explained:

If two students are having a problem that I am made aware of, I might have them sit in the circle next to each other and have the students say something nice to the person next to them. This helps to handle the situation without even really talking to either student.

Teacher I acknowledged using a whole class circle for reestablishing norms and expectations within the classroom. Teacher I stated, “A lot of it is about norm resets when we hit bumps in the road or when we all kind of need reminders.”

Two teachers mentioned using restorative circles for academic needs. Teacher B referred to this type of circle as a “teaching or learning circle” and explained that they can be used in math, reading, or writing. Teacher B explained:

We use whiteboards and show our work, kind of just sitting in a circle and seeing what everyone is doing. You could see the different ways that students track or learn and show their work because not everyone is the same learner. A lot of times students benefited from being able to draw their response and talk about it.

Teacher H spoke about sometimes using a narrative story with the students to explore characters and their feelings. Teacher H shared:

I might tell a little narrative story and we talk about what happened in the story and how certain people in the story might have been feeling and what the students would have

done if they were that person in the story, what they could have done differently, or it they would have done the same thing.

Teacher C discussed how restorative circles could also be a place where students expressed their thoughts about assignments. Teacher C stated:

I am also using circles if there is something on me, like they [students] might say, 'This assignment is crazy, it's too hard, you're asking us to do many different things.' So I will stop and talk about it and get some input. 'Let's see not only where are you struggling, but how do you see that we could fix it?'

### ***Conferencing***

All of the participants acknowledged the use of restorative conferences as a primary method of handling conflicts between two students or a small group. The methods that teachers used were all a bit different, for the participants described both structured conferences with specific language and more informal conversations. The researcher also noted that four participants did not feel they had been adequately trained to conduct conferences and that they identified other school staff, including counselors and administrators, as being primarily responsible for that process.

Teacher J saw a conference as a time to pull students to the side to have a conversation and problem solve. Teacher J would ask students, "What happened? What can we do to solve this problem?" Similarly, Teacher B identified the meeting as a "problem solving conference" with two students or a small group. Teacher B thought it was important to give students the opportunity to explain what happened. Teacher C spoke to a more structured format, including using specific questions. Teacher C explained:

I would use restorative questions I have posted in the classroom. We start by one person talking at a time, listening to the other person, starting with what happened, what they were thinking, how they are feeling, making sure both students get a chance to tell their story. And, a lot of times, it's more just giving them [the students involved] the chance to talk to each other about what happened.

Teacher F referenced using a restorative conference often when disagreements happen on the playground. Teacher F acknowledged that students often do not even realize what a disagreement is about and need time to calm down and express their own feelings. Teacher F said:

This explosion happened for the student, but then when you backtrack and you find out, you know, on the playground, they took the ball from me or they didn't want me on their team. I try and teach them [students] that these things can be avoidable if you just tell the other person how you're feeling.

Similarly, Teacher G expressed that a key element of a restorative conference is to get the students who are having the problem away from anybody else in the situation so that they can calm down and sort out their feelings. Teacher F explained the importance of the restorative conference and the way that students learn the tools to be able to stand up for themselves by being their own voice, but in a polite way. Teacher F discussed:

They [students] need to be able to explain their feelings and why they're feeling that way. And so often many kids don't, they're either too shy or they get mad. So if I'm not there, I like them to at least have the tools to be able to have an informal conference with one another. But most of the time it does involve me and I do make sure that both sides are heard. And then they come to a consensus of what is going to happen next, not me. So I try and stay out of it and make sure that they come up with the solution, not me.



The participants differentiated between informal conferencing that they would help to mediate between students and a more formal conference that is scripted with an official facilitator. Teacher I spoke about how restorative conferencing was primarily done by the counselors in the school. Teacher I mentioned that teachers acting as the official facilitator could lead to an awkward dynamic in the classroom. Teacher I explained that when the teacher is a participant, instead of the facilitator, the restorative conference serves its purpose and it is not teacher against student. Teacher I said:

You've reestablished equilibrium, because, if we're always the ones running it, they just feel like it's us against them, whereas, if we're a participant with them and someone else is asking the questions and leading the talk, then it works.

Teacher A and Teacher H acknowledged not being formally trained in restorative conferencing and Teacher D mentioned that other staff was primarily responsible for that type of intervention if there was a serious conflict between students.

### **School Climate**

Interview Questions 6 and 7 centered on the way that the participants viewed the impact of restorative practices on the school climate and the way that they would describe the current school climate in each school. Interview Question 6 asked, "Based on your experiences, how can restorative practices impact school climate?" All of the participants responded favorably to the impact that restorative practices can have on school climate, if implemented appropriately. One participant Teacher E said, "It's [restorative practices] hugely impactful. Kids are innately good and they don't want to hurt somebody. They learn life lessons." Teacher D referred to the classroom and discussed the importance of students feeling safe at school and the way that

restorative practices give students the opportunity to express themselves without fear of judgement. Teacher D said:

If you say ‘my favorite food is shrimp’ and someone else likes shrimp, they feel safe to say those things and know they won’t get judged. They know that no one is going to laugh at them. And if they feel safe in that circle, they’re going to feel safe in small groups, and safe in the classroom to be able to raise their hand and answer questions.

Teacher F acknowledged that sending students home for the day for doing something wrong does not fix the underlying problem of understanding how their actions and words affect other people.

Teacher F explained:

I feel like they are learning that they can talk about things rather than getting in trouble. I feel like they are more apt to admit when they’re wrong, so when they are wrong, they’re not going to lie, they’re not going to try and hide it, they are going to admit what they did and they’re going to accept that. Now we are going to have a conversation about it to know what happened and what is going to happen because of it. When they understand how the other person felt, it is a more positive experience.

