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# AMELIORATING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

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AMELIORATING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

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

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Faith Thompson-Lee

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Faith Thompson-Lee

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Dr. Joan Birringer-Haig

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## ABSTRACT

### AMELIORATING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Faith Thompson-Lee

The purpose of this quantitative, non-experimental study was to explore the association between school success after the tier-one introduction of a three-tiered restorative practices program. To understand school success, student factors were examined using middle school data from a suburban school district located outside of a large metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. These factors included achievement (Final GPA), attendance (Absences), and suspensions (In-school and Out-of-school) across racial groups. Separate multiple regressions were conducted for each school success factor on racial group for the 2021-2022 and the 2022-2023 school years. By this time, all district staff had been trained in tier-one Community Circles and all students had returned to school for in-person learning after the social isolation period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that the significant associations found between school success factors and racial groups in year one remained significant in year two. However, improvements were observed for every racial group in the areas of achievement (Final GPA scores) and Out-of-school suspensions; with the greatest improvements occurring for Black students. The results indicate that deep paradigm shifts away from inequity, implicit bias, and exclusion take time to cultivate but that school success factors can be improved for all students when restorative values are present in the school environment. These findings demonstrate that the presence of

restorative practices in schools can help educators and school leaders advance equity and improve school experiences for all students, as they traverse the post-pandemic realities in their school communities.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation foremost to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. First for Who He is and also for answering my prayers for guidance during this process. I thank Him for continuously sustaining me with hope and strength to persevere in the plans He has for me. To Him be all the glory, honor, and praise.

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Jason, for your prayers, support, and understanding; as well as for being my hype-man in social spaces! I love you Love.

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Jay, for being my God-sent true north, who kept me driven and focused on this journey.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Michael and Patsey, for being steadfast sources of inspiration and the best parents one could ever ask for.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	viii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Theoretical Framework .....	8
Sociocultural Theory .....	8
Restorative Practices.....	9
Conceptual Framework .....	10
Significance of the Study .....	11
Symbiotic Reform Efforts .....	11
Advancing Equity .....	13
Connection with St. John’s Vincentian Mission in Education.....	14
Research Questions .....	15
Research Question 1 .....	15
Research Question 2 .....	15
Research Question 3 .....	16
Research Question 4 .....	16
Definition of Terms.....	16
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH.....	18
Theoretical Framework .....	18



Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory.....	18
Theoretical Overview of Restorative Justice.....	20
Review of Related Research .....	24
The Impact of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic.....	24
Student Attendance at Vygotsky’s Individual Sociocultural Level.....	31
Student Achievement at Vygotsky’s Interpersonal Sociocultural Level.....	38
Student Suspensions at Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical Sociocultural Level .....	44
The Benefits of Restorative Practices in Schools .....	55
Conclusion.....	66
<b>CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES .....</b>	<b>68</b>
Methods and Procedures .....	68
Research Question 1 .....	68
Research Question 2 .....	68
Research Question 3 .....	69
Research Question 4 .....	69
Research Design and Data Analysis.....	69
Reliability and Validity of the Research Design.....	70
Setting, Sample, and Population .....	72
Setting.....	72
Sample and Population .....	73
Instruments .....	75
Intervention .....	76
Procedures for Collecting Data .....	77

Research Ethics .....	78
Conclusion.....	79
CHAPTER 4 RESULTS.....	80
Results.....	80
Research Question 1.....	83
Research Question 2.....	86
Research Question 3.....	89
Research Question 4.....	92
Conclusion.....	95
CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION.....	97
Implications of Findings.....	97
Relationship to Prior Research.....	101
Limitations .....	103
Recommendations for Future Practice .....	105
Recommendations for Future Research .....	108
Conclusion.....	110
APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL MEMO.....	112
APPENDIX B DISTRICT CONSENT.....	113
REFERENCES .....	114

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Variables and Statistical Analyses by Research Question.....	81
Table 2 School Success Outcomes by Racial Group for the 2021-2022 School Year .....	82
Table 3 School Success Outcomes by Racial Group for the 2022-2023 School Year .....	83
Table 4 Regression Comparison of Final GPA on Racial Group .....	86
Table 5 Regression Comparison of Absences on Racial Group .....	89
Table 6 Regression Comparison of In-School Suspensions (ISS) on Racial Group .....	92
Table 7 Regression Comparison of Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS) on Racial Group .....	95

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework .....	11
Figure 2 Middle School Enrollment Percentages for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 School Years.....	75
Figure 3 Kowalski's (2012) Five-Stage Problem Solving Model. ....	107

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Between March and June 2020, our nation experienced the emergence of a global pandemic (COVID-19), economic downturn, and social unrest. The compounding negative effects of these three ongoing challenges were widely experienced, especially in disadvantaged, marginalized minority communities. In these communities, the impact was devastating, echoing for some the findings in the 1968 Kerner Commission Report (Fortuna et al., 2020; Gooden & Myers, 2018; Singu et al., 2020) and revealing for many the depth of the inequity in our country that exists between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Schools played a critical role during this time by providing resources in the areas of food security, internet accessibility, and physical and mental wellness (DeCataldo, 2020) to support students and families in need.

Historically, however, schools have also played a role in exacerbating this divide by perpetuating deficit-based assumptions of racial minority students without considering their needs within the broader context of systemic inequities (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; Tichavakunda, 2019). This blame-based approach contributes to negative school experiences for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students primarily, which too often culminates in school dropout (Gregory et al., 2016; Kagan, 1990; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Payne & Welch, 2018; Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002; Townsend, 2000). The well-documented disparity in the rate of exclusionary discipline for these student groups, especially for Black students, is one example of negative school experiences. Many explanations have been offered to explain this phenomenon, such as their proximity to surveillance and law enforcement, their presumed propensity to display behaviors that warrant punishment, and implicit bias among school staff, the latter of which is the most

frequently proposed explanation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Skiba et al., 2002). Winfield (1986) describes teacher bias as a tendency to look for and reinforce achievement-oriented behaviors with White students and their assumed internal locus of control (effort and motivation), more often than their Black peers and their assumed external locus of control (hereditary and parental involvement). This can exacerbate the School Effect phenomenon that may exist within ineffective schools (Kagan, 1990).

Described in terms of the proportion of students demonstrating mastery, Kagan (1990) characterizes ineffective schools as those that create cohesive negative learning environments more powerful than the single influences of teachers, classrooms, families, and neighborhoods. Evidence of the School Effect is further supported by considering the behavior of students after dropping out or transferring to schools with a lower dropout rate. Students who dropout report improved self-esteem and demonstrate increased motivation after entering General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) and job training programs (Kagan, 1990). Lastly, transfer students tend to conform to the environment of the new school with lower dropout rates (Kagan, 1990). Quoting scholarly works, Skiba et al. (2002) describe dropping out as less of a choice and more of a natural reaction to escape a negative learning environment. Additionally, according to Skiba (2002), students within this population have a better chance of school success by transferring to a new school with low suspension rates, rather than changing their attitudes and improving their behavior in the same school with high suspension rates.

Misused zero-tolerance policies in schools and what has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline are often referred to when the phenomenon of disproportionate discipline for racial minority and low-income students is discussed (Darling-Hammond et

al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al. 2014; Payne & Welch, 2018; Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). The zero-tolerance response to school discipline was heightened by the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) of 1994, which was passed to ensure the right of students and teachers to learn and teach in schools without weapons (Skiba, 2002). It mandated a one-year expulsion for any student who brings a weapon to school. Before GFSA, the nation was already moving toward a posture of zero-tolerance in response to growing concerns about school violence. This is evidenced by the rate of school suspensions, which was the most widely used disciplinary action in U.S. public schools.

However, after GFSA, schools began to increasingly apply its parameters for seemingly minor offenses and disproportionately for racial minority and low-income students (Skiba, 2002). Consequently, students who are expelled or frequently suspended have fewer opportunities to continue their schoolwork and are more likely to not receive prosocial behavioral support. They also have more opportunities to socialize with individuals with antisocial behavior, thereby exposing them to a greater risk of encountering the legal system (Townsend, 2000). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU, 2022) acknowledged that once students encounter the legal system, making the journey in reverse back to school is difficult. This response to discipline reinforces the school-to-prison pipeline. Lesser known as the prison track, the school-to-prison-pipeline is the term that educators, advocates, and observers began to use to conceptualize the similar punitive approaches between the criminal justice system and the school system's disciplinary measures for racial minority and low-income youth (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Wald & Losen (2003) believe that without a safety net, which culturally responsive schools provide, entrance into the school-to-prison pipeline drastically

increases. Schools that provide this safety net and that are subsequently effective for low-income and racial minority students have in common an optimal academic climate and teachers who expect progress from all students (Winfield, 1986). They also successfully connect and collaborate with their students and their families of color and convey a sense of care, love, and respect for their students (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Unfortunately, not all students experience this type of safety in schools, and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is apparent that the inequities of the status quo in schools must be addressed.

Still, schools are uniquely situated to effect change and positively influence the growth and development of all students. Nationally, the groundwork to leverage this unique opportunity for schools was laid before the onset of the pandemic with the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. This was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (McGuinn, 2016; Paul, 2016). From its inception, ESEA was a civil rights law (Paul, 2016) and continues to be under ESSA. Advancing equity and maintaining crucial protections for our nation's disadvantaged and high-needs students is a primary goal of ESSA to ensure that every student succeeds (NYSED, n.d.; Paul, 2016).

ESSA gives more flexibility to states in identifying how they will be accountable for advancing equity. In New York State (NYS) for example, academic achievement, progress for English language learners, graduation rates, and college, career, and civic engagement preparedness are among their accountability measures. Additionally, NYS has designated chronic absenteeism, as well as student growth and school progress as accountability measures (NYSED, n.d), each of which is associated with students' perceptions of their school experience. NYS seeks to make progress with improving



school climate through programs that address student growth in areas of self-esteem and emotional and mental wellness, as well as through programs that decrease substance abuse, absenteeism, and suspensions (NYSED, n.d.).

Among the programs that NYS has identified to foster improvement in these areas is Restorative Practices (Gregory et al., 2016; NYSED, n.d.). Restorative practices are a continuum of preventative and responsive restorative justice approaches in schools (Costello et al., 2010). Geared toward fostering and maintaining connection within the classroom and school community, restorative practices help to create positive school experiences for members of entire school communities. New York's commitment to restorative practices in schools puts them in the company of many states across America implementing restorative practices in schools to varying degrees (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Payne & Welch, 2018). California, Colorado Illinois, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania are among the states that have implemented restorative practices for many years on a large scale and have been able to establish sustainable programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Implementation challenges, however, do not elude schools that have committed to adopting restorative practices. Initial challenges include confusion about how to implement restorative practices among the variety of available approaches. Then, staff buy-in and attitude shifts from traditional disciplinary methods often accompany the challenge of allocating resources needed to support implementation, such as time and finances. Lastly, and perhaps the most inescapable challenge, is the perception that restorative practices are too lenient on student offenses (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For instance, amidst controversy after three violent student offenses toward school

personnel in April of 2022 (Hernandez, 2022), educators in the Clark County School District of Nevada expressed feeling helpless and handcuffed to adequately address severe infractions. These incidents, along with students' self-reports of increased depression and anxiety appear to have escalated in the aftermath of the pandemic (Hernandez, 2022; Loades et al., 2020). The response from Nevada state officials, however, has been to remind educators that the restorative practice initiative in their state does not impede educational leaders from removing students.

