EXAMINING RESTORATIVE CIRCLES IN A SCHOOL SETTING: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

BY

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DISSEbATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Psychology in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

Restorative justice (RJ) was introduced into school systems as an alternative to ineffective zero tolerance and similar punitive policies as another way of dealing with a wide range disciplinary infractions. In the last few years school-based RJ has been gaining popularity within the United States, but empirical research has been lacking likely because those implementing RJ approaches are practitioners, not researchers. One RJ approach is Restorative Circles (RC), which provide a space for those involved in conflict to repair harm through a facilitated dialogue process. Given the minimal research, it is important to lay a foundation for understanding RC. The aim of the present study was just that; to develop a theoretical framework for understanding individual’s experiences and perceptions of RC guided by grounded theory methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 high school students and 25 school staff and administrators involved in some capacity with the RC program at their school. All participants were from a high school in a large urban center in the Southeast US and the majority identified as African-American. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. The categories and subcategories from axial coding are presented and illustrative quotes are included for each. The five constructs emerged from selective coding and form the basis of the theoretical model: 1) barriers, 2) initial climate/culture, 3) internal motivation, 4) level of participant engagement with RC, and 5) outcomes. The emergent model, along with the interactions among the constructs is discussed as well as consistencies of the emergent model with some developmental theories. This study provides a framework for RC researchers to use as a foundation and also for practitioners to better understand how individuals experience RC.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor and chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Dorothy Espelage for her guidance throughout the research process and my graduate career. Her constant support and feedback throughout the highs and lows have been unmatched. Your energy and dedication to your students is amazing!

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Reed Larson, Dr. Saandra Nettles and Dr. Mikhail Lyubansky for their support, insight and feedback. Thank you for reading, reviewing and editing countless drafts! I would also like to thank Dr. Elaine Shpungin for her feedback and assistance in the development of the theoretical model and Dominic Barter for sharing his insights on the principles of RC.

I would like to thank the students and staff that participated in this study and openly shared their experiences in an effort to advance the knowledge base in this area. I would like to thank the school that opened their doors to me and allowed me to conduct this study. I would especially like to thank Sylvia Clute, her family, and the rest of the RC staff for the time, energy, and effort they put into this project. This project would not have been possible without their support! Your assistance, generosity, and hospitality will always be remembered!

I want to thank all of the graduate and undergraduate students in the Espelage Lab. I would like to thank the graduate students for providing me with friendship, support and encouragement along with plenty of comic relief. I would like to thank all the undergraduate students for helping me with hours of transcriptions and assistance with coding.

I want to thank the graduate students in my writing group for providing me with accountability and structure. Thank you for offering a helping hand with coding and revisions. I enjoyed celebrating each of our victories and it was wonderful to see everyone’s thesis submitted!

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for their unconditional love, encouragement, and constant support and prayers. Without you I would not have been able to do this. I am so blessed to have you all in my life!
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Chapter 1

Literature Review

The following literature review will provide a brief historical overview of restorative justice (RJ). Given its wide application in the juvenile justice system, the review will begin here. A brief overview of international research on school-based restorative justice will be provided given the limited peer-reviewed national research on this topic. Empirical research on school-based restorative justice in the United States will be reviewed along with research from evaluation reports. Examples of key word searches include school-based restorative justice, practices and programs along with restorative circles. The terms restorative justice, practices, and programs will be used interchangeably.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) has its roots in many indigenous traditions including practices of the Maori of New Zealand and Native American Tribes in the United States, ancient Celtic practices, and the traditions of the Aboriginal people of Australia and Canada (Strang, 2001). Many of these practices are based on the value of living in harmony and restoring harmony when it is disrupted (Mbambo & Skelton, 2003; Strang, 2001). In the United States the term, in its modern sense, emerged during the 1970s and was used to refer to programs focusing on repairing the harm caused by some wrongdoing (crime) through bringing together victims, offenders and at times the wider community. Howard Zehr, known as the grandfather, of the contemporary, restorative justice movement, defines RJ as “a process to involve to the extent possible, those who
have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible” (Zehr, 2002).

With in the criminal systems, restorative justice is viewed as a participatory model in contrast to traditional ways to deal with crime. Traditionally, the western model of justice has been hierarchical, retributive, and offender focused. The goal of the traditional western model is to punish the offender. In this model, offenders typically have passive participation in the process. In contrast, restorative justice has been described as focusing on increasing participation of both victims and offenders in the judicial process, repairing harm, and in holding offenders accountable for their actions. In the criminal system, restorative justice alternatives are sometimes seen as victim-centered and defined as an approach to crime that involves bringing victims and offenders together, allowing victims an opportunity to get answers to questions that are of direct concern to them, and creating an opportunity to tell offenders the impact and consequences of their wrongdoing. Offenders are given the opportunity to apologize and make amends (Van Ness & Strong, 2010).

Restorative justice practices have most typically been applied in the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems and broadly offer a way for individuals to repair harm. RJ practices use a dialogue process as compared to a traditional punitive system where victim and offender often are unable to speak directly to one another (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005). Common restorative practices include restorative circles or conferencing in which each individual is given a chance to speak and be heard. Scholars have routinely found that adolescents involved in restorative justice programs have lower recidivism rates than those in control groups (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2005; McCold,
2003; Rodriguez, 2007; Umbreit, Coates, & Voz, 2001). Meta-analytic research evidence suggests that restorative practices are significantly more effective compared to traditional non-restorative approaches to criminal justice in reducing recidivism or reoffending (Latimer et al., 2005; Sherman & Strang, 2007). This research encouraged practitioners searching for alternatives to zero tolerance policies in schools (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

Restorative practices are, in many ways, philosophically opposed to zero tolerance policies, which have been popular in many schools nation-wide. Zero tolerance policies aim to control student behavior by using mandated suspensions and expulsions (Stinchcomb, Bazemore & Riestenberg, 2006). Zero tolerance policies directly facilitate the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Heitzeg, 2009). The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the “growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via zero tolerance policies, and, directly and/or indirectly, into juvenile and adult criminal justice systems” (Heitzeg, 2009). Schools with higher rates of suspensions also have higher dropout rates and an increased risk of students entering the juvenile justice system (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013). Zero tolerance policies criminalize student misbehavior by increasing the risk of students being suspended, expelled or arrested at school, thus feeding the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba, 2001). The ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies has been well documented in research leading to searches for alternative approaches, including restorative justice approaches (American Psychological Association, 2008; Davis, Lyubansky, & Schiff, in press; Evans & Lester, 2010; Evans & Lester, 2012).

**Restorative Practices in Schools**
Restorative practices have less typically been used in school settings in the United States, although outside the United States (e.g., Europe, New Zealand, Australia, Brazil) restorative practices are used more frequently. School-based restorative justice can involve the whole school community, staff, students, and parents (Hopkins, 2004). School-based restorative justice programs can vary widely and can range from formal to informal practices. Some programs include components of active listening, skill building, circles, mediation, or conferencing (Hopkins, 2004). Broadly speaking restorative practices focus on relationship building, responsibility, accountability, nurturance and restoration (Zehr, 2002). Typically, RJ in schools offers a dialogue between those who have harmed and those who have been harmed. The dialogue is intended to assist in working out restitution, holding individuals accountable, repairing the harm and their relationship if possible, and reintegrating the person causing the harm back into the community (Johnstone, 2002; Maceady, 2009; Suvall, 2009; Zehr, 2002). School-based RJ focuses not only on the rule violation but also on building relationships; in this context, rule violations are viewed not only as violations of rules but as violations against people and relationships (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Maceady, 2009).

Schools implementing restorative approaches use a variety of models; programs look different, even programs using the same practice such as mediation or circles. Of the schools in the United States that have implemented restorative practices, some do so for various reasons including to address problems such as truancy, bullying, disciplinary issues, problem behaviors and interpersonal conflict (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb, Brazenmore, & Riestenberg, 2006). The diversity in restorative justice practices and
programs makes research difficult and often lumps “restorative practices” together even though each practice can have different outcomes.

In the United States, compared to Europe, New Zealand, and Australia, there is minimal research on the impact of restorative justice in school settings (Evans & Lester, 2013). Research is often lacking because many of those implementing RJ are practitioners with few researchers examining the practice. There are no randomized controlled trials of the effectiveness of school-based restorative justice practices. The majority of the research that exists compares school discipline records and number of detentions and suspensions before and after an RJ program to determine effectiveness. International research on restorative practices in schools demonstrates that restorative practices show promise in dealing with conflicts, resolving disputes, and improving attendance (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Morrison, 2002; Ritchie & O’Connell, 2001; Tinker, 2002). Research in Australian schools using circles and conferences suggests that participants felt safer, more understood and accepted after participating (Suvall, 2009). International research on a variety of school-based RJ programs suggests varying levels of effectiveness in handling behavior problems like truancy, property damage, and theft (Morrison, 2005).

One of the few peer-reviewed articles on school-based restorative justice in the United States examined elementary, middle, and high schools replacing zero-tolerance with a variety of restorative justice practices for addressing drug and alcohol problems. Authors collected data from published reports by the school and interviews with key informants. Findings included reports of decreases in 1) major disciplinary issues, 2)
expulsions and out of school suspensions, and 3) reduction of substance abuse (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

Longitudinal research from RJ programs in elementary and high schools in Minnesota found that, acts of physical aggression, suspensions, and behavior referrals dropped after four years of implementation of restorative practices (Riestenberg, 2004). Research from multiple school-based programs has found similar decreases in problem behaviors in students and increases in academic achievement and engagement (McCluskey et al., 2008). Research suggests that the schools that have implemented restorative practices in the United States have seen decreases in behavior referrals, suspensions, detentions, and bullying and increases in prosocial behavior and academic achievement, among others (Brown, 2008; McCluskey et al., 2008; Riestenberg, 2004).

Research on classroom circles suggests that they 1) address classroom issues before they escalate, 2) assist in building community and 3) assist teachers in teaching curriculum (Buckley & Maxwell, 2007; Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010; McCold, 2003; Riestenberg, 2004).

In the United States, the limited research on school-based restorative justice often comes from books, non-peer reviewed articles, or evaluation reports from organizations implementing programs throughout one city or district (Evans & Lester, 2013). The International Institute for Restorative Practices has examined multiple school-based restorative programs in Pennsylvania. Evaluation report findings include a 52% decrease in violent acts and serious incidents and a significant decrease in suspensions after one year of implementation compared to the previous school year in an inner-city high school implementing restorative circles in classrooms (Mirsky, 2007). Evaluation report findings
suggest that suburban high schools and middle schools implementing restorative practices noted significant reductions in disrespect and fighting, suspensions, and disciplinary infractions (IIRP, 2009). Other high schools using restorative practices have noted not only a decrease in discipline problems, but also an increase in students’ academic performance (IIRP, 2009).