Teacher H acknowledged that relationship building is at the core of restorative practices and gives students the opportunity to work on the skills that they need to develop relationships.

Teacher H stated:

Students are going to be able to have strong relationships with each other and their teachers. It is really important because it is kind of like the foundation or the building blocks for these kids to know how to have a relationship and how to be socially appropriate.

Teacher B went further with the impact on school climate and expressed the difference in climate by using restorative practices. Teacher B explained:

The school I interned in and student taught in did not use restorative practices. The climate with the kids was different than a school like the school I am in now that uses restorative practices. There is more of a community and I think that the teachers are more aware of the kids' needs and not only the kids' needs, but the adult needs as well.

However, it was evident that the participants believed that restorative practices need to come naturally for teachers and implementation in the classroom and throughout the school is consistent. Teacher A stated, "If you are genuine and you are implementing it [restorative practices] with fidelity, I think that it helps create a classroom where people feel valued and respected." Teacher B also referred to restorative practices needing to be a natural process. Teacher B said, "I don't think some teachers see it as doing something extra, because it's something they do naturally." Teacher I expressed disappointment with the way that restorative practices have been implemented in the school. Teacher I discussed how telling teachers just to do something new does not change the climate. Teacher I spoke about the experience being frustrating because the implementation stalled at a point where it could have had impact had it continued. Teacher I explained:

As someone who has done this for a while, if they had implemented it the right way, where it is embedded in the culture, then you have a climate of acceptance and the opportunity for kids to have chances. Some kids feel like the first time they make a mistake they've lost their chance with the teacher. They've lost their chance with their peers. And if this is something that the whole community buys into, then you feel like

you have that little security net, like, okay I messed up, but we can figure a way out of it. So I think when implemented correctly, it [restorative practices] is a game changer.

Interview Question 7 asked the participants, “Can you describe the school climate in your current school?” This question resulted in many of the participants acknowledging the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) has had on their school experiences. The participants explained that typical routines and expectations were adapted to meet both remote and hybrid learning models. Even in instances where students were back in person full-time, there were distancing requirements that played a role in the way that students and teachers interact, the use of restorative circles, and the way that conferences were handled. Teacher F acknowledged trying to do a restorative circle through remote learning and developing a “ping-pong” style with the students asking and answering questions to one another on through the screen. Teacher F explained:

It [school climate] has taken kind of a different turn this year. So asking questions, about how they’re doing, especially now, and giving them strategies about how to cope with online learning and this whole pandemic is important. We haven’t gotten to see each other so far this year, but the school climate is still positive, just different.

Teacher C also shared that school climate has changed from not being able to be together as a whole school. Teacher C stated, “I don’t know that we have the same common expectations anymore or like this collective personality only because we’ve missed so much time together.” Similarly, Teacher G shared the experience of a different climate with the school in full remote learning. Teacher G explained:

I feel that last year when we were in person, there was probably more of a stronger collective mood, so we had a strong climate. This year, we are missing some of that only

because we are not coming together as a whole school. I don't know that we have the same common expectations anymore or like this collective personality only because we've missed so much time together.

Teacher D, who spent much of the year teaching remotely, said that the climate was extremely positive, and attributed the positivity to continuing restorative circles, even if it was not in the traditional sense. Teacher D said, "From the beginning I stressed with them, 'You may not be with me, but we are all in this together'."

Aside from the pandemic responses, most participants acknowledged having a positive school climate, and several of them mentioned that the administrators were the driving factor for whether school climate would be positive or negative. Teacher G explained that school climate was positive, and she attributed that to the way that the staff is treated. Teacher G explained:

If you have an administrator who is treating the staff like they are important and their voice is valued and they are heard, it reflects right into the rest of your work for the day with students and other staff.

Teacher B also acknowledged that the positive school climate had a lot to do with a change in administration. Teacher B explained that a previous administrator had put much stress on the teachers and had it made it difficult for teachers to want to implement restorative practices because they saw it as an additional responsibility. Teacher B stated that, with the new administrator, there was a schedule change that designated time for SEL and that was really the time to build relationships.

Teacher H felt that the school climate was very positive and that students were happy to come to school. Teacher H acknowledged a newer emphasis on social-emotional learning that

included restorative practices. Teacher H explained how the school was trying to incorporate more social–emotional learning strategies with the adults, students, and parents.

### **Social–Emotional Learning**

Interview Questions 8 and 9 asked the participants to discuss their perspective on SEL and the way that they use restorative practices to support SEL in their classroom. Interview Question 8 asked participants, “In your own words, describe social–emotional learning.” The participants described SEL as a skill set to express emotions, critical to student development, and strategies that should be integrated into daily practices for adults and students. Teacher C said that SEL was

The abilities to identify and empathize on the feelings of others and about ourselves and be able to apply those skills not only independently, but to build them into our everyday lives, and that doesn’t only mean academics. I think that social–emotional piece applies to your home life, to your school life, to your work life.

Teacher E had similar thoughts that SEL was about teaching more than just academics, but “teaching the child as a human being.” Teacher H discussed how many things are centered around SEL, including mental and physical health, creativity, memory, and engagement. Teacher H said:

If you come into school feeling upset or sad, that is going to impact the rest of your day and you might not do your best work or you might not be engaged or you might not want to play with anybody. So everything starts with the social–emotional piece and being able to recognize how you are feeling and why you are feeling that way.

Teacher I spoke about SEL as more than just a curriculum and about how children feel in the classroom. Teacher I said that SEL is about “how can we help kids process the craziness of the world around them and how it is impacting them.”