Since before the pandemic, restorative approaches to discipline have been adapted to reduce what is called the school-to-prison pipeline by addressing minor offenses to prevent students from entering the criminal justice system (Hernandez, 2022). The superintendent also reminded the school community that restorative practices are not about keeping dangerous students on campus, rather it's about providing restorative intervention to students who have not escalated to that level.

The challenges identified by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) were also among the challenges expressed by constituents within the Clark County School District (Hernandez, 2022). However, like Clark County, many districts are still committed to negotiating these challenges. They understand that excessive punitive practices increase the risk for students to be arrested or to drop out of school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019; Hernandez, 2022). Deep paradigm shifts take time to cultivate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). For example, the Denver Unified School District of Colorado navigated these challenges and achieved sustained implementation of restorative practices on a large scale after ten years. In 2016, Anyon examined how three Denver schools successfully implemented restorative practices in

their schools and observed measurable results in three to four years. Additionally, Anyon (2016) identified four strategies that supported their accomplishment. Foremost, these schools had a strong vision and commitment on the part of the principal. They also obtained staff buy-in and prioritized the allocation of resources for professional development and the hiring of a full-time restorative practices coordinator.

The commitment to restorative practices remains across our nation and as recent as March of 2022, the Restorative Practices in Schools Act was introduced to the United States Senate by senator, and former superintendent of Denver Public Schools, Michael Bennet ([D-CO]; 117<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2022). The benefits of restorative practices appear to outweigh the potential challenges that accompany most transformational endeavors. By adopting this sustainable system of support that fosters equity and inclusivity, schools can fulfill a critical role in the nation's recovery from the pandemic and help to effect lasting and meaningful change for all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Townsend, 2000).

### **Purpose of the Study**

School experience is related to school success (Kagan, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of this quantitative, non-experimental study is to explore the association between school success after the tier-one introduction of a three-tiered restorative practices program called a Culture of Care (Cavanagh, n.d; Cavanagh et al., 2012). To understand school success, student factors are examined using middle school data from a suburban school district located outside of a large metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. These factors include achievement, attendance, and suspensions across

racial subgroups. The findings from the present study may be of interest to all educators contending with the post-pandemic realities impacting their school communities.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Sociocultural Theory***

The theoretical framework in the current study is comprised of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the theoretical underpinnings of restorative practices. Sociocultural theory is a developmental approach to understanding how cognition is formed through social interactions within a culture (Feldman, 2014; Schunk, 2020). The term culture lends to the notion of context; therefore, what is meaningful to students within a given culture must be considered when understanding how meaningful learning occurs (Feldman, 2014). For students, aspects of context can range from the broad cultural influences of their surrounding community to the focused interpersonal influences of their family and school; neither of which can be separated from the individual influences presented by their ability, gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

Unfortunately, the interaction of influences from the individual, interpersonal, and cultural-historical contextual levels of sociocultural theory has negatively impacted many students. Non-optimal school success has been historically documented for racial minority and low-income students in our nation's schools due to inequities, implicit biases, and exclusionary practices. The present study examines this phenomenon and proposes that restorative values (respect, responsibility, and relationships; Cavanagh, n.d.) have the reparative potential to ameliorate negative school experiences and promote school success for all students.

### ***Restorative Practices***

The restorative values of respect, responsibility, and relationships are crucial theoretical tenets of the restorative practices approach in schools. In the current study, restorative practices are presented as an ideal vehicle for understanding students' differences and creating learning conditions that support optimal school success. Restorative practices in schools are a part of the broadened scope of the Restorative Justice framework that originated in the criminal justice system as a vehicle for reconciliation. In 1974, probation officer Mark Yantzi recognized the reparative potential of compassion and self-reflection and successfully arranged a meeting between two teenagers and their victims following a vandalism spree. Restitution was agreed upon and the positive response by the victims led to the first victim-offender reconciliation program in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada (Wachtel, 2016). As a result of being initially developed for use within the criminal justice system, it is often perceived that the restorative approach in schools is only suitable for repairing harm. In schools, however, utilization of the term Restorative Practices is preferred to facilitate and reinforce the broadened scope of the restorative approach that prioritizes fostering relationships among students and between school constituents.

There are many restorative programs available to support the adaptation of restorative practices in schools. The present study emphasizes the Culture of Care approach founded by researcher Dr. Tom Cavanagh (Cavanagh, n.d; Cavanagh et al., 2012). The Culture of Care uses a three-tiered implementation approach that values respect, responsibility, and relationships. Its multi-tiered approach lends to use that is suitable within classrooms and small groups, as well as for mediation and individual self-

reflection efforts. Tier one of the Culture of Care restorative practices program focuses on proactively building community and relationships through the use of Community Circles. Tiers two and three prioritize reactive strategies to repair harm through varying circle formats. Tier one is foundational and vital for the success of the reparative efforts at tiers two and three. Without the meaningful relationships created through the proactive tier one approach, participants will not feel obligated to engage in the tier two and three processes aimed at repairing the harm done to relationships.

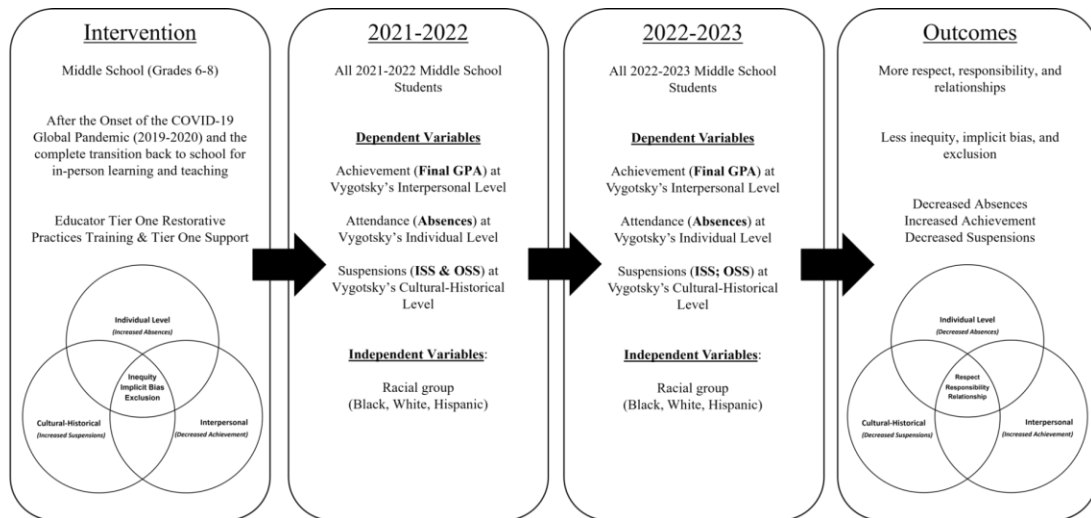
### **Conceptual Framework**

Figure 1 illustrates the Conceptual Framework of the present study. It denotes that the setting for the current study was a middle school (grades 6-8) and focused on the school years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the complete transition back to school for in-person learning and teaching. By the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year with students, all middle school teachers were trained in tier-one restorative practices (community circles). Educator support was also available in the middle school through district-provided training in restorative practices and with colleagues trained in restorative practices. The conceptual framework also identifies the target areas found in literature that the restorative practices program intended to address, which were inequity, implicit bias, and exclusion. To examine the impact of the educator tier one restorative practices training on student success, this study explored student outcomes for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years in the areas of achievement, attendance, and suspensions by racial group. The attendance variable was prioritized at the individual sociocultural contextual level and represented by student Absences. The achievement variable was prioritized at the interpersonal contextual level and represented

by students' Final Grade Point Average (GPA) scores. The suspension variable was prioritized at the cultural-historical contextual level and represented by the number of in-school and Out-of-school suspensions. With the introduction of restorative practices in the middle school, the anticipated student outcomes for the present study were decreased absences, increased achievement, and decreased suspensions. These outcomes were presumed to be related to the increased presence of restorative values, which were respect, responsibility, and relationship, and a decreased presence of inequity, implicit bias, and exclusion in the middle school environment.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



**Significance of the Study**

*Symbiotic Reform Efforts*

Our nation's commitment to student achievement and closing the achievement gap for students of under-resourced communities and marginalized demographic groups

is highlighted throughout federal legislation. This includes the authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 and its subsequent reauthorizations in the form of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 (McGuinn, 2016; Paul, 2022). Enriching measures to unify and motivate states and local educational authorities (LEAs) on this commitment have also come in the form of the National Education Goals of 1990 and 1994 (Stedman, 1994), as well as through competitive incentive programs such as the Race to the Top (RTTT) competition of 2012 (McGuinn, 2016). While there has been no shortage of time and attention dedicated to improving educational outcomes, more progress is desired, and the impact of the pandemic has exposed areas of need within our country's educational framework. These areas of weakness appear to be partly reflective of a repeatedly flawed implementation approach of school reforms.

Whether aimed at academic outcomes, attendance, graduation rates, school climate, or school discipline, American school policy reforms are largely unidirectional *at* students and *for* students but scarcely *with* students (Payne & Welch, 2018). Approaching school *with* students, rather than to them or for them is a basic principle of restorative practices (Costello et al., 2010). Restorative practices prioritize building and maintaining trusting and caring relationships (Cavanagh et al., 2012). It also validates students' developmental need for voice and choice within Vygotsky's Zone of Optimal Development (Beckley-Forest & Monaco, 2021; Feldman, 2014; Schunk, 2020). Fortunately, under ESSA, there appears to be a deliberate effort to resist this unidirectional tendency between states and LEAs identified as needing support. While states must intervene, they must do so in collaboration *with* schools, which have



considerable input in the development and approval process of improvement plans (McGuinn, 2016). Likewise, the adoption of restorative practices in schools can facilitate an optimal symbiotic relationship between educators and students to support reform related activities (Gregory et al., 2016).

Left unaddressed, the consequence of continued unidirectional policy reform for students will likely mirror the pitfalls experienced throughout American educational legislation in that of an imbalance between policy reform and supportive reinforcement. Securing financial, personnel, and technical resources to support policy reforms has been challenging for LEAs. In 2011, only a few states reported that they believed they had adequate infrastructure to support educationally related reform activities (McGuinn, 2016). This same dynamic exists when student reform methodologies in schools lack meaningful consideration for out-of-school factors, such as poverty, healthcare for physical and mental wellness, and other social inequities (McGuinn, 2016). If students' external and internal resources are lacking and unattended to by trusting adults, so will the implementation efforts of policy reform. Students must be provided with the space for their experiences with these challenges to be felt, heard, and seen by educators with whom they have meaningful relationships. When a family-like community is co-constructed between educators, students, and community stakeholders, mutual engagement and meaningful contributions can be fostered (Cavanagh et al., 2012).