A 2010 evaluation report from the Henderson Center for Social Justice based in Berkley provides a case study of one middle school using restorative practices. Some findings include that RJ allowed 1) students to uncover reasons for their actions, and 2) adults to notice changes in students specifically about identifying feelings and communicating them. The researchers stated, “there is little research on school-based restorative justice, and even less on its implementation and efficacy in schools serving youth of color from low income communities,” (Summer, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). Thus, there is a need to examine school-based programs and the outcomes associated with programs in particularly high risk schools.

**Restorative Circles**

School-based restorative practices can take many different forms, from restorative circles, or conferencing for individual cases of misbehavior to school wide restorative practices used on a daily basis by all staff. The common theme is that restorative practices take the punitive measures, or elements of punishment, out of the equation even when dealing with discipline issues. One restorative approach to dealing with student conflict and behavior disruptions is restorative circles. Although there are multiple circle approaches, this project and this section will discuss the Restorative Circles (RC) approach developed by Dominic Barter and colleagues in Brazilian favelas in the 1990s.
In this process, an act of harm is identified by someone who then initiates the Circle process with a facilitator. The act can be anything specifically observable that occurred and is used as a gateway into the conflict. The facilitator then invites those involved to participate in a Restorative Circle. This particular process involves three key participants, the “author”, the “receiver,” and the “community” (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). The conflict community often involves family members, neighbors, and witnesses, or anyone affected by the harm done (Barter, 2012). The term author and receiver were coined by Barter as recognition of the bidirectionality of conflict and the complexity of roles (Wachtel, 2009). The terms (author and receiver) are not meant to be labels for people but terminology to understand one particular act/interaction. Barter notes that often those in a Circle see themselves as victims and each other as offenders (Wachtel, 2009).

The goals of Restorative Circles are to hold a space that promotes understanding, self-responsibility and action (Barter, 2012). This process values having no gatekeepers, meaning anyone can initiate a Circle. Before the Circle meeting occurs, the facilitator conducts separate preparatory meetings (called pre-Circles) with the author(s) and receiver(s). A similar preparatory meeting is also done with the community members, sometimes collectively. The goals of the pre-circle are to build connections, identify feelings and needs of participate as they relate to the act, explain the Circle process, and obtain consent from each individual to move forward with the process. The Circle is a facilitated dialogue in which all individuals are supported by the facilitator in understanding each other, taking responsibility for their choices, and generating actions or agreements for moving forward. The characteristic that sets RC apart from other
Restorative practices or approaches is that it makes use of reflection in the dialogue processes. Participants are asked to reflect back, using their own words, what they heard the speaker saying in an effort to increase participant listening and understanding. After the Circle, Post-Circles are used to check in on the agreed actions and how things have been going since the Circle (Barter, 2012).

Restorative circles seek to deal with conflict or discipline in a way that offers those involved a space in which each party can share their side and be heard and then together come up with agreements about how to move forward. Agreements most often include ways to address and repair the harm caused by the conflict or violation. There is limited research on restorative circles, in part because many schools combine and blend models of restorative justice with traditional punitive approaches. Blending approaches makes it difficult to examine particular outcomes of school-based restorative circle approaches (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2009).

School-based research particularly on Restorative Circles is scarce. Most of the research is based on schools in Brazil. Research findings include a 98% reduction of police school visits following a school-wide adoption of Restorative Circles (Gillinson, Horne, & Baeck, 2010) and a 93% satisfaction rate by participants in a study of over 400 Restorative Circles in Sao Paulo. (Gillinson et al., 2010). There is a need for empirical research examining Restorative Circles in school settings.

Most research on RJ focuses on the justice system and outcomes such as decreases in criminal behavior and recidivism rates. Research on school-based restorative practices has followed suit, examining outcomes dealing with decreases in student problem behaviors and reductions in suspensions and expulsions. While this information
is important to school staff when deciding which programs are effective for reducing problem behaviors, other factors that impact these outcomes are not being examined. Restorative Circles in particular have received minimal attention by researchers. Because Restorative Circles has unique characteristics that set it apart from other restorative approaches, including the use of reflection and not assigning labels such as victim or offender, research is crucial to better understanding this approach. This dissertation aims to provide a more in-depth examination of school-based restorative circles programs.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

The theoretical underpinnings of the present study are drawn from multiple theories including ecological systems theory and the community involvement model. The ecological framework can be helpful in conceptualizing the complexity of RC in school settings. The social-ecological framework (see appendix A for figure) posits that individual attitudes and behaviors are shaped by a range of interrelated contextual systems, including family, peers, and the school environment, among others (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Espelage & De La Rue, 2012; Espelage, Rao, & De La Rue, 2013). The different levels include the microsystem (e.g. family, friends), mesosystem (e.g. parent teacher meetings), exosystem (e.g. school policies) and macrosystem (e.g. cultural values, laws). The dimension of time is also included in this framework as a chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In regards to the present study, the social-ecological framework allows for the examination of the combined impact and interactions of these social contexts on RC.

The community involvement model (see appendix A for figure) developed by Nettles (1991) can also be used to help conceptualize RC in a school community. The
A theoretical model was proposed to describe the impact of community involvement on disadvantaged youth. The model proposes that community structure (e.g. history, physical features) is a factor affecting student outcomes including educational attainment. Community climate (e.g. norms, rules, values) influences student involvement and development; climate may have direct effects on student outcomes. Community involvement (e.g. mobilization, allocation of resources) includes formal and informal actions that students and community members take to improve the institution. Different types of involvement may produce different outcomes including higher achievement or attitudinal shifts (Nettles, 1991). This model can be useful by viewing the community climate and structure as the school structure and climate; a school is nonetheless a community. The involvement discussed in this model may include activities such as participating in RC in some capacity. Therefore, involvement may impact student outcomes, while taking into account the school climate and structure.

The role of school and community-based programs as sites to connect with caring adults has also been discussed in the literature and may help explain some of the possible outcomes of RC (Harris & Marquez Kiyama, 2013). RC provides youth an opportunity to interact with adults in a way different from what they are accustomed to. In RC adults tend to engage in more power-sharing than is typically seen in school settings. Programs can connect students with caring adults and promote social support and positive relationships between students and adults (Woodland, 2008, Nettles, 1991).

A theoretical model was developed based on knowledge learned through conducting the interviews and knowledge of RC in general. The emergent theory from the present study suggests that initial climate/culture (e.g. high conflict, limited
resources) impacts both barriers (e.g. knowledge, trust) and internal motivation (e.g. curiosity, desire to engage) to influence level of participant engagement with RC, which in turn, influences outcomes (e.g. frustration, disappointment, improved relationships, meaningful dialogue). These outcomes then loop back to increase barriers or internal motivation. More specifically, the theoretical model asserts that there are two loops of interactions. The first one involves climate interacting with barriers, which influences disengagement, which in turn, impacts negative outcomes and then loops back to increase barriers. The second loop involves climate interacting with internal motivation, which influences engagement, which in turn, impacts positive outcomes and then loops back to increase internal motivation. This theory will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 (Results).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Research Concerns:

This dissertation aims to provide an exploratory examination of Restorative Circles. The primary goal of this dissertation is to develop a theoretical model for how individuals experience and perceive restorative circles programs and the factors associated with school-based RC.

Research Question One: How do students and staff experience and perceive Restorative Circles at their school?

Research Question Two: What factors impact students’ experiences and perceptions of RC at their school?
Chapter 2

Methods

Participants

Participants included 35 high school students and 25 school staff and administrators involved in some capacity with the RC program at their school. Students ranged in their involvement in the Restorative Circles (RC) program from participating in only a pre-circle to participating in multiple Circles to being trained as facilitators. Staff participants also ranged in their involvement with the program, from having basic knowledge about the program and referring students, to observing Circles to participating in multiple Circles and training workshops. All participants were from the same high school in a large urban center in the Southeast US. The gender breakdown for the students was 20 female and 15 male and all students identified as African-American. Student participants included students from each grade level: freshman \((n=6)\), sophomores \((n=14)\), juniors \((n=7)\) and seniors or fifth year \((n=8)\) students. The gender breakdown for teachers and staff members included 16 female and 9 male. The vast majority of staff members, like students, identified as African-American. Adult interviews included teachers \((n=10)\), administrators \((n=6)\), security staff \((n=2)\), and social workers/support counselors \((n=7)\). Approximately half the 35 students interviewed were part of the PLC; all the PLC teachers \((n=4)\) and many of the staff members \((n=4)\) were also interviewed.

Setting

School information. Data collection took place over a three-week period in a high school with a student population of a little over 1,000. According to the school
report card data from the department of education in the school’s state, 98.5% of the students in the high school are African-American, 77.2% of students receive free or reduced lunch and the on time graduation rate is 60%.

The high school also has a Performance Learning Center (PLC), which is housed within the high school. The PLC allows students to complete the requirements for high school graduation through an alternative model largely using online learning. Typically PLC programs (like alternative schools) are not housed within a high school but this particular PLC is. The PLC is located in a corner of the high school and is self-contained. Because the PLC is housed within the larger high school, PLC students sometimes eat lunch and use the school library, which is open to all students; therefore they do interact with non-PLC students throughout their school day. Schoolwork within the PLC is self-paced; because of this the amount of time students spend at the PLC varies. There are about 100 students in the PLC with four teachers and their own administrators. Students and staff from both the PLC and the wider high school participated in the study.

**Historical context.** The high school was the first in that city for African-American students until the 1970s when desegregation laws were implemented. The school is physically separated from the corporate city limits by an interstate that was built in the 1960s. There are four housing projects that feed into the school. The housing projects are home to rival gangs, which plays a role in school violence and aggression.

**Restorative Circles program information.** Due to the harmful effects of punitive discipline (e.g., higher rates of misbehavior and increasing dropout risk; American Psychological Association, 2008), a nonprofit group introduced the Restorative Circles program to the high school in the 2011-2012 school year. The goals of the RC
program were to promote restorative alternatives to punitive discipline and decrease the number of student behavior referrals in the school. The program uses RC to address conflict that anyone at the school would like to address with a Circle. The RC program at this high school provides anyone (students/staff) with the opportunity to initiate a Circle to address conflict. When conflict arises, both staff and students have the option of initiating a Circle with the goal of helping to repair the harm, restore relationships and create accountability. Once a Circle is initiated all parties involved in the conflict are invited to participate in a Circle by the restorative program staff (e.g. facilitator). Before the Circle, the facilitator has one-on-one preparatory meetings called Pre-Circles with each person involved in the conflict. The goals of the Pre-Circle are to build a relationship with the facilitator, identify some of the issues that the Circle will address, explain the process briefly and obtain voluntary consent from each party to move forward with the process. Though sometimes considerably longer in other places and contexts, the Pre-Circles at this school typically last under 10 minutes. The Circle then consists of a dialogue process supported by the facilitator. The goals of the Circle are for participants to understand each other, take responsibility for their choices and generate actions for moving forward together that are agreeable to all involved.