Teacher A emphasized that SEL was critical for kids to open up and learn. Teacher A said:

They [students] need to feel safe. They need to feel calm. Social–emotional learning is understanding their emotions and being aware. It’s not that they’re not allowed to feel sad or upset but understanding when those feelings are coming and who are people that they can go to, how can they handle it. It is being aware of how what they are feeling can affect them, their friends, and their community.

Teacher D shared the urgency of SEL in a daily routine. Teacher D shared, “If you don’t do SEL and you don’t really find out who the kids are, and you don’t take the time to talk to them and make sure they are okay, nothing else is going to matter.”

Teacher J also shared experiences of incorporating what are described as “core values” of the school community. Teacher J stated:

We even do service learning projects as well to try to connect those [core values] to the community. We want to teach the children, not just about academics, but also when they get into the world as adults how to handle themselves, how to problem solve, how to persevere when there’s a problem. So just really teaching them as a whole.

Teacher F had similar ideas and went further to say that SEL also affects adult actions. Teacher F explained that it is the way that teachers view their students, beyond the reading levels and academics. Teacher F emphasized the importance of looking internally at students to what they are thinking and feeling. Teacher B also spoke about adult actions, and the way that SEL should

be embedded throughout the day. Teacher B shared that there is often a way to link SEL to the daily curriculum. For example, daily vocabulary or storytelling gives opportunities to embed SEL skills. Teacher B went on to say, “It doesn’t have to be separate; if we are in the middle of a math lesson and someone is frustrated and on the verge of crying, we stop and take a moment, we take a break and figure it out.”

Interview Question 9 asked the participants, “How do you use restorative practices to support social–emotional learning?” The participants discussed the classroom community that is created, the way in which they speak to students, and the way that the students learn to express themselves to others. Teacher C thought that restorative practices are the tools to support SEL. Teacher C said, “Things like conferencing, understanding where people are coming from, to build that sense of relationship, it’s weaving those common threads to build social competence.” Teacher G believed that restorative practices are strategies to build community. Teacher G went on to say that, when the community is built, the students learn, “I am part of something that is important and special and it makes students want to be better and do better.” Teacher A agreed that using restorative practices in the classroom helps to build the relationships needed for students to feel safe. Teacher A shared that restorative practices and SEL are complementary to one another and said, “SEL can sometimes be a little bit overwhelming for some kids, to be vulnerable and tell you how they feel. That is why you need to build the community first.”

Teacher F discussed how restorative practices give teachers a framework for the way that they are speaking to students. Teacher F explained that it takes purposeful thought to shift from saying, “Don’t do that” to a more restorative inquiry such as “Why don’t you try doing this instead?” Teacher E expressed the way that restorative practices support SEL through social language and teaching people how to interact with each other, whether that means the adults or



students. Teacher G shared a similar experience by acknowledging the personal growth that was made through reflection and change. Teacher G said:

I think I have always been good at building relationships with students, but I didn't necessarily pay attention to the language that I used. I feel like as I reflect, I used to use a lot of accusatory language, almost shaming students. Over the last 5 or 6 years I really made a conscious effort to be more mindful of my language.

Teacher D explained that restorative questions give students the opportunity to share about themselves and, with that, they develop their emotions. Teacher D stated, for example:

If someone is saying they went to the store with their dad and bought a bike, you know, one student might be thinking, "I haven't seen my father in 5 months," and someone else might be thinking, "I can't buy a bike."

Teacher D concluded that these experiences through restorative practices allow students and adults to examine their emotions and learn how to express themselves appropriately.

### **Description of Emergent Themes**

#### **Theme 1: Community and Relationship Building**

All of the study participants spoke about their experiences using restorative practices to build community and relationships within their classroom. Teacher G stated, "Restorative practices is all about community building. That's the whole thing. I think the overall feeling in the building has been impacted so much since we've even started doing it." The participants spoke of using affective language and restorative circles to get to know students, having them get to know each other and the teacher, and to build a safe place for students to learn. Appropriately for this theme, Teacher F spoke of the way that restorative practices allow students to be more

comfortable in their community, hence giving them more control and ownership over their interactions, language, and emotions. Teacher F shared:

Eventually as the year goes on, they [the students] become more in charge. I kind of try and step back and let them take the lead of the circles or conferences, which I think it pretty good towards the end of the year, especially fifth grade. They get so good at it.

All of the participants spoke to the need to establish a classroom environment that is safe and encouraging for students. The teachers responded with phrases such as “building a safety net,” “wanting them to be good people,” “positive interaction with people,” and “school family.”

Teacher I explained that when the community is built within the classroom and school, and when everyone is invested in using restorative practices, students feel that they have a safety net when they make a mistake. Teacher D stated, “It’s not that I don’t care about how they are with their grades and their reading, but I want them to be good people, I want them to be nice.” Teacher C commented, “I like to try and build the relationships from day one, build the expectation and the culture among the students that we are all in this together, that we are family together in our classroom.” Multiple participants expressed that when relationships and community building are a focal point for teachers and administrators, there is more likelihood of having a positive school climate. Thapa et al. (2013) discussed the connection between relationships and school climate and purported that the positive relationships among students and teachers have a direct correlation with school climate. In their responses, the participants alluded to a concurrent viewpoint that “the patterns of norms, goals, values, and interactions that shape relationships in schools provide an essential area of school climate” (Thapa et al., 2013, p. 7).