### ***Advancing Equity***

While there is a wealth of scholarly research on the association between aspects of school experience and school success, the research on the effectiveness of restorative practices as an equitable intervention in schools is scarce and mostly qualitative (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2020; Ingraham et al., 2016). The present study adds to the quantitative scholarly research on restorative practices. It also highlights restorative practices as a vehicle for social justice, particularly as a viable intervention for decreasing inequitable factors that influence school success. Additionally, the current study illuminates the importance for all student groups to have equivalent access to restorative practices. When sustainable systems of support are implemented in schools, such as restorative practices and other three-tiered approaches, enduring change can be created for students of every creed, gender, and race, and from every socioeconomic background. As schools recover from the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, such sustainable systems of support are vital.

### **Connection with St. John's Vincentian Mission in Education**

St. John's commitment to the Vincentian Mission emphasizes compassion, self-reflection, and social justice for all people, especially those in need. Restorative practices are rooted in restorative justice and reflect the same principles. Restorative justice resembles ancient and Indigenous cultural practices from communities all over the world (Wachtel, 2016). In the modern era, it has witnessed an intercontinental spread in many forms but maintains common principles (i.e. harm to relationships; obligations; engagement) and values (i.e. respect; responsibility; relationship). As in St. John's commitment to the Vincentian Mission in education, these principles and values guide individuals to be critical and reflective thinkers, with an ethical compass who imagine and strive for the best in humanity.

In schools, restorative practices represent the continuum of restorative approaches that range from proactive approaches for building and maintaining trusting relationships,

to responsive approaches for repairing harm (Gregory et al., 2016). Restorative practices are dedicated to shifting the emphasis from a punishment only response to a reparative response when harm to people and relationships is done (Wachtel, 2016). Aligned with the social justice commitment of the Vincentian Mission, this is beneficial for all students but especially for students who are often perceived as offenders due to factors related to disability, gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Gregory et al., 2016; Skiba 2002; Townsend, 2000). When relationships are fostered between teachers and students and among peers, a safe and equitable learning space can be co-created where individuals' lived experiences are heard and valued. These positive relationships contribute to equitable opportunities and positive school experiences for all (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding the current study are as follows:

#### ***Research Question 1***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and achievement (Final Grade Point Average [Final GPA]) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

#### ***Research Question 2***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and attendance (Absences) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

### ***Research Question 3***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and In-School Suspensions (ISS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

### ***Research Question 4***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

### **Definition of Terms**

#### *Constructivism*

Constructivism is a psychological and philosophical viewpoint that asserts that individuals construct much of what they learn and understand (Schunk, 2020).

#### *Restorative Justice*

Restorative Justice is a way to approach criminal justice that prioritizes repairing harm done to people and relationships, rather than (but not precluding) punishing offenders (Costello et al., 2010).

#### *Restorative Practices*

Restorative practices are an extension of restorative justice in schools that uses a continuum of preventative and responsive restorative approaches to repair the harm done to people and relationships (Cavanagh, n.d.; Costello et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2016).

### *Sociocultural Theory*

Sociocultural theory is a human developmental perspective that highlights how cognitive development forms as a result of reciprocal social interactions between members of a culture (Feldman, 2014).

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

This section prioritizes existing literature on the connection between school experience and school success across the three contextual levels of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. First, a summary of sociocultural theory opens this chapter and is followed by an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of restorative practices. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to the presentation of peer-reviewed research. It begins with the connection between the COVID-19 global pandemic and school success. Next, existing literature on student attendance, achievement, and suspensions is provided, which are the variables that define school success in the present study. Lastly, the review of related research concludes with the benefits of restorative practices in schools.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### ***Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory***

The central tenet of sociocultural theory is that children learn through problem-solving and meaningful social interactions with adults and with other children (Feldman, 2014; Schunk, 2020). Lev Vygotsky asserted that self-regulation is developed through one's internal beliefs about and view of oneself in response to social interactions (Schunk, 2020). He also emphasized the interactions between influences in three domains, which are the individual, interpersonal (social), and cultural-historical domains (Schunk, 2020). Factors in the individual domain can include the child's ability, age, gender, and race. In the current study, school attendance is viewed as an extension of a student's ability to self-regulate. Much attention in literature has been given to the interpersonal domain (Schunk, 2020). For the present study, family, peer, and school influences are explored within the interpersonal domain, but it can also include religious

institutions and other community organizations. Lastly, the current study acknowledges the enduring impact of prejudice and racism that has historically plagued our country and examines the presence of implicit bias toward racial minority student groups that still exist in our nation's schools. Vygotsky viewed school as much more than a building but also a conduit for promoting learning and citizenship (Schunk, 2020). Restorative practices provide a comprehensive framework for this work to occur. It emphasizes listening in communities wherein participants feel safe to be and share.

**Zone of Proximal Development.** The space difference between a child's actual developmental ability and what they can do with the assistance of others is what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It emphasizes that cognitive growth is the result of reciprocal social transactions between the child and an adult or peer (Feldman, 2014; Schunk, 2020). When leveraged correctly, self-regulation is developed within the child due to ideal conditions that contribute to the child's view of themselves and their ability (Schunk, 2020). Incorrectly, ZPD is sometimes reduced to the term scaffolding. Scaffolding represents the unidirectional support of an expert teacher (Schunk, 2020). However, ZPD captures the symbiotic nature of learning and underscores that children are both recipients and sources of social influences (Feldman, 2014). The current study presents restorative practices as an ideal platform for this type of reciprocal social learning within students' ZPD. With restorative practices, learning is maximized because both students and their teachers alike are provided with opportunities to reorganize their mental structures based on their own experiences and the experiences of others (Schunk, 2020).

Going further, the social interactions conducive to learning within the ZPD should ideally be assistive, meaningful, and supportive. Unfortunately, positive social interactions cannot always be orchestrated, and negative social interactions are inevitable. However, the current literature on the implementation of restorative practices in schools demonstrates its potential to provide positive childhood experiences (PCEs) and resources. These PCEs and resources serve as protective factors that mitigate adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Breedlove et al., 2020), for optimal development and self-regulation within students' ZPD.

### ***Theoretical Overview of Restorative Justice***

Restorative practices in schools are a part of the broadened scope of the restorative justice framework that originated in the criminal justice system as a vehicle for reconciliation. Rooted in the practices of Indigenous peoples for years (Wachtel, 2016), restorative practices in schools are dedicated to emphasizing the importance of community through building relationships and repairing harm. Its central beliefs are: 1) the identification of harm and the needs of those affected by the harm committed, 2) an obligation to repair the harm by accepting responsibility, and 3) engagement, in the form of providing opportunities for those who caused the harm and those affected by the harm to make things right (Breedlove et al., 2020). This approach is the essence of creating a Culture of Care (Cavanagh, n.d; Cavanagh et al., 2012), which is a three-tiered implementation approach to restorative practices in schools developed by researcher Dr. Tom Cavanagh. A hallmark of restorative practices is circles. Circles provide a safe space for the lived experiences of all participants to be heard and valued, wherein relationships are fostered and leveraged between teachers and students and among peers. The



following sections outline the continuum of restorative practices within the Culture of Care approach, which is also widely represented in other restorative practices programs.

**Tier One: Community Circles.** Community circles are proactive and commonly used in classrooms where the teacher serves as the facilitator of community and relationship-building sharing prompts (Cavanagh, n.d.). These prompts can range from icebreaker questions to more substantive sharing prompts about current events. Their purpose is to foster respect and appreciation among participants, which serves as a foundation upon which all other restorative practices are introduced. Community Circles are structured and consist first of shared expectations, opening and concluding self-management exercises, and two sharing prompts that comprise the middle component of the practice. Participation, however, is never compelled and the major goal of Community Circles is to foster listening. A common misconception about community circles among teachers is that their purpose is to help teachers establish relationships with students. However, this overlooks the critical aspect of relationship building that occurs between students. Community circles can also be tailored for small groups of students and can be used with faculty, staff, and school leaders alike.

**Tier Two: Restorative Conversations.** Restorative conversations are reactive and intended for use between two or three people to address minor misbehaviors that have not become serious (Cavanagh, n.d.). A restorative conversation consists of four questions that guide participants in understanding how the problem is being perceived by those involved. Restorative conversations validate participants' experiences and a plan of action to restore harmony to the learning environment is the desired goal. A teacher can use this scripted approach to speak with an individual student on their own or a trained

third-party facilitator may conduct restorative conversations between a student and a teacher. A neutral party, such as a mental health support staff member, may be preferred for facilitating restorative conversations.

**Tier Two: Restorative Circles.** Restorative circles are reactive and apply the format and goals of restorative conversations to larger group settings to address minor conflicts impacting the group (Cavanagh, n.d.). The same four restorative conversation questions are applied to the group setting where everyone is encouraged to speak but not required. However, a co-facilitator is encouraged for restorative circles to assist with summarizing participants' responses and condensing them into one cohesive action plan that addresses the conflict.

**Tier Two: The Restorative Assessment.** The restorative assessment is a reactive tool used to help students reflect, connect, and plan what they can do differently the next time conflict arises (Cavanagh, n.d.). There are seven reflecting questions, three connecting questions, and two planning questions that inform this restorative practice. It can be used both as a deescalation tool and to assess the student's readiness to accept responsibility for their actions. From here, the facilitator of the restorative assessment then determines the appropriate intervention level (tier) of care (the specific restorative approach) that best responds to the specific circumstances of the present situation (Cavanagh, n.d.).

**Tier Three: Classroom (Reentry) Conference Circles.** Classroom conference circles are a reactive approach to addressing major misbehaviors that have occurred in the classroom. They are intended to facilitate the reentry of a student who has caused harm to a person or persons within their classroom after the consequences have been served, such

as a suspension from school (Cavanagh, n.d.). A trained facilitator and the classroom teacher are the facilitator and co-facilitator, respectively. Six questions guide a classroom conference, which allows participants to tell what happened from their perspective, explain how they were feeling at the time of the incident and how they are feeling now, and offer suggestions for repairing and preventing harm. As with any restorative practice, participation is voluntary, both for classmates and the student who caused the harm. Should the student who caused the harm choose not to participate, a classroom conference circle is not held and the student who caused the harm is reentered into the classroom as normal (Cavanagh, n.d.).

**Tier Three: Restorative Conferences.** Restorative conferences are reactive and intended to formally address specific incidents that caused serious harm (Cavanagh, n.d.). To prepare for restorative conferences, trained personnel in the Culture of Care conduct a scripted pre-conference with each participant to review and prepare them for the questions and format of the conference. This is done first with the student who caused harm but only after the restorative assessment has been completed and it has been determined that the student has taken responsibility for their actions and is willing to participate. The restorative conference usually consists of more participants than the restorative conversation, as it is encouraged that the student who caused the harm has an advocate. Should the specific incident involve another student to whom harm was caused, they too would attend the conference with an advocate. Other participants include the facilitator and co-facilitator and may additionally include parents and other staff members peripherally impacted.