Members of a non-profit organization (n=3) facilitate (host) the circles and run the RC program at the school. At least one member of the organization is at the school each day; they have office space in the main office area where administrators and other staff also have offices. The RC program at the school also offers facilitator training to students. At the end of the second year of the program, six students had completed the training. Four of those students participated in interviews for this study. RC program staff
also provides workshops and meetings for the teachers to learn more about the program. The RC program at the school was designed to serve 9th grade students and those in the PLC in their first year (2011) and then expand to all students the following year.

**Procedure**

Data were collected from students, staff, and administrators at the school over a three-week period at the end of 2012-2013 academic year. Students that had some involvement with the restorative circles program (e.g., participated in any capacity in a circle or training) in either of the two years of the program’s existence were recruited by teachers or evaluation staff. Given that the purpose of the study was to understand individuals’ experiences with and perceptions of RC, purposeful sampling was used to recruit and include participants that had some exposure to RC in order to facilitate theory development (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

**Consent/assent procedures.** This study was approved by both the University of Illinois Institutional Review board and the research approval agency for the school district where the research was conducted. Eligible students and staff were invited to participate in an interview to help evaluate the RC program. Those students wishing to participate were given a parent information letter to take home to their parents prior to their participation. A waiver of active consent was used, given that the data collection was part of a program evaluation. The rationale for using a waiver of active consent was fourfold: 1) the evaluation was initiated at the request of the program director, 2) evaluations are a known part of the RC program at this school and had already been taking place annually, 3) questions asked pose no foreseeable risks, 4) the principal approved and supported the evaluation. The waiver was sent home to parents informing
them that their child would be invited to participate in a survey and/or interview to help evaluate the RC program. Parents could decline having their children participate by sending the form back to the school. No letters were returned to the school, therefore, all students receiving the letter were eligible to participate. Teachers and staff members were recruited by evaluation staff personally asking if they would like to participate in interviews. Staff participants were given a written consent form to sign before the interview. Student participants were also given the opportunity to give their assent at the beginning of the survey and/or interview. All of the students and 90% of staff invited to participate agreed to do so. Staff declining to participate did so because of time constraints.

It was made clear to all participants that participation was completely voluntary and non-participation would not incur penalties of any kind. It was also made clear that their participation or nonparticipation would not be reported to the RC program director or the school and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, similarly, without penalty. Student participants received a $5 gift card immediately after they finished the interview in recognition of their time and cooperation. Staff members completing the interview were given a $10 gift card immediately after the completion of the interview. Staff members received higher compensation because their interviews were expected to last longer than student interviews.

**Interview administration.** Students agreeing to participate in an individual interview scheduled a 30-minute interview time. Student participants were interviewed individually ($n=35$) in the order that their schedules permitted and lasted an average of 10
minutes (range = 6-40 minutes). The interviews took place in office space provided by the school or the school library.

Staff agreeing to be interviewed scheduled a 40-minute interview in their offices or classrooms. Interviews with teachers and staff were conducted \( (n=25) \) with a focus on interviewing a wide range of staff members (administrators, teachers, security guards, counselors and social workers). Interviews were conducted with staff in their offices or the school library and lasted an average of 20 minutes (range = 10-50 minutes).

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, no participant identifying information (e.g., student/staff names) was recorded. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, that is until they stopped yielding new or relevant information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Staff and students participating in the interview had the option to opt out of having their interview audio recorded. No participant opted out of the audio recording.

**Measures**

Data sources include both student and adult interviews. Participants were given a semi-structured interview that was developed to help evaluate RC programs (See appendix B for full protocol). The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 14 open-ended questions and had three major sections: 1) questions about conflict in general (e.g. “What do you do when you have a conflict with another student at school?”), 2) questions about the RC program (e.g. “Tell me about your circle experience”), and 3) questions about school conflict (e.g. “What should teachers do when students have conflict with each other at school”). A semi-structured interview was used to allow participants and the researcher flexibility to deviate from the interview protocol. In the
vast majority of interviews (both student and staff), participants brought up information or talked about topics not specifically asked about in the interview protocol. When this occurred, participants were prompted to provide more detail. Care was taken to encourage participants to talk about issues relevant to them concerning any aspect of the RC program. All student and adult interviews were conducted by the graduate student leading the evaluation.

**Methodology**

Principles of grounded theory methodology (GTM) were used in this study as they provide useful tools to learn about individuals’ perceptions and feelings regarding a particular subject (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). GTM emphasizes understanding the “voice” of the participant and advocates creating new theory rather than testing existing theories. Studies using GTM aim to explain phenomena or generate a general explanation of a process based on empirical data (Creswell, 2007; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Methodologists have provided variations or their own interpretations of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Given the variations, this study used principles of grounded theory following the methodological guidance of Charmaz (2006), Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and Miles and Huberman (1994) to analyze the interview data. A constructivist approach, as opposed to Struass and Corbin’s (1998) positivist approach, to grounded theory was chosen because it “emphasizes the studied phenomenon rather than the methods of studying it” (Charmaz, 2006). This particular grounded theory approach was chosen on the basis of its ties to social justice research (Charmaz, 2006). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis principles were used as a starting point in coding the data.
GTM states that development and identification of the variables does not take place prior to data collection but instead as part of the data collection process. Researchers may begin with a theory or develop one as interviews, transcribing and coding take place. The theory is, therefore, grounded in the data, and in the views of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The theory is driven by the data collection and data analysis impacts the theory. It is an iterative cycle of induction and deduction consisting of collection of data and analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

In line with GMT principles, knowledge about RC and developmental theories were used, in addition to the interview data, to develop a theoretical framework that explains the experiences and perceptions of these individuals with RC as well as factors that impact their experiences, perceptions and outcomes. The current study developed a substantive theory that provided theoretical interpretations or explanations for a particular phenomenon, RC; this is in contrast to formal theories that are more abstract and provide a theory for a generic issue that can be applied more broadly (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Over the course of transcribing and coding the theoretical framework was revised and refined to better reflect the data.

**Analysis**

Interviews were each assigned a number and transcribed by undergraduate research assistants. Interviews were transcribed into word documents. All student transcripts were placed into a single word file for coding. The same was done for adult transcripts, yielding 139 single-spaced pages of interview data from students and 125 single-spaced pages of interview data from adults. Transcripts were then checked against
the audio files to ensure accurate transcription and all identifying information was removed (e.g. all names mentioned in transcripts were replaced by “X”).

Interview transcripts were then each individually coded and analyzed guided by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) method of qualitative coding and data analysis based on grounded theory and some principles of Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis (2006). Several coding techniques that are in line with GTM principles were applied in order to examine interviewee’s accounts at different levels.

Thematic analysis was used as a starting point because it allows flexibility and provides a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows for the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns or themes within data; it describes data in detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). The following beginning steps as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used in this study: 1) familiarizing yourself with your data (e.g. transcribing, checking transcripts), 2) generating initial codes (e.g. coding in a systematic fashion across the entire data set), and 3) searching for themes (e.g. collecting codes into potential themes). Interviews were distributed among a team of undergraduate research assistants for transcription. After all interviews had been transcribed all of the transcripts were checked against the audio files for transcription accuracy.

A team of three graduate students and one undergraduate student coded all of the transcripts individually by breaking down the data into phrases or sentences that represented the participants’ main ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Student and adult interview transcripts were treated separately and codes were identified for each set of transcripts. Transcripts were coded in Microsoft word using highlighting to identify
recurrent ideas or initial codes and “track changes” to insert comments with a description of the main idea. Each coder identified between 55-71 codes during this stage in coding. Most of the passages highlighted among coders; the differences were often in the terminology used to describe the code. There was about 80% overlap between the categories identified for students and those identified for adults. After this initial coding step a basic grounded theory approach to coding was used, incorporating open, axial and selective coding.

**Open Coding.** The initial open coding method used was based on Miles and Huberman (1994) and Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) grounded theory methods. Open coding, or line-by-line coding helps identify initial phenomena and produces a list of categories. The goal is to code the data for its major categories of information (Creswell, 2007). A category represents a unit of information composed of happenings or instances (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In searching for categories after the initial line-by-line coding a variant of *in vivo* coding was used to create conceptual labels to capture the categories in the transcripts using the participants own words (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The three graduate student coders met to discuss each of their initial codes, to agree on categories, and to come to an agreement for each of the code labels used to represent the data. After this open-coding 45 categories for students and 52 for adults emerged regarding the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The theoretical framework was revised throughout the coding and analysis process to reflect the emerging themes in the data.

**Axial Coding.** Axial coding was then applied where categories and subcategories were rearranged and regrouped in order to make connections between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was done by specifying and clarifying concepts that relate to
categories (Creswell, 2007). One graduate student and a faculty member familiar with RC principles went through the categories and subcategories and further reorganized the data. From the axial coding process 24 categories and subcategories emerged for the students and 30 for the adults. The emergent categories were assigned category labels.

Selective Coding. The final stage of coding was selective coding that consists of integrating and refining categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding allowed for the development of an overarching theoretical scheme to explain how each of the categories relates to each other and how they explain the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007). From selective coding, five constructs or overarching theoretical categories emerged from the data. These five included: 1) barriers, 2) initial climate/culture, 3) internal motivation, 4) level of participant engagement with RC, and 5) outcomes.

Triangulation of data was used to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is a process of corroborating evidence from different sources to validate findings (Creswell, 2007). In the current study evidence from coding the student interviews and the teacher/staff interviews yielded identical overarching theoretical categories and nearly identical subcategories to the major themes. This consensus provides support for the validation of findings.
Chapter 3

Results

The purpose of this study was to generate a theory that explains students’ and teachers’ perceptions of and experiences with the Restorative Circles (RC) program at their school. The grounded theory model for RC experiences and perceptions, developed from the present investigation can be seen in Figure 1. Each part of the model will be discussed in more detail in this chapter; axial (e.g., categories and subcategories) along with selective coding (e.g., overarching constructs) results will be presented.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
The emergent theory suggests that school and neighborhood climate/culture (e.g. high conflict, limited resources) impacts both barriers (e.g., knowledge, trust) and internal motivation (e.g. curiosity, desire to engage) to influence level of participant engagement with RC, which in turn, influences outcomes (e.g. frustration, disappointment, improved relationships, meaningful dialogue). These outcomes then loop back to impact barriers or internal motivation. More specifically, the theoretical model asserts that there are two loops of interactions. The first one involves school and neighborhood climate interacting with barriers, which influences disengagement, which in turn, impacts negative outcomes, which create even greater barriers. The second loop involves climate interacting with internal motivation, which influences engagement, which in turn, impacts positive outcomes, which then create even greater internal motivation.