## **Theme 2: Social Competency**

The participants consistently spoke about the development of student social competencies when using restorative practices. The five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills are the areas of social development that students and adults should know and be able to do (CASEL, 2021). The participants in this study perceived that their students were able to develop self-awareness and self-management by using strategies to express and synthesize emotions. The participants used restorative conferencing to handle conflict and to give students the skills necessary to problem solve, advocate for their needs, and find means of restitution. Teacher F spoke specifically to this theme by acknowledging the five social competencies and the way that they determine the overarching needs of students. Teacher F stated, “I feel like the five core SEL competencies are the big umbrella, and restorative practices is underneath it. The competencies drive the work you do with restorative practices.”

Several participants spoke about the social competency of the adults and the way that it affects the work that they are doing with students. Teacher G spoke to the need for the adults to work on their own relationships within a school community. Teacher G shared the experience of working with students and teachers that seemed disconnected to the community. Teacher G said, “For whatever reason, if teachers were unhappy it was reflected in their practice. You could tell they were miserable. You could tell how their patience was short with students.” Teacher D shared the experiences of seeing students not wanting to be in certain classrooms. Teacher D explained:

Students don't want to go into a building where they feel tension between adults. Adults need to use restorative practices in every part of their life. Adults need to regulate their

emotions and remember that sometimes people act off because something is really wrong.

Teacher I shared an example of how a teacher's expression of personal values played a role in a student feeling unsafe in the classroom. Teacher I explained:

There was a teacher who just, for whatever reason, whether it was fundamental beliefs, had issues with transgender kids and couldn't get beyond it. And so we had students who just couldn't go there, they would sit with the school counselor because they didn't feel safe in the classroom.

The social competency of students and teachers is essential to create a school environment that is supportive, thriving, and is conducive to academic and emotional success. Schonert-Reichl (2017) purported that, for students to reach their full potential, "educators must focus explicitly on promoting social and emotional competence" (p. 138). The participants in this study were adamant that restorative practices were used consistently to teach the SEL competencies. The social competency of adults was also discussed, and the discussion led the researcher to believe that this is an area for further development.

### **Theme 3: Consistent Restorative Structure**

Many of the participants spoke about the importance of a consistent restorative routine that the administrators would support and that would be implemented throughout the entire school. Several participants spoke about what type of frameworks are used (e.g., sentence starters, restorative question posters, mood meters, talking pieces and circle starting techniques, graphic organizers, and other supports) for students to learn the expectations. Teacher F shared that a sentence starter is provided for students, especially at the beginning, to get their thoughts together before they participate in a restorative circle. Teacher F stated, "I think it is helpful for

them [students] to put it down on paper and have a chance to process the questions.” Teacher D shared the experience of using a talking piece like a ball or stuffed animal, while Teacher J used a bell chime to initiate a restorative circle.

Many participants acknowledged the gaps in implementation where other teachers were not using restorative practices or the administrators were not fully supportive. The participants had similar experiences in which professional development was lacking in the full scope.

Teacher G spoke to the need for further professional development specifically. Teacher G stated:

I think we need more professional development for teachers on how to build these skills and incorporate them into the classroom, because I don’t think that there is a lot of people who are very comfortable with it yet or have a buy in or they are just very “old school.”

Teacher I spoke to the frustration with the lack of follow through within the district implementation. Teacher I shared, “It was one of those in-service things to kick-off the school year, with a great presenter who was motivating, but the district didn’t weave it into our culture.” Many of the participants expressed how the school administrator really determines the outcomes of implementing restorative practices. Brown (2017) spoke to the positive impact that administrators had on school-wide restorative practices in two urban middle schools. “Teachers were empowered in both schools, as both had principals who shared power and encouraged teacher-led initiatives” (p. 62). As Teacher B and Teacher F shared, restorative practices are encouraged by their administrators and often are used in meetings with adults. Whereas, Teacher I spoke to the inconsistencies from classroom to classroom and with their administrators. Teacher I shared that, with so many initiatives in the school, restorative practices were just another thing that staff felt frustrated with and the administration of it “fell flat.” Teacher I said,

“And it is frustrating because I think restorative practices have the most potential to change our school climate.”

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers’ perceptions of restorative practices in K–8 classrooms. High (2017) said that a “growing number of schools are adopting restorative practices proactively, with a view to preventing misbehavior by improving climate and strengthening relationships” (p. 525). The International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP; as cited in Wachtel, 2016) defined restorative practices as strategies and activities that “build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making” (p. 1). Restorative practices promote the development of caring and safe school environments to support effectively academic success (Vaandering, 2014).

In this chapter, the researcher described the data analysis process and the presentation of results as they related to understanding the experiences of 10, K–8, public school teachers in Connecticut, and their use of restorative practices in their classroom. In the interviews, the researcher explored the teachers’ perceptions of restorative practices and gave participants the opportunity to share their personal accounts. The interviews uncovered information related to the way that teachers use restorative practices in their classrooms, the way that they use restorative practices to support social–emotional learning, and the way that restorative practices can affect school climate. The three themes that emerged were (a) the use of restorative practices for community and relationship building, (b) social competency for students and staff, and (c) the need for consistent restorative structure within a school community.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers' perceptions of restorative practices in K–8 classrooms. The researcher explored the experiences of 10, K–8, public school teachers in Connecticut who used restorative practices. The participants taught in varied grade levels, subjects, and had a range in overall experience. The intent of the research was to gain insight to the use and implementation of restorative practices to support SEL and to improve school climate. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) explored the connection between restorative practices and SEL. They found that by using these two approaches simultaneously, an opportunity was made for restorative practices to contribute to student development of “social skills including communication skills, kindness, empathy, and caring” (p. 110). Chapter 5 includes the interpretations of findings, implications of findings, recommendations for action, and recommendations for further study.