The three-tiered approach to restorative practices included in the Culture of Care framework aligns with many other multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that already exist in many primary and secondary schools. These include models of response to intervention (RTI), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and social-emotional learning (SEL). Implemented with fidelity, SEL programs can inform both RTI and PBIS, and restorative practices can serve as a vehicle for reinforcing the learning objectives of the SEL curriculum (Jain et al., 2014).

### **Review of Related Research**

A review of related research is presented in this section. It provides peer-reviewed research on school success. This is conceptualized by student achievement, attendance, and suspension, which are the areas of interest in the current study. First, the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on school success is reviewed. This is followed by a focused review of one school success variable at each contextual level of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Student attendance is explored at the individual level. Student achievement is examined at the interpersonal level and student suspension is assessed at the cultural-historical level. One should note that while the review of one school success variable is prioritized at each contextual level, they are not fully isolated from the others. This is due to the confluence of contextual factors that contribute to each school success variable. To conclude this section, a review of the research on the benefits of restorative practices in schools is presented.

### ***The Impact of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic***

Central to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is the interaction between interpersonal (social), cultural-historical, and individual factors in human growth and

development (Schunk, 2020). In the year 2020, this interaction was demonstrated as the world faced the COVID-19 pandemic. This section explains how the cultural-historical pandemic affected the way of life for people both interpersonally and individually. The emotional, mental, and physical well-being of individuals was severely impacted and experienced by families, students, schools, and surrounding communities.

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) was reported in Wuhan, China and by March 2020 caused a global pandemic. Those most susceptible to the virus were the elderly and those immunocompromised. Those with preexisting conditions, such as asthma, cardiovascular disease (CVD), hypertension, chronic kidney disease (CKD), or obesity, were also at higher risk of severe illness and even death upon contracting the virus (Singu et al., 2020). These preexisting conditions are also highly correlated to social determinants of health (SDOH) for vulnerable populations. Ninety-four percent of patients who died from COVID-19 had at least one SDOH (Singu et al., (2020). In 2020, Singu et al. (2020) conducted a meta-synthesis to summarize the impact of the pandemic. They sought to provide crucial information to facilitate measures to prevent illness and decrease transmission for at-risk populations. The authors describe five SDOH categories and how their interrelated nature further places the disadvantaged at risk. The first category was Health and Healthcare. Barriers to health literacy, healthcare, and healthy food options were explained to exacerbate poor health outcomes for the disadvantaged and contribute to hypertension, CKD, and obesity. The second category was social and community context. Here, both individual and structural discrimination, along with the lack of social capital were cited as compounding factors that posed insurmountable challenges to social isolation recommendations and interpersonal trust.

Access to healthy foods was again identified as a contributing factor in the neighborhood and built environment SDOH category. Neighborhoods in food deserts, and those that are plagued with the effects of air and water pollution, as well as crime increase transmission of illnesses and restrict outdoor activities that contribute to healthy lifestyles. Education was the fourth SDOH category which is undoubtedly connected to the fifth, economic stability. The researchers assert the home and school environment as major determinants of high school graduation and connect the absence of a high school diploma to limited job opportunities and poverty. Poverty was a recurring theme among the five SDOH categories and the authors concluded that the root cause of serious illness from COVID-19 was income level and racial/ethnic identity (Singu et al., 2020). They also expounded upon the role that poverty, inequality, and SDOH have historically played in the transmission of infectious diseases.

Singu et al. (2020) recommend an interdisciplinary approach between all who can contribute to the process of understanding the complexities of SDOH. This will allow for sufficient preparation to efficiently respond to future pandemics. An interdisciplinary approach echoes attributes of the restorative approach where all perspectives are welcomed to address shared interests and to co-create shared realities. While every population was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of Singu et al. (2020) brings attention to the disproportionate representation of disadvantaged populations affected at the individual, interpersonal, and cultural-historical levels. Though the suggested restorative practices of the present study may not directly remedy SDOH, they can serve as a vehicle for facilitating the communication and understanding necessary to begin the process.

Like Singu et al. (2020), Fortuna et al. (2020) underscored the disproportionate physical, emotional, economic, and educational harm for the most disenfranchised within the United States. They also discuss social determinants of health (SDOH) and identify them as mediators of the toxic stress that was greatly magnified for disadvantaged and racial minority populations in the wake of the pandemic. The purpose of Fortuna et al.'s 2020 brief meta-synthesis was to shed light on inequities worsened by the pandemic and to advocate for a trauma-informed social justice response. The authors cite preexisting inequities as the root cause of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial minority groups. These included healthcare inequities and lower rates of vaccination in communities of color, preexisting SDOH and low-wage employment, the digital divide in access to telehealth and remote education for children, and overrepresentation and crowding in correctional and immigration centers, as well as in urban communities.

According to Fortuna et al. (2020), before the pandemic, the amalgamation of these factors caused disruptions in educational attainment. However, combined with the ongoing loss of elderly family members and emotionally drained parents, these multigenerational stressors exposed children to trauma-related disorders who are already at greater risk compared to adults (Fortuna et al., 2020). In the ongoing aftermath and recovery from the pandemic, the authors conclude that a focused, intentional response is needed to support youths of color.

Fortuna et al. (2020) suggest that academic institutions and community-based organizations (CBOs) be equipped with the infrastructure, knowledge, and resources to provide access to telehealth services. They emphasize that this may begin with academic institutions collaborating with CBOs and related systems (i.e. child welfare; juvenile

justice) to build self-efficacy and long-term capacity to effectively respond to the anticipated long-term COVID-19 crisis. Five recommendations were provided to mount an effective response. These were: (1) collaborative care and prevention strategies across sectors; (2) building community-academic telehealth partnerships; (3) respectful and considerate leadership that empowers community stakeholders; (4) promoting parent competencies and fostering positive relationships within the community; and (5) creating environments in schools and other community settings that foster relationship building, self-regulation and problem-solving skills, and engagement in positive activities. The latter three align with the current study and can be directly facilitated through the implementation of restorative practices.

In addition to the exacerbating effects of social determinants of health (SDOH; Singu et al., 2020) and consequential traumatic experiences (Fortuna et al., 2020), another byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic was isolation. Beginning in March 2020, government shutdowns and quarantines were enforced across the United States. Out of an abundance of concern, Loades et al. (2020) conducted a rapid review to synthesize the available data on the relationship between loneliness and mental health in healthy children and adolescents. Their purpose was to assess whether social isolation predicted mental health problems, as well as to compel early intervention and preparation for increased mental health needs. In their review of 63 studies of 51,576 participants, Loades et al. (2020) discovered consistent results across studies for children, adolescents, and young adults. Particularly for children and adolescents, there was a clear association between loneliness and mental health problems for up to nine years later.



Only one study, however, examined the effects of enforced social isolation or quarantine. In this instance, children were five times more likely to need mental health services and experience post-traumatic stress (Loades et al., 2020), which was consistent with emerging data from China and the United Kingdom at that time. In other studies, the duration of loneliness was found to be more strongly associated with anxiety and depression, as opposed to the intensity of loneliness. The authors suggested that this finding may be of particular interest to politicians as they contemplate social distancing measures and the length of time schools should remain closed (Loades et al., 2020). Of particular interest to school educators and leaders are the findings of studies that measured loneliness and mental health outcomes after targeted interventions. Both included peer and adult support, however, the longer intervention (four to six hours over four months) yielded small to medium effects while the shorter intervention (two classroom sessions) did not decrease loneliness.

Loades et al. (2020) point out that loneliness involves social comparison and that the globally shared experience of enforced isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic may mitigate its effects. The authors suggested that it is important to help children and adolescents feel a part of a group and to know that there are others whom they can look to for support. Restorative practices can help accomplish this, as they prioritize community and the need for a sense of belonging for children and adolescents (Loades et al., 2020).

In addition to concerns about isolation during the quarantine response period to COVID-19, concerns about student absenteeism soon presented itself for educators around the nation. During this time districts quickly shifted to online learning to maintain continuity of education. However, by May 2020, surveyed teachers reported nearly a

quarter of all students were truant from online learning, and another 45% with lower levels of engagement with their school than before the pandemic (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). Too soon to comprehensively observe absenteeism from online learning during the quarantine, Santibañez & Guarino (2021) used archival data from the recent past to predict the effects of absenteeism for a proactive response. Using regression analyses, they sought to understand the effects of absenteeism on academic and social-emotional development for primary and secondary students and subgroups.

From California's Project CORE conglomerate of diverse districts, Santibañez & Guarino (2021) were able to amass over 1.3 million observations for nearly 600,000 students from the Smarter Balanced Assessments in ELA and mathematics, as well as the social-emotional data from the CORE student surveys. The authors found that absenteeism is greatest in kindergarten and grades 10 through 12. Absenteeism begins to increase in middle school and is highest among 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Additionally, certain subgroups were shown to have higher rates of absenteeism with rates higher for African American students, students classified with disabilities (SWD), English Language Learners (ELL), and students identified as homeless or foster youth (HL/FST). Negative effects of absenteeism on test scores were found for all students, especially for those classified as ELL, HL/FST, SWD, or receiving free or reduced-priced lunch (FRPL). Both ELA and mathematics test scores were negatively impacted but more so for mathematics. Likewise, SEL for all students was negatively impacted by absenteeism but more so for middle school students in the areas of self-efficacy and social awareness.

Fortunately, other recent scholarly research using Project CORE data found that improved SEL outcomes are related to increases in test scores and behavioral outcomes,

regardless of students' baseline proficiency levels (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021). This information presents an opportunity for the restorative approach as a viable measure. Schools can implement restorative practices to respond to the probable learning and social-emotional losses from the school closures of the pandemic and the challenges of online learning. Restorative practices often catalyze the application and processing of SEL concepts. It is therefore logical to conclude that improved academic and behavioral experiences for students will positively impact students' perception of school and thereby, their likelihood of school attendance (Gase et al., 2016; Kagan 1990).

### ***Student Attendance at Vygotsky's Individual Sociocultural Level***

Many factors influence students' individual attendance patterns, one of which is self-regulation as defined by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. According to Vygotsky, self-regulation is developed through one's internal beliefs about and view of themselves in response to social interactions (Schunk, 2020). For students, these social interactions can include those between their families, peers, and authority figures at school. This section highlights student attendance as one individual factor that is impacted through a cross-section of other individual and interpersonal influences.