This chapter is divided into five sections, each representing the overarching constructs that emerged during the selective coding stage: barriers, initial climate/culture, internal motivation, level of participant engagement with RC, and outcomes. The five overarching constructs and 8 categories, 7 subcategories, and 10 themes that emerged for students and 11 categories, 7 subcategories and 11 themes that emerged for adults are presented below in outline form (see outline 1 and outline 2), consistent with Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) method of data reporting. A descriptive matrix displaying a sample of selective and axial coding results (e.g. categories and subcategories) for the second construct, initial climate/culture, can be found in appendix C. An in-depth examination of the five constructs that comprise the emergent theory and their interrelationships follows the outlines. The examination provides one illustrative quotation for each category, subcategory, and theme to assist in describing the theory.
The quotes are identified by the participants’ role in the school (e.g. student, teacher); grade level and gender are also provided for student quotes. Many of the quotes used to illustrate a particular category also address a variety of the categories and subcategories of the five overarching constructs. The quotes were chosen because they demonstrate the category well, but the interactions and interrelationships are also discussed.

Outline 1: Student constructs, categories, and subcategories

1. Overarching Construct I: Barriers
   a. Low Knowledge/ Awareness of RC
   b. Low Involvement
2. Overarching Construct II: Initial Climate/Culture
   a. High Violence
   b. High Boosting/ Instigating
3. Overarching Construct III: Internal Motivation
   a. Curiosity/ Openness
   b. Desire to engage
4. Overarching Construct IV: Level of Participant Engagement with RC
5. Overarching Construct V: Outcomes
   a. Negative
      i. Frustration
         1. Lying
         2. Fighting
      ii. Disappointment
         1. Unwilling to be vulnerable
         2. Not everyone important to conflict present
   b. Positive
      i. Ownership of process/ Bypassing adults
      ii. Interrupting the school to prison pipeline
      iii. Improved relationships
      iv. Prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict
         1. New skills/tools
         2. Utilizing Circles
         3. Less physical fighting
      v. Meaningful dialogue
         1. Understanding and connecting
         2. No rumors/boosting in the circle
         3. Gets to the actual cause of the issue
Outline 2: Adult constructs, categories and subcategories

1. Overarching Construct I: Barriers
   a. Low Knowledge/ Awareness of RC
   b. Low Involvement
   c. Low Trust
   d. Lack of Time
2. Overarching Construct II: Initial Climate/Culture
   a. High Violence
   b. High Boosting/ Instigating
   c. Limited resources
3. Overarching Construct III: Internal Motivation
   a. Curiosity/Openness
   b. Desire to engage
4. Overarching Construct IV: Level of participant engagement with RC
5. Overarching Construct V: Outcomes
   a. Negative
      i. Frustration
         1. Lying
         2. Fighting
      ii. Disappointment
         1. Unwilling to be vulnerable
   b. Positive
      i. Interrupting the school to prison pipeline
      ii. Improved relationships
      iii. Prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict
         1. New skills/tools
         2. Utilizing Circles
         3. Less physical fighting
      iv. Meaningful dialogue
         1. Understanding and connecting
         2. No rumors/boosting in the circle
         3. Gets to the actual cause of the issue
   v. Academic and social achievements
      1. Maturity in students
      2. Better behavior in students
      3. Confidence in students

Barriers

From selective coding, the first overarching construct that emerged as individuals discussed their experiences with and perceptions of the RC program was barriers.

Students and adults discussed some barriers they noted regarding the RC system at their
school. When students discussed barriers two categories emerged from axial coding: 1) low knowledge/awareness of RC and 2) low involvement. Adults also shared the first two categories with students but two additional categories also emerged for them. The four subcategories for adults included: 1) low knowledge/awareness of RC, 2) low involvement, 3) low trust, and 4) lack of time

**Low knowledge/awareness of RC.** Students and adults talked about the need to increase awareness and knowledge of the RC program because not enough people knew about it or understood it.

I don’t think anybody really knows about the circle program. It’s kind of like, the only time they will know about the circle program if it’s somebody popular in the circle program, or someone that everybody knows is in the circle program, then, and that- it’s just unknown -10th grade female

I don’t know what percentage of the staff understand it [the RC program] or know what it is. I have heard a few comments that lead me to believe that people are clueless as to what this can do to help the kids and help some of them [the teachers]. I think probably the staff is not properly trained to understand this.

–Teacher

**Low Involvement.** Students and adults also spoke about needing to increase the involvement or participation in the RC program. Everyone spoke about the importance of increasing not only student, but also teacher and staff participation in the RC program.

I just think more people need to be involved in it [the RC program]. -11th grade female

Get the teachers in it [the RC program] more. –Teacher

**Trust.** Another barrier that was identified only by adults was trust. Adults noted that trust needed to be gained, specifically trust that the program would stick around. This was likely due to the experience the school staff has had with high turnover of programs; historically programs have come and gone and none seem to stick around too long.
Building trust may also impact the involvement and knowledge and awareness categories discussed above because if there is trust that the program will stick around, adults may investment more into it by learning about it and participating in it. Trust may also impact student involvement because if students feel that teachers and staff are investing in the program, then students may also feel that the program is worth investing in.

I’ve seen programs come and go um, so the- if we see something has the potential to- uh, the potential to work and there can be a good model put in place then the powers that be need to do whatever they need to do to make sure that the- that the program is gonna be funded, it’s gonna be consistent and then we can see some longevity – Social worker

**Time.** The last category that emerged under the construct of barriers (for adults only) was time. Adults spoke about needing time to build the program and for a paradigm shift to occur. In terms of building the program, adults discussed that buy-in from everyone is something that will take time. In terms of the paradigm shift, adults shared the RC program addressed conflict in a different way than what everyone was used to. A paradigm shift needs to occur where this method of addressing conflict could be integrated into the culture or climate, which is something that will take time.

I’ve seen several of them, you know, the fights in the neighborhood and they come to school and we try to deal with it [the conflict] in a whole different method, and sometimes that’s conflict. What they’ve [students have] seen and what they’ve grown up with is totally different then what we are trying to implant on them. And there is some rejection of it, “that’s not the way I deal with it at home, that’s not how I see my mom and dad handle- or my mom’s boyfriend deal with conflict, they fight it out.” So it’s a whole paradigm switch. – Teacher

They [everyone] are learning the new process, they learning a new technique; it doesn’t happen over night…she’s doing something that’s gonna take a little while, I mean, it can take one or two years for people to build up to where they are right now. It’s gonna take longer on how to instill a new method on how to deal with conflict…I could foresee maybe a three – five year plan, in stages. Word gets around; we gotta educate the teachers to what we have. - Teachers
I’m not gonna say that there isn’t buy in, I’m saying that I don’t think we’ve had enough time to build that. –Administrator

Time is also something that will impact the three other categories discussed above: knowledge, involvement, and trust. The longer the RC program is around, the more knowledge people will have of it and likely more involvement will be seen given that there has been time to build trust in the program.

**Initial Climate/Culture**

From selective coding, the second overarching construct that emerged as individuals discussed their experiences with and perceptions of RC was initial climate/culture. Participants spoke about the climate or culture that they experienced in their daily lives, both at home and at school. When both students and adults spoke about climate/culture, two categories emerged from axial coding, 1) high violence and 2) boosting/instigating. For adults, a third category also emerged 3) limited resources.

**High violence.** Students and adults expressed common feelings about the climate in their neighborhood and school involving a lot of violence perpetuated by everyone. Participants stated that violence was a part of most facets of their lives. Both students and adults talked about being part of or witnessing violence on a daily basis.

People like to see everybody fight for no apparent reason. And they like to just video it, put them on all these website and have all these people comment on how they fight. -9th grade male

I think adults should act like adults, not children- out there fighting with them and arguing with them like that. –12th grade female

“In my neighborhood this [Circles] ain't how we work it out, we fight it out.” And by some of the videos and some of the things that I’m seeing today, even the grown ups are in the street fights. And it’s like the wild wild west. I’m almost amazed at the parents I see there, they are there to support their child, they want their child to stand up and be a person- and I mean, that’s admirable, but that’s not how you deal with it. – PLC teacher
**Boosting/Instigating.** Students and adults also talked about their culture including lots of instigating fights, or to use their language, “boosting” each other to fight. Interviews suggested that much of the physical fighting was due to instigation because of the entertainment value placed on fights as well as fighting being a way to gain recognition or respect in the school and neighborhood. Teachers and students talked about videos of fights that occurred in the neighborhood being uploaded to YouTube and students gaining recognition for the number of views or comments that the videos received.

Cause they’ll always be that one person that be like, like, an instigator. Be that one person that be like, “oh no she said this.” That’s why most of the people be fighting, cause people be boosting their head up and fight. -10th grade female

I see adults out there in the community, kinda like boosting it [fights] on. –Security

**Limited Resources.** A third category of limited resources emerged for the adults only who explained that limited resources and limited time were part of the climate at school. When they spoke about limited resources, it was in terms of engaging student conflict. More specifically, there was recognition that the way they were addressing conflict was not helpful, while also acknowledging that there were limited alternatives available to them. Adults described feeling stretched in attending to all the responsibilities that came with their job.

The rule says that, you know, Johnny must be suspended three days and I have to call the police and this is what has to happen. And they [school staff] rely on that to the point where they aren’t really helping the kids develop mechanisms to solve their own problems. - Teacher

I’ve got seven classes and like a hundred and sixty-some kids. Other than if somebody calls a meeting I don’t know what’s going on. I’m in my room trying to keep my head above water. But if there were some, some way to make it [Circles]
a part of the school climate, because the anger, the frustration and everything is across the board. Children and the teachers all feel the same thing.” –Teacher

The model suggests that the construct of climate/culture interacts with the construct of barriers. When limited resources are the norm, it may be especially difficult for individuals to find time to learn about the program or get involved in it. If adults in the school already feel stretched, adding investing time for RC to their plate may just place more demands on already overfull schedules.

Students did not discuss limited resources as part of the climate but this subcategory may assist in understanding the barrier of involvement that students described. Students attributed adults’ reasons for not participating to adults not caring. A 10th grade student remarked, “I wish Miss X was in it [Circles], ‘cause she’s the principle and, if you the head principle and you care about the kids, you supposed to be involved in something like this.” This quote illustrates the interaction between the overarching constructs of climate and barriers. Students want adult involvement in the program (barriers) and adults feel that their schedules are already packed (climate). One teacher suggested that he and his peers wanted to participate but logistically trying to get schedules to match up made it impossible, “we want to know and understand this process, but we don’t have time. And if we had time to actually be involved, I’ve been invited to more than one circle, but I haven’t had time. Once they try to arrange with the kid’s schedule, then the adult’s schedule, it’s like I don’t have time to get to it…we have to have time to be a part of them.”