Restorative practices are frameworks that are used in various school settings to build social connections, encourage emotional learning, and provide necessary strategies that encourage reflective consequences (Wachtel, 2016). A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to allow the researcher the opportunity to gather the data from the participants and to generate a description of the “essence of the experiences for all of the individuals” (Creswell, 2013). The themes that emerged from the data were (a) the use of restorative practices for community and relationship building, (b) social competency for students and staff, and (c) the need for consistent restorative structure within a school community. The following descriptions emphasize the researcher's conclusions relative to the study's research questions and the literature review.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do K–8 teachers implement restorative practices in the classroom?
2. How do K–8 teachers use restorative practices to support SEL in the classroom?
3. How do restorative practices affect school climate?

## Interpretations of Findings

### Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked, “How do K–8 teachers implement restorative practices in the classroom?” The study participants represented a variety of K–8 grades, and they had various years of teaching experience, mostly in an urban setting. All of the participants had a restorative mindset and found it helpful to use restorative practices to meet the needs of their students. Each participant had their own style of implementation, but it was evident that all of the participants used restorative practices for community and relationship building.

The participants in this study used affective language to model socially appropriate conversation skills, and to teach students how to express their emotions in a constructive way. As Costello (2009) purported, affective language is easy and useful, and it can be used to show that adults too have feelings and emotions. Teacher D reported that affective language was used in the classroom to encourage students to be comfortable talking to one another, but it was also used to help the adults to humanize themselves by sharing their own feelings. Teachers A, F, and H spoke of using affective language to share their own feelings to motivate students to redirect their behavior or complete tasks. They reported using “I feel . . .” or “I like it when . . .” statements to encourage students to reengage in the learning. In addition, Teachers G and I acknowledged the need to be more purposeful when using affective language because it was a



shift from a punitive style of management. Mirsky (2007) acknowledged that restorative practices were intended to change the nature of relationships between students and adults and to move away from zero tolerance and authoritarian ways of discipline. Teacher G acknowledged that prior to using restorative practices, the language that the teachers had used with students was more of a shaming technique. Teacher G said, “It almost feels like looking back, you are shaming a kid for not doing something.” Further, Teacher I addressed this shift and the challenges they saw in their experiences. Teacher I stated:

I think this whole philosophy is about connections and using the right language and establishing a culture where you talk things out and it is not three strikes, you are out. And some of the older teachers had a harder time adjusting to that. They are used to one strike, you are in the office, two strikes you are suspended, three strikes you are expelled. And so they, I think, were the most resistant.

All of the participants spoke confidently about implementing restorative circles in their classrooms, even in the youngest grades. As High (2017) addressed, restorative circles can be used in many ways with the overarching premise being to build community, social competence, and give students the opportunity to feel connected. The participants used circles in simple ways for check-ins, to develop safe spaces, to encourage the expression of emotions, for academic reinforcement, and to handle classroom challenges. The data supported multiple authors’ accounts in the literature, including Brown (2017), Tacker and Hoover (2011), Mirsky (2011), and Augustine et al. (2018), all of whom suggested that circles could be used for various objectives, including relationship building and academic needs. Teacher C reported using restorative circles daily, starting with very basic “get to know you” questions, and then building up to more critical thinking questions. The data also showed a heavy emphasis on using

restorative circles to build relationships. Teachers A, C, and F all responded that getting to know their students is one of the primary reasons why they use restorative circles in their classrooms. Teachers D and I went even further to emphasize the way that they used restorative circles to create a safe space for students to share their emotions. Teacher D described the way that creating a safe space makes it easier for students to make mistakes and share emotions. Teacher D explained:

If they're [students] safe in the classroom, they'll be able to raise their hand and answer questions. They know that they have the support of each other, even though they might not always get along. They have that support and they know no one's going to laugh at them if they get a wrong answer. They know I am not going to laugh at them if they get a wrong answer and so they will try more. I think if kids feel wanted and feel loved and feel that security, they're going to want to not only make me happy but make their peers happy and do a good job for their peers.

Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) also spoke of the need to create safe and supportive spaces where students can handle conflicts and manage their stress. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) stated, "Students' interpersonal skills, including their ability to interact positively with peers and adults, to resolve conflicts, and to work in teams, all contribute to effective learning and lifelong behaviors" (p. 7). Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey also discussed the way that the learning environment directly affects student engagement and effort, for students have more success when they feel that their teachers and peers value them.

When discussing safe and supportive spaces, Teacher I similarly stated:

If your kids don't feel safe in your classroom for whatever reason, whether there is a kid in the room bullying them or they feel your personality is standoffish, you are not going to get anywhere academically, you're just not.

The participants were less descriptive about restorative conferencing and several participants mentioned they had not been formally trained. Costello et al. (2009) spoke of the difference between small impromptu conferences and formal conferences. Teachers use small impromptu conferences when something small happens in a school that affects people. Formal conferences are scripted, involve a facilitator, and are intended for higher level, disciplinary infractions. The participants seemed somewhat confused between the two types of conferencing and used the term "circle" and "conference" interchangeably. After discussing restorative circles and then moving to questions about restorative conferencing, Teacher E asked, "So that's essentially the same thing, right? If there's a conflict between two kids, you know, just hearing both sides of the story." Several participants acknowledged that other support staff (e.g., social workers, psychologists, or administrators) handled conferences. Teacher I acknowledged that the school counselors would do the restorative conferences. Similarly, Teacher F acknowledged that an administrator would be the mediator of a restorative conference. From participant responses, the way that training affects the level of comprehension and implementation of restorative practices in classrooms became evident.