As in Santibañez & Guarino's (2021) work, attendance, behavior, and achievement were also key components of Jenkins' 1995 study on school commitment. In this study, Jenkins examined the factors related to school commitment and hypothesized that low levels of student school commitment are related to three student delinquency patterns, which were school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. To investigate, this quantitative study used an extension of multiple regression, called path analysis. The sample was obtained from a middle school for seventh and eighth grade

students in an urban-suburban community in Delaware during the 1990-1991 school year. Approximately, 34 percent of students were non-white, and 49.3 percent were male. State-funded transportation was provided for 95 percent of students and 20 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. A survey was created based on initial school observations and information gathered from interviews with students and teachers. The findings demonstrated that a high level of student school commitment is inversely associated with a stepparent in the home ( $\beta = -.38, p < .05$ ), being non-white ( $\beta = -.48, p < .01$ ), and being male ( $\beta = -.56, p < .001$ ); and positively associated with being in the eighth grade ( $\beta = .66, p < .001$ ), parental involvement ( $\beta = .13, p < .01$ ), and mathematics ability ( $\beta = .47, p < .001$ ). Inverse relationships were also found between student school commitment and school crime ( $\beta = -.52, p < .01$ ), school misconduct ( $\beta = -.70, p < .001$ ), and school non-attendance ( $\beta = -.66, p < .001$ ).

Jenkins (1995) concluded that the results support the importance of shared accountability between family and school and equitable access to rigorous coursework. Additionally, intentional efforts to identify and address possible perceptions of alienation among non-white students were proposed, as well as to include students in the decision-making process. The purposeful implementation of restorative practices has the potential to create the space for Jenkins' recommendations to be realized.

School non-attendance (Jenkins, 1995), also referred to as chronic absenteeism, often culminates in school dropout. As a result, there is often an overlap in the available literature on absenteeism and dropout. Schoenberger explored this relationship in 2012, purposing to inspect the relationship between absenteeism and the likelihood of dropping out of high school. He also sought to identify absentee pattern groups among students.

This quantitative study used group-based trajectory modeling, which is a probability-based method of modeling longitudinal data into subgroups. The sample was obtained from a large, urban school district in the southeastern United States between the 1997-1998 and 2008-2009 school years. In the 2007-2008 school year, the student sample included 30,099 total students with 15,084 female and 15,015 male students. Forty-two percent of the sample was African American, 34 percent were White, and 15 percent Hispanic, and the dropout rate for grades 9-12 was higher than what was reported for the entire state.

With the truant attendance threshold set beyond the 90 percent threshold, the results demonstrated four distinct absenteeism student group patterns: (1) Group 1 (Constant Attendees) made up nearly eighty percent of the sample and were less than five percent likely to dropout; (2) Group 2 (Developing Truants) made up nearly ten percent of the sample and were 24.7 percent likely to dropout; (3) Group 3 (Early Truants) made up nearly eight percent of the sample and were 11 percent likely to drop out; and (4) Group 4 (Chronic Truants) made up over three percent of the sample and were 20.6 percent to dropout. Schoenberger (2012) concluded that students missing more than 10 percent of their registered school days are at greater risk of dropping out of high school. They also found that dropout was more prevalent among exceptional students (students differently abled), as well as for those who were male, African American, and Hispanic students.

It is important to note that Developing Truants (Group 3) had the greatest likelihood of dropping out, even over Chronic Truants (Group 4). Developing Truants were students whose absenteeism increased and became stronger in middle school.

Chronic Truants followed in elevated likelihood, whose absenteeism persisted and extended into early middle school. For the current study, Schoenberger's (2012) work provides an example of how attendance, gender, and race connect with school dropout and that middle school indicators are important to consider. Together, this reveals space for the appropriateness of the implementation of restorative practices as an early intervention to mitigate the effects of these combined factors.

In 2019, Gubbels et al. characterized school dropout as a more serious presentation of school absenteeism that is related to the accumulation of different risk factors over time. To further investigate this relationship, Gubbels et al. (2019) conducted a quantitative meta-analysis review of the literature on absenteeism and dropout. Their purpose was to identify risk factor domains for each factor and to examine the mean effect size of each domain. The authors also aimed to capture the mediating effect of gender on risk factor effects. Studies that examined absenteeism and dropout in Western countries at the primary and secondary levels of education were included in this meta-analysis. Each had to report a correlation coefficient of a bivariate association with absenteeism and dropout, or sufficient evidence that such an association was calculated (Gubbels et al., 2019). Of the 75 studies included in the meta-analysis, 781 potential risk factors were identified for school absenteeism and 635 for school dropout. While the mean effects varied in presentation between absenteeism and dropout, the researchers observed six shared risk factor domains, which were: (1) Problems at or with school (i.e. grade retention and learning difficulties); (2) physical and mental problems (i.e. poor physical health, substance abuse, and adverse childhood experiences); (3) anti-social behaviors (i.e. delinquent and risky behaviors); (4) parenting problems and difficulties

(i.e. low levels of parent support and control); (5) other family structure problems (i.e. low SES, low parental educational levels, and non-nuclear family structure); and (6) characteristics of the school (i.e. class and school climate; large class and school size). Lastly, inconsistent with existing literature on school absenteeism and school dropout, the authors found that gender was not a moderating factor among the risk domains. However, outside of the six shared risk factor domains, gender was found to have a moderating effect. For school absenteeism and school dropout, negative school attitudes and drug abuse were found to be stronger predictors for girls than for boys.

Therefore, the authors suggest the need for improved and valid risk and needs assessments for more effective prevention and intervention measures to reduce absenteeism, and by extension school dropout. In the present study, the implementation of restorative practices is recommended as a viable option, especially prevention measures in the areas of mental health, anti-social behaviors, and school climate.

The findings of Gubbels et al. (2019) demonstrate the complexity of factors that contribute to absenteeism. As a result, a vast amount of research has been dedicated to understanding this phenomenon, but the majority of the research has been quantitative in nature and program-specific (Gase et al., 2016). Missing from the literature was the student perspectives on absenteeism, which was the focus of research by Gase et al. in 2016. From the student perspective, their research team sought to understand the experiences of students with a history of school truancy and their perspectives on what contributed to it, how the school and others responded to it, and what can be done to reduce it (Gase et al., 2016). The researchers used a qualitative descriptive approach with purposive sampling to answer their research questions. A 16-question open interview

method was used with all 39 participants to guide them in telling their stories (Gase et al., 2016). In their findings, the school influences on truancy most often cited were the school curriculum and instructional styles, relationships with teachers and counselors, and school structures and climate.

Specifically, students reported enjoying classes that were engaging and those that did not rely on worksheets. They also preferred group work over independent work and teachers and counselors who took the time to help and listen to them without criticism. The interviewees also recommended a clear, yet empathetic response to truancy. One that discourages truancy, provides students with mental health and emotional support, and involves parents (Gase et al., 2016). Among the factors related to school climate, gangs and negative peer situations were named as factors that made school unsafe or uncondusive to focusing and learning in school (Gase et al., 2016).

The work of Gase et al. (2016) demonstrates the importance of including the student perspective in reform efforts, which can be facilitated through the use of restorative practices. In addition to relationship building, restorative practices can also be applied to repair harm. When used as a method for productive solution-finding, engagement with, ownership in, commitment to, and school attendance are reasonable outcomes to expect.

Negative peer influences at school undoubtedly influence students' perceptions of school safety, which among student connectedness, and school engagement are key aspects of school climate (Van Eck et al., 2017). Recognizing that school climate is conducive to attendance and academic achievement and that it is widely documented as being associated with students' social and emotional well-being, Van Eck et al. (2017)



committed to quantitatively exploring the relationship between school climate and chronic absenteeism. They sought to find patterns of absenteeism among climate profiles at the individual and school levels. Participants included students within a large urban public school system, serving students in grades six through 12, from 121 schools. Eighty-nine percent of the students were African American, and 61 percent were eligible for federally subsidized free and reduced meals (Van Eck et al., 2017). Results were collected from student responses on the annual, district-wide school climate survey. The findings yielded three climate profiles at the individual level (Positive [highest means], Moderate [moderate means], and Negative [lowest means]) and two climate profiles at the school level (Marginal [lowest proportion of students reporting moderate and negative means] and Challenged [highest proportion of students reporting moderate and negative means]).

Overall, students in the positive climate profile were significantly more likely to have lower rates of chronic absenteeism than students in the moderate and negative profiles (Moderate:  $\beta = .011, p < .05$ ; Negative:  $\beta = .016, p < .01$ ), with no significant difference observed for students in the latter two profiles, ( $\beta = .004, p > .05$ ). Similarly, students attending climate challenged schools were significantly more likely to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than those who attended marginal climate schools ( $\beta = .033, p < .05$ ).

From these findings, Van Eck et al. (2017) suggest that targeting individual students with chronic absenteeism is insufficient. It was therefore recommended that more intervention measures are needed at the school-wide level to improve constructs such as connectedness, student-teacher relationships, the learning environment, and

parent involvement. The current study supports the authors' conclusion, which is that school-wide climate improvement measures, such as restorative practices, are preferred over targeting individual students with chronic absenteeism.

### ***Student Achievement at Vygotsky's Interpersonal Sociocultural Level***

Like student attendance, student achievement can be categorized as an individual factor related to students' capacity for self-regulation and their self-efficacy (Schunk, 2020). However, the literature overwhelmingly explores the impact of school and family on student achievement, which are primary components of Vygotsky's interpersonal contextual level. This section details how the school and classroom environments, as well as parental factors in the home environment impact student achievement.

Similarly to Van Eck et al. (2017), the research of Shindler et al. (2016) suggests that student achievement is best attained by addressing school-wide factors, such as school climate. In the 2016 study of Shindler et al., eight school climate dimensions were studied in relationship to student achievement. They were: (1) school appearance and the physical plant; (2) faculty relations; (3) student relations; (4) leadership decision-making; (5) the discipline environment; (6) the learning environment; (7) attitude and culture; and (8) school community relations. These distinct eight dimensions were a part of the School Climate Assessment Instrument (SCAI) created by California's Alliance for the Study of School Climate (ASSC). Using the SCAI, along with the Academic Performance Index (API) and Similar School Rating (SIM) scores published by the state, Shindler et al. (2016) explored the relationship between student academic achievement and school climate. The study examined this relationship using 230 schools representative of

regional diversity across five states. The minimum sample size at each school was 30, with most samples being much larger (Shindler et al., 2016).

The purpose of the SCAI is to provide an overview of the health, function, and performance at each school. The research demonstrated a strong relationship between school climate and school achievement. Seven conclusions were drawn: (1) school climate decreases from the elementary to the secondary level; (2) achievement was highly correlated to the school climate mean; (3) achievement correlated to all eight dimensions of the SCAI, with the strongest correlation with classroom discipline practices; (4) all eight dimensions were interrelated; (5) this interrelated relationship intensified when socioeconomic status was controlled for; (6) other school data points demonstrated the same interrelated nature; and (7) the perception of school climate varies by students' academic track, with lower tracked students reporting lower levels of school climate quality.

Shindler et al. (2016) observed that schools with optimum school climate promote a psychology of success (POS), as opposed to a psychology of failure (POF) that appears to be pervasive in low-quality school climates. Schools that promote POS have three key components that foster students' self-esteem: (1) a growth mindset for one's self-efficacy, (2) a sense of belonging and acceptance, and (3) an internal locus of control. The present study suggests that restorative practices can facilitate the symbiotic nature between these three factors and school climate to improve student achievement.