**Internal Motivation**

From selective coding, the third overarching construct that emerged in understanding individuals’ experiences with and perceptions of RC was internal
motivation. For both students and adults the two categories that emerged during axial coding under this overarching construct included: 1) curiosity/openness and 2) desire to engage.

**Curiosity.** For students and staff that did not have prior knowledge of RC, a theme of curiosity emerged. For these students, their curiosity seemed to drive them to learn more about how RC worked. This category interacts with culture in that students seemed to realize that they needed a new way to handle conflicts and were curious to see what RC could offer them in terms of another option. For adults curiosity also seemed to drive them to learn more and gain a better understanding of the process.

I wanted to see like how did it work out or could it help me in previous- I mean, not previous but um, like more things that could happen, or whatever the word I’m looking for- future incidents and stuff. -12th grade female

Well, I um, wasn't so clear [about the RC program], like maybe my first month here; I started back in August of this year. So I wasn't too clear when students started appearing [in the RC office], and X did a little, she gave us a little information about the restorative justice program and I was like, “okay, okay, kind of makes sense.” I attended um, it wasn't a training session, it was um, a meeting similar to the one we had Monday, to learn more. –Administrator

**Desire to engage.** Both adults and students talked about wanting to engage in the process. Those adults and students that had a desire to engage shared some sort of understanding, or knowledge about RC. Students that talked about wanting to engage in the process had at least heard about RC and from that, they had a sense that it might be helpful for them to resolve their conflicts or that it might help them in some other way.

Adults that talked about wanting to engage in the process, talked about wanting to try RC because it provided a different way of handling conflicts. For adults, similarly to students, the culture of violence interacted with their internal motivation in that they had some hope that RC may be useful given that they did not find their current methods of dealing
with student conflict to be effective. One teacher made the connection between a culture of high violence and how it interacts with a desire to engage, “it really sounds ridiculous to us, sit down and talk, because of everything’s going on in the community…so when somebody mentions doing something [dealing with conflict] a different way, the reaction is not always positive.”

Cause, like, the dude- no we was cool, I've known him since middle school. And I wanted to get to the bottom of all this “he-said she-said” stuff. So I wanted to hear it from his mouth. You know, that [the Circle] was the only way I was gonna hear it from his mouth, so I took that chance. -9th grade male

This is ground breaking stuff, it really is, it really is. I guess I was excited last year for it [the RC program]. I tried to be that way and let them know my room was open for it, you know, “if you wanna come in here and try something new and try something different,” you know. “come on in bring them in.” I gave up some of my class time and, you know, they expose kids to new way of doing stuff. Oh yea, I wanna do that. I wanna be involved with stuff like that because if not, then the only thing I’m doing constantly is breaking up fights. -Teacher

Level of Participant Engagement with RC

From selective coding, the fourth overarching construct that emerged was level of participant engagement with RC. Level of participant engagement with RC is seen as a continuum from completely disengaged to completely engaged in RC. Quotes for this construct provide examples from the two opposite ends of the continuum.

Students at the disengaged end of the continuum individually feel that they do not resonate with or value RC as a way of dealing with conflict in their lives; disengaged students’ felt that the RC process was just not for them. For adults, the level of engagement with RC captures their perceptions of student engagement.

I just don’t like talking cause I mean, I don’t like discussing this [conflicts], if I got a problem, I don’t like saying it. I like to do it on my own. -12th grade female

I think there has been fair amount of resistance [by students] to using this as a model. –Security guard
Students and adults at the engaged end of the continuum spoke about resonating with the values of RC and seeing RC as something that was consistent with how they wanted to engage conflict. Adults talked about how the program had a similar philosophy or had values they endorsed which helped them initially have some support for the RC program. It seemed that once adults learned about the process, it made sense to them in terms of how they wanted or would like to handle conflicts.

I like to talk about it [conflicts] instead of getting into fighting – 10th grade female

My philosophy for some reason is very much similar to the restorative circle process. It’s a process that I already believed in, in how you would handle kids with conflicts. I support it because it’s something I already believed in. -Teacher

Outcomes

The fifth and last overarching construct that emerged during selective coding was outcomes. This construct included 2 categories for both students and adults 1) negative outcomes and 2) positive outcomes.

Negative outcomes. For adults and youth, the category of negative outcomes included two subcategories 1) frustration, particularly by lying and fighting and 2) disappointment, which included the theme of unwilling to be vulnerable. For youth only, a third theme under the subcategory of disappointment emerged: not everyone important to the conflict present.

Frustration. Students talked about feeling frustrated about their Circle experience because they believed that their peers had lied in the circle. Youth perceived lying as being associated with their peers not aligning or resonating with the values of RC and possibly not wanting to participate. For adults, frustration was both something that they experienced watching students lie in the Circle and also perceiving student frustration.
from the lying. For adults, students lying in the Circle was described as a function of discomfort or distrust issue possibly with the Circle participants but especially with the Circle facilitators. Adults shared that they perceived students not feeling comfortable with the facilitators or not trusting them because the students had not had time to build relationships with the facilitators.

She should have told the truth! She was sitting right there [in the Circle]. -10th grade male

“Y’all need to stop [lying], come on now!... She [the facilitator] needs you to be truthful”... It's hard for me to sit there [in the Circle] knowing that you know some information but you're [the students are] not keeping it real, because you [the students] feel like this person [the facilitator] is a stranger. You [the students] feel like there are certain things you cannot tell this person –Security

The second theme that emerged under the subcategory of frustration was fighting. Students and adults felt frustrated that sometimes in Circles students just wanted to fight it out rather than talk it out. Students also mentioned that even if they wanted to talk it out, sometimes the other students in the Circle just wanted to fight. This theme was also attributed to students not resonating with the RC values and disengaging from the process. Adults talked about students wanting to fight as something that was due to the students not wanting to engage with the process. Some adults described anger and disengagement leading to negative outcomes (e.g., fighting) in circles.

There was one time that I thought, when I came in the circle with X, I thought everything was fine but I think X just said some things to get out of the circle so we could fight again, which we did. We had another fight one more time. So the only time I- the first time I was in the circle, I haven’t been having a fight in four months so therefore I didn’t have a fight until the day X want to fight again. -9th grade male

So all they wanted, all they saw was just their anger and their pride and they didn't want to talk really at all. As soon as one said something smart then the other person starts, you know, yelling back and it just turned into a big explosion. I think that's the hardest thing if you’re so angry that you don't want to try to talk it
out then it’s gonna block the whole [RC] process. So that's exactly what happened. –Counselor

**Disappointment.** The second subcategory for negative consequences was disappointment. This subcategory emerged for both students and adults. Youth shared that even if they wanted to participate in the Circle, sometimes their peers did not want to and so they did not take the circle process seriously. Youth discussed being disappointed when their peers were unwilling to be vulnerable in the circle or to use their words, when others did not want to “take it seriously.” Youth talked about their peers “playing around” or “messing around” in the Circle.

I don’t really think they [Circles] is helpful. I mean I won’t say it’s a waste but half the time people don’t be paying attention; they be playing and stuff. -10th grade female

They [students] would just play around and think of it as an opportunity to miss class –Teacher

For students the subcategory of disappointment also had another theme; students felt disappointed that not everyone important to the conflict was present in some Circles. Youth talked about how Circles would be better if everyone that was involved in the conflict were present. Many students experienced Circles that were missing key players as only addressing part of the conflict. Students seemed to be aware of the value of having everyone involved in and impacted by the conflict present in order to best address the conflict.

There was conflict that started between more than just the two people that were here [in the Circle], so that if they would’ve reached out and got the rest of the people there in that conflict, I think that would have helped the circle. -12th grade female

Disengagement leads to negative outcomes, because students that do not see the process as fitting with their values and therefore do not want to engage, contribute to
frustration and disappointment for those students that do want to engage. A 12th grade student summed up her disappointment of being in a Circle with a disengaged peer by saying, “have students that want to be there [in the Circle], be there.” Having two disengaged students is also likely to contribute to negative outcomes because they are not interacting with the process fully.

These negative outcomes loop back and exacerbate the barriers because when individuals are frustrated and disappointed with the RC process they may be less likely to want to be involved or learn more about the process. Thus feeding the loop from disengagement to negative outcomes to increased barriers.

**Positive Outcomes.** The second category under outcomes is positive outcomes. This category includes five subcategories and five themes for youth and five subcategories and nine themes for adults. Four of the five categories overlapped for youth and adults. The five categories that emerged after axial coding for students included: 1) ownership of process/bypassing adults, 2) interrupting the school to prison pipeline, 3) improved relationships, 4) prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict, and 5) meaningful dialogue. The six categories that emerged after axial coding for adults included: 1) interrupting the school to prison pipeline, 2) improved relationships, 3) prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict, 4) meaningful dialogue, and 5) academic and social achievements.

**Ownership of the process/bypassing adults.** The first student-only category that emerged from axial coding was ownership of the RC process. Students talked about using the Circle process as their method of dealing with conflicts because it was better than the method they used before which was physical fighting. Students also talked about
using the Circle process on their own, meaning stepping into the facilitator role and facilitating a Circle without adult involvement.

Me and my friend were playing around in class and we actually solved [a conflict using] the Circle. It was fun but it was serious too and we did it all by ourself. Cause my friend that used to be in the facilitator circle training, me and her we was just playing at first but my other friend, the girl I’ll call my friend and the girl I’ll call my sister, they was arguing about something or whatever. So me and X said, “let’s have a circle.” and then we was playing - we was playing though, and then it actually solved their problem. Now they talk. So we actually did a Circle, all by ourselves. -12th grade female

**Interrupting the school to prison pipeline.** Both students and adults spoke about a shift to less punitive methods of dealing with student conflict. Students discussed that a positive outcome of the RC program was that they were not getting suspended or “locked up.” Similarly, adults explained that a positive outcome of the RC program was not having to give as many suspensions or detentions. This category speaks to the negative consequences of zero tolerance policies contributing to the “school to prison pipeline”.