## **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked, "How do K–8 teachers use restorative practices to support SEL in the classroom?" SEL encompasses the strategies that students and adults need to identify and manage emotions, to understand the perspective of others, to make responsible decisions, to set goals, and to handle interpersonal conflicts appropriately (Payton, 2008). The participants

expressed that restorative practices can be used to support SEL if they are implemented correctly. Teacher D spoke about the way that a restorative circle or simple conversation with a student is imperative to the success of the day. Teacher D shared:

People probably get mad at me, but I feel like that is more important than academics. We can worry about letter sounds in a little bit. I just feel like if teachers don't make SEL a part of their day, they are going to miss out on knowing about their kids and the kids are going to miss out on a lot, too.

Elements of the five core SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills were interwoven throughout the participant interviews. Schonert-Reichl (2017) discussed how SEL skills are teachable and beneficial for students in many areas, including academics, citizenship, and future life goals. Teacher E discussed the importance of teaching students healthy ways to cope with emotions. Teacher E explained:

The things that you think kids know, they actually don't know. For example, we talk about how to help your friends if your friend is down, but what do you do to help yourself when you are down? We teach them healthy ways to outlet their stress and anxiety.

Rather than sitting there eating a gallon of ice cream or sleeping all day, we are trying to teach them different things that are successful for people who are healthy.

This approach added more emphasis on the way that restorative practices can be used to teach the core competencies that include both mental and physical health. Similarly, Teacher H stated, "You know, there's their mental and physical health for SEL as well. There's also their creativity, memory, and their engagement. All of their learning is centered around SEL."

Teacher B spoke about the way that SEL is incorporated into the classroom through content and is integrated with restorative practices. Teacher B explained:

This week for SEL we've been thinking about the vocabulary word gratitude. We've been talking about the things we are grateful for, listening to stories, just building connections with what we are all grateful for at home, what we are grateful for at school, what we are grateful for in the community, and just listening to their stories. I constantly check in with the kids, how are they feeling about reading? Maybe during the math lesson, you stop and check-in, "How's everyone doing? Thumbs up? Thumbs down? Do you understand?" Those quick check-ins are the practices that you should be doing every day just to make sure that your kids' needs are being met.

Teacher D also spoke about incorporating SEL into content areas. Teacher D would use SEL concepts in a restorative way when students worked in writing groups. Teacher D explained:

With writing, when they're giving feedback to each other, they're not just giving negative feedback, even when they're talking to each other about their writing. Give them something positive; tell them something to work on; don't be like "I hate your writing." I tell them [the students] that you have to think of how you would want to hear it.

Teacher C explained the way that the classroom expectations are established at the very beginning of the year through restorative practices. Teacher C said, "As we create our classroom rules, class contracts, even digital citizenship in the remote learning world, I make sure that their [the students] input is there and heard." Teacher H spoke about using a morning meeting concept where many things are happening, including a restorative practice style check-in. Teacher H said:

Our morning circle is a morning meeting, so it's not all geared towards restorative practices, but we start with a circle, a greeting to say we are ready to learn, and a share. I will ask a question like, "What is your favorite holiday?" or "What is your favorite food?" And we go around the circle and everyone takes a turn, knowing there is one speaker at a time.

This is consistent with other participants' experiences and with the literature on restorative circles, whose authors purport that circles are commonly used for sharing opportunities that build community and relationships among the students in a classroom (High, 2017).

The data from this study suggest that restorative practices are being used in the classroom to support SEL and teach social competency. Teachers are using restorative practices by modeling affective language and teaching students the best way to express their feelings. Restorative circles are used to build trust and establish safe spaces where students and adults can communicate in both celebratory and challenging situations. When conflicts arise, restorative conferencing becomes the forum so that students can share their perspectives, teachers can model empathy, and students can come to an understanding of the way that they will move forward. Restorative practices can work in union with an SEL and content curriculum to support social competency.

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked, "How do restorative practices affect school climate?" Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggested that restorative practices could be a measure to improve school climate by providing a positive method of handling school discipline. The findings of this study do align with the suggestion that restorative practices can improve school climate; however, the participants failed to link clearly restorative practices to school

discipline, which is a shift from much of the current literature. Throughout the participant interviews, there was a heavy focus on the proactive benefits of restorative practices more than the reactive use for disciplinary incidents.

Teacher B shared the experience of not using restorative practices at one school, and then changing schools to one that did implement these practices. She found that there was a difference in school climate. Teacher B attributed the change in climate to having solid relationships with the students and the adults. Teacher B explained:

Not all teachers are using restorative practices, but I think the ones that are using restorative practices have better relationships, not only with the kids in the building, but the staff as well. It's just building those positive relationships and really getting to know the kids, but also getting to know the teachers and the support staff that you are working with.

Similarly, Teacher F discussed that the school climate was very positive and attributed that positivity to the use of restorative practices. Teacher F said:

It is very positive. I think people are wanting to help their students and want tools to do that. The administration is very supportive of that and wants us to learn more about them [restorative practices] and different strategies with restorative circles. I think almost every single person in my school has gone to restorative practices training. So it's definitely something that is very important in my building to make sure we are giving children the right tools that they need to succeed in life.

Teacher J spoke to the school climate being a challenging situation because of a high turnover rate of teachers. Teacher J stated, "When there's a high turnover rate, you can't, you don't have the opportunity to really meet the other teachers or understand them, or, you know, just build

relationships with them.” Teacher I shared the experience of having an administrator who built relationships, and of the climate being positive, and then having a new administrator who focused on other areas. Teacher I explained:

At my particular school, we had a principal a couple of years ago who just was like a kid’s principal, like perfect, which to me in a middle school is someone who loves kids and loves you. He didn’t get bogged down in all of the politics in schools and districts. He just cared about the kids and he cared about his teachers. And because he didn’t buy into the right stuff, he got moved from our building. Someone else got put in. Maybe we hadn’t cemented certain things with our curriculum, but kids were happy.