Kagan (1990) shared similar sentiments, believing that reform efforts are best addressed at the institutional level and asserting that non-optimal factors within classrooms and schools produce a discrete subculture of students incompatible with

school success. These students are often at risk for school dropout, whose profile has presented consistently over several decades and varied urban settings. Included in this profile are students who have low educational aspirations, self-esteem, self-regulation, and negative attitudes toward school. Subsequently, these students often experience academic failure, absenteeism, and misconduct, with no indication of challenged aptitude (Kagan, 1990). Citing the well-documented phenomenon of the School Effect among ineffective schools, Kagan (1990) concludes that schools have the potential to create learning environments more potent than the single influences of teachers, classrooms, families, and neighborhoods. Further accentuating the School Effect is research that has found improved self-esteem for students after they have dropped out of high school, increased motivation with enrollment in General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) or job training programs, and for transfer students, the tendency for their behavior to conform to the environment of their new school with low dropout rates (Kagan, 1990).

The purpose of Kagan's (1990) meta-analysis was to propose and describe an empirical research model for examining classroom factors that lend to the development of an estranged subculture of students within schools marked by academic failure. Kagan (1990) explored research on the effects of three differential themes: (1) differential treatment by teachers; (2) differential student cognitions and cognitive mediation; and (3) differential treatment by peers on students labeled differently.

The findings indicated that students deprived of assistance and social support cognitively perform in certain ways incompatible with school success. As such, Kagan (1990) proposed a research model that would evaluate three risk profiles of students (average achievers; low achievers not at risk; and students considered to be at risk)

against the three aforementioned differential themes. Kagan (1990) suggests this research model to explore to what degree students' classroom experiences place them at a risk for placement within the alienated subculture. While the current study also recognizes the potency of the School Effect on students', it is careful to honor the unique potential of schools to effect school success through the implementation of inclusive restorative practices.

According to Kagan (1990), school alienation is a risk factor for low achievement and ultimately, school dropout, which are often accompanied by exogenous variables such as low family socioeconomic status and belonging to a racial minority or ethnic group (Kagan, 1990). Reinforcing this connection is the tendency for teachers to not expect such students to achieve and the deficit mental models teachers ascribe to them to explain academic and behavioral challenges. (Kagan, 1990; Winfield, 1986). These challenges often result from being marginalized for generations by the majority population, and the school systems designed to meet the needs of students in the majority (Cavanagh et al., 2012; Kagan, 1990). Economic, political, and social marginalization for racial minority groups often results in poverty and low resourcing and consequentially, related struggles in schools. In a quantitative, longitudinal study, Pratt et al. (2016), explored the connection between multiple family risk factors that a child experiences during their first three years and their school readiness at the age of four. In 1991, families were recruited into the longitudinal National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (NICHD SECCYD). Fifty-two percent of the 1,364 one-month old infants included in the study were male; 76 percent were White, 13 percent were Black, six percent were Hispanic,

and five percent were identified by their mothers as Other races/ethnicities. Twenty-two percent of families were living at the poverty level and 23 percent were living just above the poverty level, which is one to two times the poverty threshold. The remainder reported an income-to-needs ratio above two times the poverty threshold, which is a federal threshold identified for economic self-sufficiency (Pratt et al., 2016).

Using multiple regression models and structural equations modeling, data collected from observations, interviews, surveys, and test scores was analyzed at the one, six, fifteen-, twenty-four-, thirty-six-, and fifty-four-month-old developmental stages. The authors found that accumulative family risk factors were associated with school readiness indicators. A negative association was found between the cumulative risk index and school achievement (math and literacy) and self-regulation, and a positive association was found for behavior problems. Three family risk profiles also emerged from the findings. These were: 1) Low risk (78%, n = 1,065; income about four times above the poverty threshold); 2) low-resourced, characterized by single-parent and minority status (12%, n = 139; income around two times above the poverty threshold); and 3) low resourced, characterized by parental harshness and depression (10%, n = 161, income between one and two times above the poverty threshold). Members of both the latter elevated-risk family profiles were likely to have low cognitive stimulation in the home.

The findings suggest that an accumulation of family risks presents challenges for children's school readiness. As a result, these risks must be considered within a person-centered approach, and a holistic framework of interventions for families ranging from below to just above the poverty threshold (Pratt et al., 2016). The present study considers these family risk factors, alongside the potential for their collective negative impact to be

mitigated through the application of restorative practices in schools (Breedlove et al., 2020).

While parental harshness can impede school success, parental engagement can nourish it. In addition to parental influence, however, adolescents are also influenced by their peers, who serve as a reference group as they explore their individual identities (Feldman, 2014). Both parental and peer influences have been explored in the literature with school dropout, and in 2017, Amdouni et al. sought to understand this association more closely. Data was collected from 125 students from the sampled school, within the Chicago Public School (CPS) system. The school mirrored the average racial demographics of a CPS school with 90 percent of students identifying as a racial minority U.S. group, consisting primarily of African American and Hispanic students. The authors looked at the academic achievement of respondent students and their perceptions of their parents' involvement (with parent-teacher conferences, attending after-school activities, and checking their grades at least once a month) and their peers' performance in and attitude about school (Amdouni et al., 2017). The results of their quantitative study showed that parental involvement is strongly associated with student achievement and that many students are in frequent contact with peers who perceive school as a waste of time. It was also demonstrated that regardless of parental involvement, if engagement with failing peers remains low, so will the likelihood of failing students and dropping out. Furthermore, it was shown that there is a higher threshold for the negative consequences of peer influences to appear for students reporting high levels of parental involvement, and a lower threshold for students reporting low levels of parental involvement.

The authors suggest that schools can lower or limit the number of failing students. This can be accomplished through fostering parental involvement, managing the negative peer influences occurring at school, and early intervention. Their findings demonstrate that negative peer influence is also a risk factor for low achievement and dropout. As such, the authors point to the potential for the adaptation of school-wide restorative practices to allay the negative peer influences occurring at school.

### ***Student Suspensions at Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Sociocultural Level***

Positive parental involvement and peer influences alone, however, cannot contend with the implicit biases that racial minority students often experience in our nation's schools. These experiences are firmly established in the literature, one of which is the pattern of disproportionate suspension rates for racial minority groups. This phenomenon is best understood through the cultural-historical lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This section connects the racism that was once accepted in our nation's cultural history to the present prevalence of implicit bias underscoring suspensions and exclusionary practices for racial minority students.

In the United States, overt inequities based on race and class were targeted by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It was crucial in increasing the awareness and sensitivity of White Americans about the unpalatable, offensive and violent behaviors sanctioned by segregation against Black Americans. However, Lynn & Parker (2006) contend that while overt forms of racism have subsided since then, everyday racism has increased and remains in the form of unconscious or implicit bias with racial malintent. In their summary of both qualitative and quantitative literature on the genealogy of the



emergence of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Lynn & Parker (2006) demonstrate how the theory has changed the nature of education research.

According to the authors, CRT is a detailed framework on how race and racism present in and affect aspects of law and society. It challenges the assumptions held by those in power that we live in a fair and just society and that schools are the great equalizers of opportunity for the races (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Lynn & Parker (2006) discuss how racism yet persists in schools and has been found to account for disproportionate rates of dropout and school suspension for Black and Latino students. For example, Lynn & Parker (2006) outlined research on how schools undervalue and overlook Mexican American students' cultural wealth, undermine the value Puerto Rican students' place on education, and how the concept of being colorblind is shortsighted and downplays racial incidents against Black students.

Through one quantitative study, Lynn & Parker (2006) demonstrate the power of experimental designs to measure racial inequity in education. In this study, teachers were provided with students' photographs and academic profiles. It was shown that more than 73 percent of teachers selected White and Asian male students to participate in an advanced algebra course, even when some of their academic profiles were inferior to profiles of capable Black students. It was also found that more than 50 percent of teachers only examined the profiles of White and Asian students. The findings of this study exhibit the persistent implicit biases permeating schools that favor White students and those who are believed to present with White-affirming behaviors (Kagan, 1990; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; Winfield, 1986). The latter points to the divisiveness that implicit biases can cause among racial minority races. These biases can also be

compounded by classism along the lines of gender, nationality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, thereby perpetuating oppression (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

The authors point to the interdisciplinary nature of the development of CRT and assert that research must continue for responsibility to be assumed and corrections enacted. The multi-theoretical approach of the current study resonates with the vision of Lynn & Parker (2006). It both conceptualizes the confluence of cultural-historical factors that impact school experience and success, and how restorative practices can be used as a reparative measure.

Lynn & Parker (2006) also discuss a critical race methodology for conducting qualitative research wherein the experiences of the racialized, gendered, and classed students of color are prioritized. Similarly, to explore the disproportionality in school discipline for African American students, Skiba et al. (2002) quantitatively investigated how the relationship between race, gender, and socioeconomic status explains the reasons behind these disparities. Skiba et al. (2002) stated that the statistical significance of disproportionality rates does not indicate discrimination bias and emphasized the unreliability of self-reports to capture bias. Therefore, the researchers sought to explore common alternative hypotheses that have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. These hypotheses were: (1) Statistical Methodology; (2) Socioeconomic Differences; and (3) The Relationship of Behavior and Discipline. Proportion criterion and chi-square tests were used to explore the first hypothesis. For the second, a two-factor (race, gender) analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. Lastly, discriminant analysis was used to differentiate the types of disciplinary referrals based on gender and race.

The sample consisted of 11,001 middle school disciplinary records from 19 middle schools in an urban midwestern public school district in the United States. Students were nearly evenly split between grades six, seven, and eight with four students listed in grade nine. Black students made up 51.8 percent of the sample, White students represented 42 percent, Latino students consisted of 1.2 percent, and Asian-American and Native American made up 0.7 percent and 0.1 percent of the sample, respectively. Free and reduced-cost lunch status represented the qualification of socioeconomic status where 65.3 percent of the sample was classified with free-lunch status and 8.1 percent as reduced-cost. From the findings, regardless of the method of analysis, Skiba et al. (2002) found statistical disproportionality for all group differences across all disciplinary consequences (referral, suspension, and expulsion), though the findings for race and gender were more robust than socioeconomic status. Likewise, socioeconomic status only minimally influenced race and gender differences in disciplinary measures.

For the third hypothesis, no evidence was found to support the theory that students with the highest rate of referrals, which were Black students in this study were referred for more of a variety of reasons or more serious infractions. Instead, the results demonstrated that White students were more likely to be referred for more objective offenses and Black students were more likely to be referred for more subjective offenses. Skiba et al. (2002) also note that no statistical disproportionality was found at the administrative level for suspensions. According to the authors, this points to racial disparities in classroom referrals due to an overreliance on punitive, authoritarian disciplinary responses to racial minority students (Skiba et al., 2002).