Students seemed very aware of how the (punitive) methods that the school used for dealing with student conflict often resulted in them being suspended or “locked up.” A 9th grade student made the connection between him getting into fights, getting suspended and lower academic achievement, “you have a fight and your grades drop because you are missing school and your grades drop.” Adults also seemed aware of how these (punitive) methods resulted in too many suspensions. Students attributed not being suspended or “charged” to the RC program. Similarly, adults attributed being less reliant on punitive methods and more willing to talk things out using RC principles. This outcome could also be due to school staff having another option “or layer of intervention” for dealing with student conflicts. Instead of just suspending students, school staff is able to utilize the RC program to address the conflict.
Like, didn’t nobody get suspended…we just solved it [the conflict] and went back to class. It’s that simple. -10th grade male

I didn’t get charged- I didn’t get locked up [after the circle]. -10th grade male

I noticed that some fights, some arguments, some fights get talked out more, instead of just suspension, instead of just suspending somebody from school, where they get away from their education for like five days, they don’t learn nothing for that whole five days. Instead of doing that [suspensions] you could do a circle and they do the circle they sign the paper, then they go to class, and they become friends again, or they leave each other alone. -11th grade female

I’m not as quick to do a suspension [in response to a conflict], but yet try to bring both parties in to resolve, opposed to doing a quicker suspension. –Administrator

**Improved relationships.** Students and adults also talked about improved relationships as an outcome of Circles. Students shared that their relationships were “cool” with peers they had conflict with, after participating in a Circle. One of the goals of the RC program is to restore relationships to how they were before the conflict. In this case students and adults talked not only about restored relationships, but also actual improvements in their relationships. Most of the relationships before the conflict were already strained and neutral at best, but after the Circle, participants talked about building actual relationships or having positive relationships with those individuals with whom they experienced a conflict. Similarly to the students, adults also spoke about both experiencing improved relationships with their students, and seeing improved relationships among their students.

Me and this kid [were] about to fight, and I think I, uh, I got in his face. I was upset and, you know, everybody wanted to hype up the situation. It wasn’t like that. I just wanted to get a little closer to see what he was saying. And so, uh, me and him ended up being cool after that [the Circle]. -10th grade male

“I’ve only participated in one circle and it was arguably the most revolutionary thing I’ve ever seen. I mean these girls couldn't walk within 50 feet of each other without, “I can’t believe she’s” you know, and then, now they talk they say “hi” to each other. I mean, they literally would walk down the hall and “I’m gonna hit
her, I’m gonna” you know and it was just a complete turn around [after the Circle], I think the Circle gave them an opportunity to voice their opinion and then the other heard and voiced their opinion then the- they came to this epiphany that they’re actually more alike than they are different…It was great they- they literally went from not being able to sit in a room together….so from that to being in the same room….they can be cordial.” –Counselor

It [the Circle] turned out positive, it turned out positive, I was surprised cause the person that I was [in the Circle with]– the young man, I learned some things about him that I didn't know. And, um, it kind of helped us resolve our conflict so…I think anything that can help build relationships, um, I think in the circle it allows the two people that’s involved in the conflict to build a relationships but it also allows the person that’s facilitating to build relationships as well and trust. And here, relationship is real big uh, building relationships. And once the kids understand that you’re gonna relate to them and they can trust you then you’d be surprised what you can get from them. –Teacher

Prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict. Another category for this construct was prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict. This subcategory had two themes 1) new skills/tools 2) utilizing circles and 3) less physical fighting.

Youth talked about learning new ways of handling conflict because of their Circle experience. Students also talked about learning to address conflict by talking it out rather than fighting it out. Adults talked about learning new tools because of the RC program, utilizing those tools and seeing students utilize new tools for handling conflicts. When adults spoke about the “tools,” they were not necessarily speaking about the circle process but about specific skills from the process, such as reflecting back when listening to others.

It's [the RC program] just really been helpful for me with my friends and things. Like, recently I had a problem with my friends and I just pulled it to the side, I was like, “why this why that, how come this going on?” -9th grade male

I think just seeing, I think just seeing, once you model the different, um, [RC] tools or whatever, um, you know, when they [the RC program] first came over we had training and they gave us some things to use, some tools to use. And once you use those tools and those tools actually work, you see results, then you see, ok it [the tools] can work. –Administrator
Adults and students talked about how the fact that they were utilizing Circles was an itself an outcome of the RC program. Administrators, security guards, teachers, and support staff all talked about how they have seen their peers using Circles more to deal with student conflicts. Students spoke about going to circles whenever they have conflicts. Students also acknowledged that the RC process was different than what they were used to, “they [Circles] help me, um, handle things different than what I used to.”

The second one- I mean the first one, I enjoyed it and it worked so then the second one, it was like, “okay, I could just go to the circle and just work out better.” -12th grade female

I feel like the administrators have embraced it [Circles]. I know that if there is an opportunity for students to go to the Circles they [administrators], you know, kind of go in that direction. I feel that they’ve embraced it, um, from, you know, what I see um that- they’ve embraced it so that’s a change because, you know, sometimes the administrators, you know, they rule with an iron fist and “it’s my way” and “we’re gonna handle this discipline situation this way” and she’s [principal] been, you know, able to kind let the circle process play out all of them [the conflicts]. –Administrator

The last theme that students and adults talked about was less physical fighting. Adults talked about seeing less physical fighting and attributed that to the RC program. Students talked about less physical fighting, in terms of less fighting between them and their peers. This theme ties in with the theme of learning new skills, because students are using other methods of dealing with their conflicts, likely using the new skills they learned from the RC program.

I mean we ain’t getting in conflicts [fights] since then [the Circle]. And that was two months ago. -12th grade male

I haven’t had a fight since February or January last year. -10th grade female

Incidentally it has cut down in the- on the conflict within PLC. I don't think we’ve had one major fight since that whole process has been, you know, placed within
the PLC [and] kind of working with the kids. We haven’t had any major fights within PLC. –Administrator

**Meaningful dialogue.** For both students and adults, another positive outcome of RC was meaningful dialogue. Under this category three subcategories emerged 1) understanding and connecting, 2) no rumors/boosting in the Circle and 3) gets to the actual cause of the issue.

Students enjoyed being able to talk to their peers and feeling understood because of the Circle. Adults noticed that RC gives students an opportunity to have a voice and to interact in a way that is different from what they are used to. Students were seen as able to talk and listen to each other in ways that support their relationships and create conditions for feeling heard and dealing with the underlying issues of their conflict.

I feel like everyone can get their point of view across [in Circles]...I think that [RC] is a good program. Um, I think that is a way for people to get- to like- to understand each other so that way they are not just bickering a whole bunch of words and no one is listening, but they’re actually saying something that someone is going to listen to, and then they can relay what someone wants to listen to back and then they will get to an understanding. -11th grade male

If they [students] feel like they can say their voices, their opinions, right or wrong, a lot of times it’s gonna be, you know, wrong or whatever just because they’re so young um, but just that ability to do that, you know, can make them feel, “ok, you know, this schools is not so bad,” you know, what I’m saying? Cause a lot of kids just want to write off [the school] completely because they think it’s just the most horrible school, no one listens to them and all this other stuff but like, by adding this [Circles] it’s like ok, “I do have a voice, I can say whatever I feel right or wrong and it can be heard and at least considered.” Um, so that's what I like about it, it’s just that [students], they- they’re able to do that a little bit more as opposed to, you know: “You have to do this. You have to do that. You have to do those things.” They need structure period but at the same time, sometimes these kids, especially at this age, all they want to do is be heard. –Counselor

Students also enjoyed talking out their conflicts directly with their peers without having an audience observing and instigating. Adults talked about the “no boosting” outcome as not having peer pressure in the Circles. Students are used to a culture of
violence that includes their peers instigating fights. Adults talked about how Circles provide students with a space to talk out their conflict with no peers around to “boost” it up.

It’s like I said, [in Circles] you can get your point across and you don’t have your friend or whatever in your ear. It’s like you and that person and you can go with your mind and I guess you feel more safer when it’s just y’all two to talk. Cause when it’s like, if you were around a bunch of people and you were trying to say something, if you say, “okay let’s leave it alone”, someone else out your crew gonna be like “oh you a punk, you just left it alone, you let her do this you let her do that dah dah dah dah dah dah and you still friends with her dah dah dah dah dah dah” and then when you up in here [the Circles] it’s like there’s nobody there to tell you that so you must feel more safer...it’s just you and that person and someone talking to you. And they [the Circle participants] get a better understanding, instead of someone that don’t have anything to do with it [the conflict] trying to eas it on. -12th grade female

It helps them [students] to see that a lot of things that they thought they heard from someone else had nothing to do with the person that they’re angry at. Um, so it just opens their eyes to really see that- how much people try to um beef things up, try to instigate um a lot of the problems. That's all kids want to see, they just want to see a fight, so a lot of this- times- if they just talk it out, it’ll be done, squashed, over with as opposed to “did you hear what so-and-so said about you and this that and a third” and then that [rumor] just becomes a huge blow up from there. –Counselor

Students and adults also enjoyed the positive outcome of getting to the actual cause of the issue instead of just fighting back and forth without even knowing why they are fighting. Adults shared that often having students sign a “no contact” contract in which students agree to not get into a physical fight with each other at school often does not make sense because it do not address the actual problem. Circles can get to the root cause of the problem and therefore better assist students with their conflicts compared to the other methods the school had been using to deal with conflicts.

I guess every child has a reason for being- I can’t think of the word, but every child has a reason for acting out, so they need to figure out exactly what the reason is and then solve it. -12th grade female
I felt like they [Circles] were a great resource for all of us because it just made so much sense. These kids that had conflicts were coming back together to be in the same building and sometimes in the same classes, and if it [the conflict] didn't get resolved then- if issues didn't get resolved then they [the conflicts] were gonna come up again. So the idea of having like a no contact contract, that doesn't make sense. I felt like these circles were really geared to get at the bottom of the issue, that- the underlying pieces, the feelings, the conflict. I felt like it's [the RC program] very empowering for kids to be able to solve their own problems, to be able to listen and solve problems. And I think it's also a great model. Many of our kids are not coming from homes where conflict resolution is always more positive. So, it is a wonderful model to help kids see that there is another way to resolve conflict. And actually, kids can feel like their- well, I feel like they can feel stronger and closer connected after the experience. –Counselor

I think [the Circle program], it’s an opportunity for both students to sit down and talk about what they think the issue is and that's the biggest thing [in the conflict] because sometimes kids will fight, I’ve seen fights in my- in my time in the high school, and when you ask them what they’re fighting about they really don't know, like, “I don't know, like, I don't even have an issue with her. I thought I had an issue with her friend but definitely not her.” You know, it’s like the weirdest thing it’s like, “but you all just shut our school down, we’re in lock down because you all just had this all out, brawl out and you really don't know why you’re fighting?” So the Circles has brought that element of “lets get to what we really have an issue with” and it [the real issue] kind of comes out that way and at the end [of the Circle] it's like “well, we’re cool. We know the same people, we go to the same places, we actually have more in common than we do- then we don't.” So, I think that’s the best part of what the circles have brought to this school. –Administrator

**Academic and social achievements.** The last subcategory that emerged for adults only was a seeing a stronger focus on academic and social achievements among their students as a positive outcome of the RC program. Adults noticed that the RC process had impacted some of their students in observable ways. They noticed that students were more focused on academics, had more confidence and were better behaved. Adults seemed to like the RC program because they were seeing changes in the students that had participated.
This subcategory included three emergent themes, 1) maturity in students, 2) better behavior in students, and 3) confidence in students. The numbers in front of each quote correspond to the theme numbers above.