Teacher I went further to discuss that the current emphasis is on test scores, the community doesn’t feel supported, and therefore, the school climate has been negatively affected. Teacher I said, “It’s all about the scores, and we are forgetting about the whole kid.”

Gregory et al. (2014) also argued that teachers who used restorative practices develop strong social connections and have better relationships with their students than teachers who do not use restorative practices. The participant interview responses consistently emphasized the opportunities that restorative practices gave for community and relationship building. Teacher A spoke about the benefits of implementing restorative practices with fidelity. Teacher A said, “I think that it helps create a classroom where people feel valued and respected, and there is an element of trust.”

Teachers A, B, and I spoke about the need for a natural, authentic, and consistent implementation strategy to see changes in school climate. Teacher I discussed the way that the lack of buy-in from staff and the inadequate professional development at the school attributed to a decline in using restorative practices. Teacher I explained that, when the directive to use



restorative practices comes from a top school leader and nobody really understands what they are doing, there is no change. Teacher I stated, “If every PD that we do for a year is focused on us living it, feeling it, and experiencing it, it can be eye opening and inspiring.”

The findings in this study were that restorative practices could have an impact on school climate because of community and positive relationship building. The participants rarely mentioned using restorative practices for disciplinary incidents, which (although it was a primary function of restorative practices as found in the current literature) the data in this researcher’s study did not support this function as the emphasis in this study. A purposeful and authentic implementation plan, led by a supportive administrator, can lead to the successful use of restorative practices to improve school climate through community and relationship building.

### **Implications**

Fronius et al. (2019) discussed the way that the study of restorative practices was conducted in the beginning stages. The researcher then sought to provide insight into a gap in the current literature concerning the phenomenon of restorative practices. The researcher examined teachers’ perceptions of restorative practices in K–8 classrooms. The phenomenon of restorative practices in classrooms was examined, including when, where, and how restorative practices are implemented and the way that these practices are used to support SEL efforts. The findings in this study contributed to the literature of restorative practices, they study included the detailed experiences of K–8, public school teachers in Connecticut.

As Bevington (2015) reported, school staff using restorative practices felt that it went well beyond a behavior management tool. The focus of this study was consistent with that viewpoint, but the researcher went further to show that the term behavior management was not widely emphasized as a facet of restorative practices. The participants rarely even mentioned

anything associated with behavior management but were focused more on the impact of restorative practices on the five SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills, and school climate. The data gathered in this study showed that restorative practices were used to solve conflicts, but the term “discipline” was only used to compare the restorative mindset to that of previously implemented behavior management plans. This could indicate that the teachers who implement restorative practices have fewer instances of negative behaviors.

Huang and Anyon (2020) discussed that there is limited research on the direct correlation between the use of restorative practices and improved school climate. Thus, this study provides insight to the use of restorative practices to improve school climate. The data suggest that, if teachers develop strong relationships with their students, a community will develop within the school as a whole. Students will be more invested in meeting academic and social expectations when they feel safe, nurtured, and respected.

### **Recommendations for Action**

From the participant responses and presented findings from this study, the researcher offers three recommendations:

1. Classroom teachers should use restorative practices to support the teaching of SEL competencies.
2. School leaders and classroom teachers should optimize the opportunity to develop positive relationships with their students through the use of restorative practices to improve school climate.

3. School leaders who seek to implement restorative practices should focus on providing a robust and thoughtful implementation plan, including initial and continuing professional development.

The recommendations are a result of the analysis of current literature on restorative practices and the analysis of the data that were gathered during this study. Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) argued that restorative practices enhance a student's connection to school and "become a vehicle to develop students' SEL skills which includes communication skills, kindness, empathy, and caring" (p. 111). The findings of this study support the implementation of restorative practices in schools to support the SEL competencies. By affective language, restorative circles, and restorative conferencing participating teachers are supporting and teaching the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. Therefore, Recommendation 1 is that other classroom teachers can replicate these methods to use fully the benefits of restorative practices beyond merely a behavior management structure.

Recommendation 2 is that school leaders and classroom teachers should optimize the opportunity to develop positive relationships with their students by using restorative practices to improve school climate. This recommendation is based on the emphasis of community and relationship building among participants. This theme emerged from the data and can be interpreted as a way to improve school climate. Although the studies on the direct correlation between the use of restorative practices and improved school climate are limited (Huang & Anyon, 2020), the existing studies showed aspects of improved school climate (Mirsky, 2007; Boucaud, 2017).

Recommendation 3 is that school leaders should provide a robust and thoughtful implementation by applying an authentic, consistent, and sustainable implementation plan for restorative practices, as was supported by multiple participants. This plan would include robust and purposeful professional development for its onset and continuation. Costello et al. (2009) discussed that administrators need to consider such areas as organizational change, staff resistance, vision, and self-assessment when considering implementing restorative practices. The researcher found that the participants were sometimes confused, for they used terms interchangeably and referred to the implementation plan falling short after the initial kickoff. This decline leads to a decrease in the use of restorative practices and inconsistency. The participants also referenced the impact that administrators had on the outcomes of restorative practices.

Although the study was focused only on the perceptions of a small group of teachers in Connecticut, the researcher believes that the description of the phenomenon could affect decisions that might currently be under consideration in schools regarding the use of restorative practices.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

From the findings of this study, further research studies are recommended in the following areas: (a) to understand the perceptions of a more diverse sampling of teachers, including various geographical areas and school settings; (b) to examine the perceptions of school administrators who use restorative practices in their schools; and (c) to explore further the best way that restorative practices can support SEL efforts and improve school climate.