Teacher training in culturally competent methods of classroom management and relationship-building strategies was suggested by the authors. These two methods were presented as appropriate responses to the extensively documented phenomenon of disproportionate discipline for African American students. These strategies are also recommended by the present study, as they can be facilitated by the restorative approach of a Culture of Care and other restorative approaches.

Also consistently documented is the influence that teacher expectations have on student outcomes (Winfield, 1986), which reinforces the classroom level as an entry point to disparities between student groups (Skiba et al., 2002). According to Winfield (1986), these expectations are largely a part of a personal belief system. Reminiscent of the School Effect discussed by Kagan (1990), these personal beliefs or biases differentiate how some teachers interact with high versus low-performing students. In 1986, Winfield conducted a yearlong case study to document teacher beliefs and practices that influence student learning. Winfield (1986) focused on teacher beliefs regarding academically at-risk students across five inner-urban schools in a major metropolitan school district.

Ranging from effective to ineffective, as identified by school leaders, forty elementary school teachers were interviewed and taught in classrooms of predominantly Black students. For this qualitative study, a case study narrative was created for each school in the sample. An interview protocol guided the probing of teachers' perceptions regarding the: (1) Goals of Instruction; (2) Roles of the Principal, Reading Teachers, and Other School Reading Program Personnel; (3) Coordination of Instruction; (4) Attitudes Toward Student Learning; and (5) Effort Expended in Classroom Instruction. The results were based on self-reports and observational field notes that were not validated against

actual classroom practices. A cross-classification analysis yielded four possible teacher belief/behavior categories across two dimensions, responsibility and improvement-maintenance.

The first category was called Tutors which categorizes teachers who believed low-performing students were capable of learning and who assumed responsibility for their achievement. Similarly, the term General Contractors was used to describe teachers who believed that low-performing students could improve but shifted their responsibility, such as to classroom interventionists or special education programs. The third category was named Custodians and captures teachers who believe in the unlikelihood that low-performing students can achieve but who assume minimal responsibility, thereby maintaining low levels of achievement. Lastly, the term Referral Agents describes the belief/behavior patterns of the fourth category of teachers who neither believed that low-performing students can achieve and did not assume responsibility for their improvement.

Referral agents choose to refer students for special education testing or blame parents and students' home backgrounds for their academic struggles. One referral agent teacher commented, "They end up here because of misbehavior," when discussing the students in their remedial class identified as learning disabled. When the misbehavior of alienated students is repeatedly met with school exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, these students are often tracked lower academically or placed in remedial classes (Townsend, 2000).

Winfield (1986) calls attention to the need to view these findings within context, stressing the importance of considering the relationship between teacher beliefs and school-level policies and practices, as well as the complex nature of social interactions

within the classroom. In general, however, the authors assert that schools must work more intently and genuinely (Townsend, 2000; Winfield, 1986) at improving their success with low-income and racial minority populations. They must choose to respond to failure as a challenge to increase opportunities for at-risk students to achieve mastery. The current study contends that by assuming the responsibility for relationships through a restorative approach, teachers will be better able to reflect upon their expectations and beliefs about students and their capabilities (Townsend, 2000; Winfield, 1986) and commit to meeting the educational needs of every student. Going further, restorative practices may repair and preserve the relationship between teachers and students who misbehave, buffer against unwarranted exclusionary practices, and facilitate the instructional beliefs and practices of Tutor teachers.

In 2000, Townsend outlined 11 strategies for schools to employ to improve their success with low-income and racial minority populations, looking intently at the disproportionate representation of African American male students in school discipline. In reviewing related literature, Townsend (2000) connects the seemingly domino effect of classroom cultural discontinuity, increased disciplinary referrals, and suspensions, a widening achievement gap, poor social skills, low self-esteem, and eventually school dropout. Foremost, Townsend (2000) implores schools to examine their suspension and expulsion data to ensure that it is an accurate reflection and that no group of students experiences differential discipline based on ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, or any intersection of these characteristics. Schools and educators are then asked to reflect upon their belief systems, such as their attitudes toward and expectations of African American students, as well as their policies that serve only to maintain power and

control with no real connection to students' quality of life (Townsend, 2000). The remaining seven strategies that Townsend offers to reduce the disproportionality of African American students in school discipline can be viewed through the lens of addressing the cultural discontinuity that many racial minority students experience while in school.

Specifically, Townsend (2000) discusses how building relationships with students can overcome linguistic barriers, improve the relevance of instruction, and inform classroom management strategies. Relationship building can include getting to know students through interest questionnaires and talking to them, but also through taking a genuine interest in their extracurricular activities or extending personal invitations to students to participate in school activities. Lastly, building cultural bridges by establishing family and community partnerships is suggested as an appropriate culturally responsive approach to address the cultural discontinuity and disparities that exist for many racial minority students in school. A trademark of restorative practices is relationship building and inclusivity. The present study offers the restorative approach as an alternative method to exclusionary practices, as well as a preventative measure against more severe disciplinary concerns for all students.

These disparities also include the overrepresentation of racial minority students in special education (Skiba et al., 2002). The findings of Winfield (1986) allude to this pattern in the emergence of the Referral Agents teacher beliefs/patterns category. Townsend (2000) also details how disproportionate exclusionary discipline practices for African American students contribute to missed instruction, poor academic grades, grade retention, and lower academic tracking or remedial programming. Students with

disabilities, however, are protected under the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) against exclusionary discipline practices that would deny them a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). This legislation was intended to provide a balanced approach to disciplining students with disabilities (Skiba, 2002). However, in Skiba's (2002) review of legislation and literature, it is explained that many administrators feel it constrained their ability to maintain safe schools because of the due process students with disabilities are entitled to when exclusionary disciplinary practices are involved.

Critics contend that IDEA '97 created a dual disciplinary system within schools and subsequent legislation has been proposed (but never passed) to provide more latitude for administrators to apply exclusionary measures for students with disabilities. Skiba (2002) notes, however, that IDEA '97 does not preclude exclusionary discipline or the ability for law enforcement to exercise their responsibilities when crime is committed in schools. It rather ensures due process and that students with disabilities are not denied FAPE when infractions are related to their diagnosis. Skiba (2002) also makes the argument that exclusionary discipline has consistently been demonstrated in the literature to be ineffective. The irony of the advocacy for exclusionary discipline for one of our most vulnerable populations is pointed out. This is because students with disabilities are already overrepresented by racial minority and low-income students for whom exclusionary practices have been consistently disproportionately demonstrated in scholarly literature.

Alternatively, Skiba (2002) proposes a unified, proactive approach to discipline that reduces exclusionary discipline for all students, thereby resolving the perceived



conflict between FAPE and school safety (Skiba, 2002). This type of disciplinary approach prioritizes school climate, early intervention, and effective responses to disruption and crisis. The current study also advocates for this type of approach through restorative practices. Therefore, it is not surprising that restorative practices were among the options presented by Skiba (2002) to sustain a unified, proactive approach to discipline.

If implemented more broadly in schools, Payne & Welch (2018) propose restorative practices as a suitable disciplinary approach, which has attributes that are consistent with the suggestions offered by Skiba (2002). Payne & Welch (2018) refer to the literature about the positive effects of restorative practices to support their claim, which includes its potential to reduce student offenses, increase positive perceptions of school climate, and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline that has exacerbated disparities for marginalized students (Wald & Losen, 2003).

In 2018, Payne & Welch sought to explore how school structure (or characteristics), student and family characteristics, and community characteristics are associated with the implementation of restorative practices. This included restorative practices as both a whole framework and individual restorative techniques (restitution, peer mediation, community service, and student conferences). This quantitative study used binary logistic regression models and a least squares regression model to complete their analysis. The sample was drawn from The National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools published in 2000, derived from survey results from principals, students, and teachers from secondary high schools. Schools from small towns or rural areas were more likely to have participated in the study and alternative, private, and

religious schools were excluded because of their varying disciplinary policies and norms that differ from public schools. The final sample consisted of 263 nonalternative secondary schools.

The results showed that the use of restitution decreased as the number of students taught by teachers and the percentage of Black students increased ( $b = -.102, p < .05$ ;  $b = -.080, p < .05$ ). The use of peer mediation was positively associated with the number of students taught and school size ( $b = .051, p < .01$ ;  $b = .866, p < .05$ ). However, peer mediation was negatively associated with the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch and the percentage of Hispanic students ( $b = -.022, p < .05$ ;  $b = -.035, p < .05$ ). The use of community service decreased as the percentage of Black students increased ( $b = -.035, p < .05$ ), however it was positively associated with school crime ( $b = .462, p < .05$ ). Last among the individual restorative practices techniques was student conferences and a negative association was shown between the use of student conferences and the percentage of students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch ( $b = -.027, p < .05$ ). Consistent with the findings of the individual use of restorative practices techniques, the likelihood of schools using an overall restorative practices framework for addressing student misbehavior was negatively associated with greater percentages of Black, Hispanic, and students who receive free/reduced-priced lunches ( $b = -.400, p < .01$ ;  $b = -.322, p < .05$ ;  $b = -.380, p < .01$ , respectively).

The present study supports Payne & Welch's (2018) emphasis on the importance of policymakers, as well as district and school leaders, to adopt and commit to more restorative measures. This commitment to restorative practices can safeguard against differential implementation of restorative practices for marginalized groups.

### *The Benefits of Restorative Practices in Schools*

At each of Vygotsky's three contextual levels, the findings of the previously reviewed literature point to the potential transformative benefits of restorative practices in schools. Restorative practices seem to cultivate the ideal conditions in classrooms and schools that promote the development of students' self-efficacy, self-image, and self-worth, or what Vygotsky refers to as self-regulation (Schunk, 2020). The potential for positive student outcomes appears more likely when students approach school from a disposition of self-regulation. Therefore, this section highlights the conditions created at schools that have committed to restorative practices and the benefits they have produced for students. These benefits were obtained for students both individually and interpersonally, and demonstrate the potential for restorative practices to mediate the cultural-historical influences of implicit biases that still exist in our nation's schools.

Payne & Welch's (2018) charge to educational leaders and policymakers to commit to restorative practices will help ensure equitable implementation of restorative practices for all students. Equitable implementation may also foster the trust needed to effectively collaborate with diverse students and parents to alleviate their perceptions of alienation (Jenkins, 1995; Kagan, 1990). Trusting relationships, however, are best developed through sustainable school transformations that take time to cultivate. Cavanagh et al. (2012) assert that there are no 'quick fixes,' but demonstrate that with time and effort, a committed school can bridge the disparities experienced by marginalized racial populations. According to the authors, their study with the Maori population in New Zealand applies to the plight of racial minority students in the United States. The sample consisted of school stakeholders from schools in the Brady Area of

New Zealand, serving student populations with around 50 percent of native Maori students, which is over twice the national average.

In this qualitative study, the researchers focused on the efforts of these schools to create a culture of care, which is characterized by building and maintaining trusting and caring relationships and repairing relationships after harm is committed through wrongdoing with restorative practices (Cavanagh et al., 2012). Within an iterative or cyclic information-gathering process and the process of appreciative inquiry, interviews, observations, and researcher reflections were examined. The trustworthiness of their findings was supported using triangulation, member checking, and peer review; and by representing different cultural worldviews among the participants and research team (Cavanagh et al., 2012). The findings revealed two major themes, which were: (1) building relationships and the capacity for relationship building and (2) holistic caring and building trust.