(1) Academically they [the students involved in the RC program] seem more focused um, all of them have gotten jobs, well quite a few of them have gotten jobs. One is actually at X, so their whole mindset has changed, it’s like they’re—they’ve come up a level, you know? And I think it’s about being mature, being placed in a role and I think they’re living up to their role. —Administrator

(2) I know year one, um, the teachers were excited about how it [the RC program] helped them see differences with the behaviors of some our students, especially some of our problem students. And, you know, then they were able to see why it [the RC program] was really working. —Administrator

(3) Well she [the student] just not as “ahhhhhhh.” She’s a loud and boisterous individual anyway, but is not as, um, intimidating and, you know, confrontational as she once was, I can see that. And just have that responsibility of having the opportunity to go down and speak, you know, that puts some wind beneath her little wings, you know, made her fly a little higher and that’s good to see. Um, the other kids have been pretty mild manner [since the RC program was implemented] from my observations. —PLC teacher
Chapter 4

Discussion

This chapter uses the theoretical model described in Chapter 3 to better understand how students and school staff interact with the Restorative Circles (RC) program at their school and how they experience and perceive the program and the context in which the RC program exists. The chapter also discusses the various ways this particular RC program adheres to and diverges from RC theory and principles, and discusses the degree to which this model is consistent with established developmental theories.

The theoretical model resulting from the interview data suggests that there are five major constructs that contribute to understanding student and school staffs’ experiences with and perceptions of RC at their school. These include, 1) barriers, 2) initial climate/culture, 3) internal motivation, 4) level of participant engagement with RC, and 5) outcomes.

**Barriers.** The first component of the emergent theory for understanding the RC process is barriers. Barriers represent the limitations of the system that are evident to individuals. Generally, students and staff spoke about how limited knowledge and involvement in the RC program was a barrier to more effective implementation.

**Initial Climate/Culture** is the second component of the emergent theory. Climate represents the environment that individuals are exposed to in their daily lives both at home and at school. Students and adults spoke about a culture that involved high violence and limited resources that was prevalent both at school and in the neighborhood.
**Internal motivation.** The next component of the emergent theory is internal motivation, which represents participants’ curiosity/openness and desire to engage with the RC process. Students and adults without knowledge of the program spoke about being curious about the RC program and wanting to learn more about it. Those that had some knowledge or understanding of the program spoke about a desire to try out the RC process.

**Level of participant engagement with RC.** The fourth component of the emergent theory is level of participant engagement with RC. Students on the disengaged end of the continuum talked about not resonating with the RC values or not wanting to talk out their conflicts. Students and adults on the engaged end of the continuum spoke about sharing the values of the RC program.

**Outcomes.** The last component of the emergent theory is outcomes. This component represents the positive and negative outcomes that individuals have attributed to the RC program. In general, negative outcomes included frustration and disappointment while improved relationships, prevention of destructive ways of handling conflict and interrupting the school to prison pipeline were some of the positive consequences of RC.

**RC Principles and the Current RC program**

The particular RC program from which interview data were collected adheres to RC theory and principles in some ways and diverges in others. The following discussion of both adherence and divergence allows for a greater understanding of the overarching constructs and pathways in the emergent theory and also provides support for several
aspects of RC theory, including 1) community ownership, 2) community involvement, 3) accessibility 4) voluntariness, and 5) independence of punitive elements.

Community ownership. Restorative approaches that include more community ownership are viewed as being towards the more restorative end of the spectrum (Barter, 2011). This particular RC program was brought into the school and led by a non-profit group outside of the school community, which may have, at least initially, interfered with community ownership. Students and adults spoke about their own and others’ unwillingness to be vulnerable. Students also talked about other students not taking the process seriously. This could be due to students feeling distrust and discomfort with their peers or possibly with the facilitators. Adults discussed both of the negative outcomes (frustration and disappointment) as possibly being due to not knowing or having a relationship with the facilitator; one administrator pointed this out when she said, “one thing I do know about our students and the community in general, really, they have to kind of respect you and know you before they even start listening.” RC values having community members (as opposed to outsiders) facilitating Circles, because a level of trust and comfort is likely to already be established with someone who is a member of the community (Wachtel, 2009). Restorative Justice scholars have suggested that if participants feel intimidated they may feel less safe and less comfortable opening up and sharing their truth, including how they were impacted by what happened (Umbreit & Stacey, 1996). This is important because the willingness of participants to share their feelings has been found to impact the outcomes of other restorative practices (Umbreit & Stacey, 1996).
Notably, despite the occasional frustration and disappointment, there was also evidence that some community ownership did exist. In systems where there is community ownership of the process, greater community engagement is also seen (Barter, 2011). One of the positive outcomes discussed by students was the fact that some of them were using RC on their own, without adult involvement. Altogether, the interview data show some community ownership of the RC program, but also suggest that community ownership could have been higher. This may be one of the reasons that some of the Circles did not lead to restorative outcomes.

**Community involvement.** The more the process includes all of the individuals impacted by the conflict (i.e., the conflict community), the more restorative the process is likely to be (Barter, 2001). If everyone involved in the conflict is present in the Circle, it is likely that the Circle will be more restorative. The opposite is also true. Since students cannot be forced to either participate or take Circles seriously because voluntariness is a core value of the RC process, it is not surprising that some students were unwilling to engage fully, if at all. Having everyone impacted by the conflict present is important because conflicts often impact more than just two people. Having only the victim and offender, or using RC terminology the author and receiver, may decrease the level of resolution felt by all those who were impacted (Coates, Umbreit, & Vos, 2003; Umbreit, 1995).

**Accessibility.** In order for the program to be accessible by everyone, people need to know about it. Limited knowledge of the RC program may be impacting how accessible the program can be. Although the program has no gatekeepers, (i.e., any student or staff person can initiate a circle), those that do not know about it, cannot
participate. This is relevant because the more accessible the process, the more restorative it is likely to be (Barter, 2011).

There are many possible reasons for the lack of knowledge about the RC program. One reason may be that this particular school has a history of programs “coming and going,” as one social worker put it. Individuals may not feel compelled to invest their time and energy into a program that may not stick around too long. This seems very adaptive given the track record of programs at this school. It also seems adaptive given that the school culture is such that staff feel stretched and are trying to, in the words of one teacher, “stay above water.”

**Voluntariness.** The more voluntary the process the more restorative it is likely to be (Barter, 2011). Full voluntariness is an ideal characteristic of a restorative system as it has been documented to lead to more restorative outcomes in other restorative practices (Umbreit, Coates & Vos, 2001). Voluntariness may impact the disengagement discussed by participants. Circles at the high school were not 100% voluntary. Though participation in Circles was voluntary in theory, some students may have chosen to participate because they believed it would lead to a less severe punishment. If Circles are not perceived to be fully voluntary, youth “playing around” is likely because students do not really want to participate.

Students also talked about their peers laughing, giggling, and playing around in Circles. Some adults described this behavior as “nervous energy” brought on by the fact that students generally had no previous experience with this kind of dialogue process. Since RC is very different from how students normally interact with one another in
school or in the community some nervousness, which could be expressed by laughing or playing around is not surprising.

Students may feel pressured by adults to participate in a Circle and may feel that the program is imposed rather than voluntary. Individuals may also see their participation as a requirement or punishment. If students see it as a punishment then RC is no different from the punitive measures that are already part of the current culture. Circles work best when working independently of the punitive system not as part of it (Evans & Lester, 2013).

**Independence of Punitive Elements.** It is helpful to view restorative approaches as falling somewhere along the continuum of punitive and retributive to fully restorative (Barter, 2011). According to Barter (2011), the more a restorative system is independent of a punitive or retributive system the more restorative the outcomes. The current RC system was operating in an environment that included both a restorative and a punitive method of addressing conflict. Though only partially restorative, this was likely a strategic (and possibly necessary) decision given that the school administration was not likely to approve the elimination of all punitive elements without first seeing compelling results. Even with the two conflicting approaches in the environment, the positive outcomes of the RC program are notable, though they would have likely been even more restorative if some of the punitive elements in the environment were removed.

As restorative approaches gain traction in schools, the resulting tension between the two vastly different philosophical approaches presents a new set of challenges for school officials to navigate. Current punitive school policies emphasize zero tolerance, which sustains a climate of fear and punishment. The culture of high violence also carries
an implied culture of vengeance that is common in a punitive system. Value is placed on getting back at or punishing those that have caused harm rather than understanding why the harm occurred and what can be done to repair it (Karp & Breslin, 2001). In contrast to zero tolerance policies, restorative practices require a shift in philosophy; in order to see this shift the tension between retributive, authoritarian controls and restorative communitarian controls need to be balanced (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

The introduction of a restorative system at a school may create conditions for a paradigm shift to restorative values. A paradigm shift occurs when restorative methods of addressing conflict are integrated into the culture or climate, which is something that takes time (Karp & Breslin, 2001). This paradigm shift can impact engagement and the outcomes of RC because restorative practices are seen as being strengthened when the context where they function holds the same values (Barter, 2012). Because restorative and punitive systems have many opposing values, the introduction of a restorative system may feel threatening to some school teachers and staff and even to some students, even when there is dissatisfaction with the status quo. At the same time, many adults and students find the restorative alternative intuitively appealing.

Adults in the school acknowledge that the punitive ways of handling conflicts and rule violations are not effective. This recognition is in line with research suggesting that zero tolerance policies are not effective in reducing behavior referrals (Evans & Lester, 2012). This recognition or longing for a different way provides an entry position for RC and a possible initial paradigm shift, because it offers a drastically different approach for dealing with conflict. Two years into the RC program, the adults in the school seemed to be changing their view of punitive approaches. Though they already had some motivation
to change the way they interacted with students prior to the RC program, until the RC program, they did not have the structure to put that motivation into practice. Having a program that aligns with their values and provides a structure for how to put those values into practice may have been all some adults needed to shift to less punitive responses.

The current RC program seems to be situated somewhere near the middle of the continuum between punitive and restorative. It contains many of the principles or values of restorative approaches albeit some to a larger degree than others. Although there are ways in which the program can be more restorative it is notable that there are positive outcomes attributed to the way the program is currently operating. As Barter (2011) pointed out, just reconfiguring the way in which people in conflict meet already creates potential benefits; creating a dedicated space where people can focus on listening to each other and speaking the truth to each other is already a significant step towards a restorative system.