This study was focused on the perception of teachers in K–8, public school classrooms in Connecticut. In the limitations of this study, the researcher recognized the small sample size and

acknowledged that the teachers who chose to participate might have had strong opinions on the phenomenon of restorative practices. From the findings of the study, the researcher concludes that the participants were very passionate about using restorative practices. Further studies could incorporate a more random sampling to expand the knowledge base. Although the participants came from various locations in Connecticut, further studies beyond the state would provide a richer understanding of the phenomenon.

The participant interviews alluded to the role of the school administrator on numerous occasions. The participants shared that the school administrators play an important role in the implementation and sustainability of restorative practices. Further studies could examine the perceptions of administrators who use restorative practices, or on the contrary, who do not use a restorative framework.

The researcher recognizes that the findings in this study are a small glimpse of the impact restorative practices can have on SEL efforts and the impact on school climate. The researcher recommends that this work continue by gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to explore a more diverse representation of the work that is being done to improve school climate.

### **Conclusion**

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the participant interviews provided descriptions of the experiences of public school, K–8 teachers regarding the way that they use restorative practices in their classrooms, to support SEL, and to affect school climate. The findings of the study indicated that teachers are using affective language, restorative circles, and restorative conferencing for community and relationship building, to teach and support SEL competencies, and to improve school climate. The researcher's conclusions in this study can contribute to the literature and can influence practice for many educators are implementing or

seeking to implement restorative practices. Restorative practices can be used in many ways and further study would be appropriate to explore the role of restorative practices in other classrooms, the role of school administrators in the implementation process, and the ways that SEL can be incorporated in more congruent ways to affect school climate.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## Connecticut Elementary School Teachers Facebook Recruitment Flyer

**Are you a K-8 public school  
teacher in Connecticut?**

**Do you use restorative  
practices in your  
classroom?**

**You are needed!**

**Participate in a research study examining  
teachers' perceptions of using restorative  
practices in the classroom.**

*\*Participants to be interviewed using Zoom\**



**Social Emotional Learning**

**To participate in the study email Jamie at:  
[REDACTED]@gmail.com**

**Appendix B**  
**Institutional Review Board Approval**



Institutional Review Board  
Mary DeSilva, Chair

**Biddeford Campus**  
11 Hills Beach Road  
Biddeford, ME 04005  
(207)602-2244 T  
(207)602-5905 F

**Portland Campus**  
716 Stevens Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103

To: Jamie E. Coady, M.S.  
Cc: Andrea F. Disque, Ed.D.  
From: Brian Lynn, J.D.  
Date: October 23, 2020

IRB Project # & Title: 102320-19; Teachers' Perceptions of Restorative Practices in K-8 Classrooms

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above captioned project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2).

Additional IRB review and approval is not required for this protocol as submitted. If you wish to change your protocol at any time, including after any subsequent review by any other IRB, you must first submit the changes for review.

Please contact me at (207) 602-2244 or irb@une.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Brian Lynn", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Brian Lynn, J.D.  
Director of Research Integrity



## Appendix C

### University of New England Consent for Participation in Research

**Project Title:** Teacher Perceptions of Restorative Practices in K-8 Classrooms

**Principal Investigator(s):** Jamie E. Coady

**Introduction:**

- Please read this form. You may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is this research study being done?**

This study is being done to understand the teacher perceptions of restorative practices. The researcher has a special interest in restorative practices and current research has limited examples of the impact restorative practices may have on SEL and school climate.

**Who will be in this study?**

K-8 teachers in Connecticut who have used restorative practices in their classrooms will be eligible to participate in this study.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to participate in a Zoom video interview. This interview will be between 30-60 minutes.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

There are no risks associated with participating in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

The possible benefit is the impact that teachers' perceptions can have on future practice of SEL, school climate, and restorative practices.

**What will it cost me?**

There is no financial cost to this study.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

This study will maintain privacy by using a pseudonym for each participant.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

The data will be kept confidential based on the use of a pseudonym for each participant. The interviews will be transcribed and maintained in a secure file storage on a password protected computer.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University.
- Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with Jamie E. Coady.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
  - If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.

#### **What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

#### **Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researchers conducting this study is Jamie E. Coady
  - For more information regarding this study, please contact Jamie at [rpstudyct1@gmail.com](mailto:rpstudyct1@gmail.com)
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Andrea Disque at [adisque@une.edu](mailto:adisque@une.edu).
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Mary Bachman DeSilva, Sc.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4567 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

#### **Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

#### **Participant's Statement**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

---

Researcher's signature

---

Date

---

Printed name

## Appendix D

### Teachers' Perceptions of Restorative Practices in K–8 Classrooms

#### Recruitment Questionnaire

1. Are you a public school teacher in CT?  yes  no
2. Do you teach a grade between K–8?  yes  no
3. Do you use restorative practices in your classroom?  yes  no
4. If yes, which practices have you used in your classroom?  
 Affective statements  
 Affective questions  
 Impromptu conferences  
 Circles  
 Formal conferences

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions

Researcher will review the Informed Consent Form with each participant to begin the interview.

Each participant will be informed that the interview will be audio and/or video recorded.

Researcher will review restorative practices in the context of the classroom.

1. Please tell me about yourself and your current role at your school.
4. What are your experiences using restorative practices in your classroom?
5. How is affective language used in your classroom?
6. Can you describe your use of restorative circles in your classroom?
7. Describe your experience using restorative conferencing?
8. Based on your experience, how can restorative practices impact school climate?
9. Can you describe the school climate at your current school?
10. In your own words, please describe SEL?
11. How do you use restorative practices to support SEL in your classroom?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with restorative practices, SEL, or school climate?