**Current model’s relationship with existing developmental theories**

This model fits well within several existing developmental theories, some of which were discussed in Chapter 1 (literature review). The social-ecological framework posits that individual attitudes and behaviors are shaped by a range of interrelated contextual systems, including family, peers, and the school environment, among others (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979; Espelage & De La Rue, 2012; Espelage, Rao, & De La Rue, 2013). Consistent with the social-ecological framework the current model explains how individuals’ perceptions and experiences with the RC program are shaped by interrelated contextual systems. The systems present in the current model include individual factors (e.g., internal motivation), school and neighborhood environment (e.g.,
climate/culture), peers (e.g., disengagement and engagement in RC), and broader societal systems (e.g., Zero tolerance legislation), among others. The two feedback loops in the model are also consistent with the social-ecological framework in that they allow the interrelationships among the different contextual systems to be seen.

The community involvement model was proposed to describe the impact of community involvement on disadvantaged youth (Nettles, 1991). This model proposes that community structure (e.g., history, physical features) is a factor affecting student outcomes including educational attainment. Community climate (e.g., norms, rules, values) influences student involvement and development; climate may have direct effects on student outcomes. Community involvement includes formal and informal actions (e.g., mobilization, allocation of resources) that students and community members take to improve the institution. Different types of involvement may produce different outcomes, including higher achievement or attitudinal shifts (Nettles, 1991).

The current model is consistent with pieces of the community involvement model. The current model proposes that climate, via interaction with internal motivation influences RC (engagement), which in turn influences outcomes including academic and social achievements. This connection is consistent with the community involvement model, which posits that community climate influences student involvement and development, which may impact attainment. The involvement discussed in the present model includes engagement or disengagement with the RC process. Thus, engagement is proposed to impact student outcomes, while taking into account the climate and culture of the student’s environment.
The current theory is also consistent with Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Self-determination theory suggests a link between increased autonomy and increased intrinsic motivation, which is in turn linked to greater academic achievement. Self-determination theory defines autonomy as feelings of volition; these feelings of volition are related to greater intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is related to improved academic performance and learning and creates greater engagement in learning, among other positive outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2008).

The current theoretical model suggests that a positive outcome of RC is ownership of the process, characterized by students using the process or skills associated with the process to work through their own conflicts without adult involvement or assistance. Ownership can be seen as autonomy as described in self-determination theory. Similarly, in the current model internal motivation is consistent with intrinsic motivation discussed in self-determination theory. The second feedback loop in the current model posits a link between the positive outcomes (including ownership) back to internal motivation and greater engagement in the RC process, which in turn impacts the positive outcomes including greater academic and social achievement.

The consistencies of the present RC model with other developmental theories are notable, because they suggest that similar documented developmental processes are in place when individuals interact with RC. The similarities illustrate the underlying developmental mechanisms that impact individuals’ experiences and perceptions of RC. The current model provides a theory for understanding how individuals experience and perceive an RC program.

Limitations
As with much qualitative research the emergent theoretical model is unique to the particular investigator, participants and context of the study (Creswell, 2007). Given that all study participants are from the same school and experienced the same RC program, generalization should be done with caution.

This study relied on face-to-face interviews, which may have been impacted by social desirability or students’ and school staff’s lack of perceived safety to divulge their true feelings towards the program. Also interviews were semi-structured which may have led some participants to only focus on the questions asked and not discuss everything that was relevant to them about the RC program. Had the interview been more open-ended a different story may have emerged.

**Future Directions**

Future work should include more empirical studies focused on understanding school-based restorative circles programs in order to better understand how RC impacts the school and individuals. Studies that include multiple RC school-based programs can assist in understanding characteristics that might be common across programs or with particular populations. Longitudinal research on school-based restorative circles programs would also be beneficial in order to better understand the transitions or cultural shifts that may occur over time.

**Conclusion**

Restorative justice programs have been gaining popularity among educational policy makers looking for alternative ways of handing student behavior referrals and other conflicts. The lack of empirical literature, particularly on RC, may be impacting the development, implementation and outcomes of RC programs in school settings; this
dissertation provides a start in filling the gap by presenting a theoretical model for better understanding how individuals experience and perceive RC.

This study provides one of the first, rich descriptive examinations of the particular school-based RJ approach, Restorative Circles. A theoretical model of how students and adults at one school experience and perceive RC was constructed through qualitative data analysis. From a practice perspective, this research can inform RC practitioners by providing them with a theoretical framework and some considerations that may facilitate the development and implementation of school-based RC programs.
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Appendix A: Theoretical Models
Social Ecological Framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

The community involvement model (Nettles, 1991)
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for High School YOUTH

Conflict in general
1. What do you do when have a disagreement or problem with other kids at school?
2. What do you do when have a disagreement or problem with teachers and other staff person here at school
3. What do you do when you have disagreement or problem with brothers, sisters or cousins at home
4. What do you do when you have a disagreement or problem with adults at home, like parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents or step-parents?

RC Process
5. Tell me about your circle experience?
   a. Why did you decide to be in this circle?
   b. What did you like about being in the circle?
   c. What would have made the Circle better?
6. How helpful are Circles for arguments and problems at school? Why?
7. How helpful are Circles for arguments and problems at home? Why?
   a. When you have a fight or argument with someone, do you wish you could fix things afterwards? Like make things better? When you have a fight or argument with someone, do you wish you could get them back – later - for what they did? Like revenge?
   b. Who do you think should fix things or make things better after a fight or argument?

School Conflict
8. What should TEACHERS do when students have problems, fights or arguments with each other at school?
9. What should FRIENDS AND OTHER STUDENTS do when kids have arguments, fights and problems with each other in school?
10. What about outside of school? Like in your neighborhood? What should parents, teachers, and other adults do when kids have problems, fights and arguments in the neighborhood?
11. What do you think parents, teachers, and other adults should do when kids break the rules in school or other places?

Outcomes (if not mentioned in RC process q’s)
12. Since you started being in Circles, do you do things differently when you have a problem or argument with others? Why or why not?
13. Are teachers and school staff handling fights and arguments differently since the school started having Circles? If yes, how?
14. Do you wish you could do things differently DURING arguments or fights? (what do you wish you could do differently?)
Is there anything else about the program that you’d like to share that we haven’t already talked about?
### Appendix C: Sample Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Initial Climate/ Culture Categories and Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Violence</td>
<td>In my neighborhood this [Circles] ain't how we work it out, we fight it out. And by some of the videos and some of the things that I’m seeing today, even the grown ups are in the street fights. And it’s like the wild wild west. I’m almost amazed at the parents I see there, they are there to support their child, they want their child to stand up and be a person- and I mean, that’s admirable, but that’s not how you deal with it. - PLC Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We have kids who are just normally used to um arguing, fussing, fighting. -Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That is exactly what happened with this girl. Every time you turned around, she was in a fight. She was always in a fight. -Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Say for instance these hood fights, they’ve been goin on for a long time –Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>See, with the kids in this school, you can’t tell if they are joking or if they are playing because they talk the same way when they are having a joking conversation or when they are about to have a fight. Most of the time, they were joking with each other, and then the next thing I know, they are banging each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nowadays on the streets if somebody have a problem with this child or something, they seen them out there fighting, grown people be trying to put they self into it, they self into the situation like they our age.-9th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other's heads. -PLC teacher</td>
<td>-11th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many of our children, they’ve eternalized - internalized a pattern of aggression, they believe that they’re gonna stand their ground, if they’ve got to die for it, they’ll tell you they’re gonna go. –Teacher</td>
<td>I’m from, that always happens, grown people getting into little kids situations -9th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are almost at that stage right now of chaos and not community –Teacher</td>
<td>That’s in the neighborhood, that’s… yeah sometimes you gotta fight -10th grade male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m finding many of them, especially in these kid’s communities, the adults are a part of the conflict with the kid. The adults are encouraging and teaching them how to be involved in conflicts. – Administrator</td>
<td>Like people nowadays just be stalling, just to pick for no reason, just to pick with people for no reason -9th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve seen a lot of fights occurring here -Teacher</td>
<td>Adults need to mind their business. -10th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lot of our conflicts some from out in the community. Things that have occurred during the weekend and it spills over here. Or something that spills here over there. – Administrator</td>
<td>like in the community, the parents, if a child goes home and says to their parent that this child did this, and then they go home and tell their mother, then the mothers are gonna be having a conflict. -12th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like, the things that I’ve seen in this neighborhood, I feel like adults don’t act like adults -Teacher</td>
<td>they be encouraging us, they be wanting people to fight, like they amp it up. But they be more bigger than what it already is, they don’t be doing nothing nowadays. They just be liking watch fights. -9th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often in our classroom and things escalate so quickly. So it’s, and that’s how it gets out of hand, to where it can start something, you took my pencil, to there’s a physical altercation happening before you. –Teacher</td>
<td>When they disrespect me I disrespect them back -12th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they would like to see ya’ll fight and see …they would like to see us fight -10th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>just fight cause you never around people-11th grade female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosting/Instigating</td>
<td>And in this community we serve a lot of the conflicts that the kids are in is because of the adults. You know a mother doesn’t like your aunt my father don’t like your uncle or whatever it may be. -Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see adults out there in the community, kinda like boosting it[fights] on. –security</td>
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<td></td>
<td>And honestly a lot of the fights that happen here is because of a third party that has nothing to do with the two main people involved. -Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People on the sides encourage the conflicts – Social worker</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It’s he said/she said stuff - Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The people are having a conflict, um, really don’t want to be having the conflict, but the peer group may be encouraging it. –administrator</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How much people try to um beef things up, try to instigate um a lot of the problems. –Counselor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>got to see who was boosting it up they got to see…it was because of the people wanting to get put their two cents in and put them against each other to see a fight happen –Counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The instigators are usually a lot of times not addressed by the school staff – Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it kind of the whole he said she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Resources</td>
<td>You don’t have the time – Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A teacher’s job here, there’s so much you have to stay focused and do. –Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is so many demands placed on teachers and administrators -Social Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’ve considered if I’ve had time maybe if we sit down and try it we wouldn’t wanna kill each other. -Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And really here we’re- I’ve got seven classes and like a hundred and sixty-some kids, other than if somebody calls a meeting I don’t know what’s going on. I’m in my room trying to keep my head above water. But if there were some, some way to make it [Circles] a part of the school climate, because the anger, the frustration and everything is across the board, children and the teachers all feel the same thing.” –teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Right now if you try to put anything else on my plate (laughs)- Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think sometimes they put a heavy hand on the school to do everything when we can’t do it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I can’t do it. I just can’t do it. I’m not given the opportunity give my knowledge.

– Teacher

we want to know and understand this process, but we don’t have time. And if we had time to actually be involved, I’ve been invited to more than one circle, but I haven’t had time. Once they try to arrange with the kid’s schedule, then the adult’s schedule, it’s like I don’t have time to get to it…we have to have time to be a part of them. - Teacher

The rule says that, you know, Johnny must be suspended three days and I have to call the police and this is what has to happen. And they [school staff] rely on that to the point where they aren’t really helping the kids develop mechanisms to solve their own problems. – teacher

Its nice but we don’t have the time -Teacher