Students consistently revealed that it was important to have teachers who care about them personally and who take the time to understand how they learn. Findings from the student perspective also demonstrated the need to not only have positive teachers but teachers who emit characteristics of a good friend, who care with both softness (kindness) and hardness (maintaining high expectations and accountability for the classroom family; Cavanagh et al., 2012; Townsend, 2000).

The authors conclude that the expectation is not for teachers and educational leaders to become competent in every culture represented in their student body. Rather, the challenge is to cultivate a culture of care by co-constructing schools or classroom communities wherein all students feel safe to attend, engage, and contribute just as they

are (Cavanagh et al., 2012). The current study supports the authors' assertion that this approach makes it safe for all students and their parents to engage in and contribute to their schools and classroom communities.

The safety that a culture of care produces can serve as a protective or mitigating factor against adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These adverse experiences can be related to housing and food insecurity, as well as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The extent of the negative lifelong, psychological, and physiological impact of the latter three ACEs was examined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente in the landmark ACE study (Breedlove et al., 2020). Since the original ACE study, childhood adversity associated with low income and low resources (Pratt et al., 2016) has also been examined throughout the lifespan, including the presentation of their consequences in children and adolescents in primary and secondary school.

However, in a qualitative study, Breedlove et al. (2020) reviewed the ACE literature alongside studies that examined the mitigating effects of positive childhood experiences (PCEs) and other protective factors (PFs) on ACEs. The purpose of their study was to assert that the adaptation of restorative practices in school can create learning environments that provide PCEs and PFs for all students. Opportunities for PCEs and PFs are especially beneficial for students of marginalized populations who experience early family risk factors and ACEs at disproportionate rates (Breedlove et al., 2020; Pratt et al., 2016; Slopen et al., 2016). The results demonstrated that the implementation of restorative practices mitigates the effects of ACEs at the individual level (increases in empathy, self-regulation, confidence, and self-acceptance),

interpersonal level (improved student relationships with teachers and peers, fewer discipline referrals for racial minority groups, and conflict resolution skills demonstrated with family members), and school-wide level, (enhanced sense of belonging and feeling safe at school for students, improved climate for teachers, and decreases in behavioral referrals, physical injury, and property damage; Breedlove et al., 2020).

Based on these findings, the authors implore educators, school mental health professionals, and school leaders to commit to improving support for students with ACEs. To accomplish this, they suggest the use of restorative approaches instead of punitive measures. Their findings demonstrated that restorative practices in schools mitigated the effects of ACEs at the individual, interpersonal, and school-wide levels, which complement the assertions of the present study.

The positive influences of restorative practices at multiple contextual levels were also demonstrated in the work of Ingraham et al. (2016), in their qualitative case study of the implementation of restorative practices in one culturally and linguistically diverse elementary school. From an urban community in San Diego, participants included an array of stakeholders, including students, families, school staff members, members of the community, and university students. Eighty percent of students enrolled in the elementary school, which serves grades kindergarten through fifth, were Hispanic and another 10 percent were African American. Within this population, 68 percent were English Language Learners (ELLs), and 87 percent of all students were eligible for free or reduced meals (Ingraham et al., 2016). From the findings of focus groups, interviews, observations, and open-ended survey questions, as well as quantitative assessments of archival school data, positive outcomes were observed at each stakeholder level.

Students displayed an eagerness to participate in restorative practices lessons, reporting that it was useful and that they learned valuable information. Peer mediators reported being able to generalize their ability to peacefully resolve conflicts at school into their homes and conveyed that being a role model for younger students was meaningful. Parents reported worrying less about the likelihood of their child graduating high school and were appreciative of the skills learned and the confidence gained from the parent workshops. Also, teachers repeatedly indicated an increased preference for and aligned beliefs with restorative practices in their classrooms. These results were echoed at the school-wide level too, showing considerable decreases in the total number of disciplinary referrals, the total number of students referred, and for every category of behavioral misconduct (Ingraham et al., 2016).

In addition to the implementation of restorative practices, the authors credit these results to other collaborative measures they employed, which included the participatory culture-specific intervention model (PCSIM) and the multicultural consultee-centered consultation (MCCC). They also suggest that the adaptation of restorative practices may yield results consistent with the reasons educators entered the profession, which is to make a difference in schools, as well as in the lives of students (Ingraham et al., 2016). The current study supports this vision by highlighting the potential for school-wide restorative practices to address school experience, and by extension school success.

The potential for restorative practices to make a difference in the current state of schools and the school experience for all students is apparent in the exponential growth that restorative practices have seen in U.S. schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, it is still in its developing state, with limited research on its effectiveness.

Available scholarly works are largely qualitative with many quantitative studies lacking the internal validity to exclusively attribute to restorative practices. In 2020, Darling-Hammond et al. summarized the findings of quantitative research regarding the effectiveness of restorative practices in U.S. schools published in the 20 years between January 1999 and December 2019. Each study was reported as correlational, save for two studies that used randomized control trials (RCTs).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) defined effectiveness as the ability of restorative practices programs to produce measurable outcomes for students and schools in the following areas: (1) Student Misbehavior and School Discipline; (2) Bullying; (3) Racial Disparities; (4) Student Attendance and Absenteeism; (5) School Climate and Safety; and (6) Academic Performance. The authors found evidence of the benefits of restorative practices in every area, but some areas did produce mixed results. Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggested that restorative practices can improve school climates, as well as reduce student misbehavior and school discipline. However, mixed results were shown in the areas of absenteeism, academic performance, bullying, and racial disparities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Notably, the authors also found evidence of unequal access to restorative practices. Two studies demonstrated that schools serving higher percentages of Black students and students who receive free and reduced-priced lunches were significantly less likely to be exposed to restorative practices. This trend, however, was not consistent among all schools, such as those researched in the Denver Unified School District of Colorado, which has successfully created sustainable systems of restorative practices in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).



To further support the empirical exploration of the effectiveness of restorative practices in schools, the authors suggest that schools establish a clear and acceptable definition of restorative practices, improve upon and replicate effective implementation measures, and consider the schools' readiness to implement restorative practices. They also suggest examining the integration of restorative practices with other multi-tiered models, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Resonating with the findings of Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), the present study seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of restorative practices for improving the school experience for all students and to promote equitable access to restorative approaches and other multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in all schools.

Equitable access to restorative practices requires a commitment to the restorative approach by educational leaders and policymakers (Payne & Welch, 2018). In 2016, Gregory et al. found that a commitment to more restorative measures showed promise to safeguard marginalized groups against differential disciplinary treatment. Through the use of surveys, the researchers examined the relationship between the degree of teachers' implementation of restorative practices with student perceptions of teachers as respectful and teachers' use of exclusionary discipline. Both hierarchical linear modeling and multiple regression analyses were used in this quantitative study. The study took place over the 2011-2012 school year during the schools' first year implementing restorative practices. The final sample consisted of 29 teachers and 412 students across two large, diverse high schools in a small east coast city in the United States. Of the teachers, all identified as White, save one self-identified Puerto Rican teacher. Among the students'

self-reports, 44 percent were White, 21 percent Latino, 3 percent American Indian, 5 percent African American, 2 percent Asian, and 25 percent mixed race.

The results showed a relationship between higher student reports of teacher restorative practices implementation and perceptions of teacher respect ( $r = .58, p < .01$ ) and lower disciplinary referrals for Latino and African American students ( $r = -.45, p < .05$ ). High restorative practices implementation was also associated with fewer disciplinary referrals for Asian and White students ( $r = -.36, p < .10$ ). Going further, Gregory et al. (2016) looked at the difference in disciplinary referrals between Asian and White students and Latino and African American students among teachers' with a low degree of restorative practices implementation and a high degree, as perceived by their students. Teachers with a low degree of implementation, showed a larger gap in referrals (Asian/White,  $M = 1.69$  referrals; Latino/African American,  $M = 9.13$  referrals; [ $t(15) = 3.21, p = .006$ ]), while teachers with a high degree were found to have a smaller gap (Asian/White,  $M = .77$  referrals; Latino/African American,  $M = 2.92$  referrals: [ $t(12) = 2.69, p = .02$ ]).

The authors acknowledge that disparities among racial groups were not eradicated for teachers reported to have a high degree of restorative practices implementation. However, as in the current study, they emphasize the potential for restorative practices to reduce it (Gregory et al., 2016). The researchers suggest that student voice be included in the implementation process of restorative practices through the regular collection of student feedback surveys. They also encouraged the use of implementation science to support the fidelity of implementation.

The provision for systematic student feedback in the process of restorative practices implementation to allow their voices to be heard was also a recommendation that arose from the mixed methods study conducted by Jain et al. (2014). For their review of the effectiveness of restorative practices in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in California, the authors used regression analyses and survey data. This allowed them to explore the perception of restorative practices and its association with suspensions, particularly for African American students, between restorative practice schools and non-restorative practices schools within the district. Key findings were reported for three major areas: (1) Overall Implementation at OUSD; (2) Experiential Reports; and (3) Impact of Restorative Practices. Over the ten years of implementation reviewed, OUSD demonstrated a substantial growth in the number of schools implementing restorative practices, growing from one school in 2005 to 24 schools in the 2013-2014 school year. Over 90 percent of principals and restorative practices coordinators and over 60 percent of teachers were trained in restorative practices.

When reflecting upon personal experience with restorative practices, over half of the staff reported that restorative practices were very easy or somewhat easy to implement and about 80 percent believed that implementation should continue at their school (Jain et al., 2014). The impact was measured by several indicators. Overall, teachers and students reported restorative practices as helpful, with almost 70 percent of teachers reporting improved school climate at their schools. More than 88 percent of teachers believed that restorative practices were helpful or somewhat helpful in managing challenging student behaviors in the classroom and 63 percent of teachers noticed improvements in the way students resolved conflicts with staff and peers. Students also

reported that restorative practices helped them to improve their conflict management skills, as well as relationships with peers and parents. Suspensions declined significantly for all students, most notably for African American students for disruption and willful defiance, which showed a 40 percent decrease from 1,050 to 630 within the last three years.

Additionally, the discipline gap between Black and White students decreased from 25 percent to 19 percent between the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years. Attendance and academic outcomes improved as well, with the greatest change in chronic absenteeism observed for middle schools which experienced a 24 percent decrease compared to a 62.3 percent increase for non-restorative practices schools. For high schools, reading levels doubled for ninth-grade students and the dropout rate declined, with a 56 percent decrease in dropout rates for restorative practices schools, compared to a 17 percent decrease for non-restorative practices schools.

Based upon the findings, Jain et al. (2014) contend that with integral implementation, restorative practices show promise as an alternative strategy to exclusionary discipline for minor behavioral infractions for all students, especially for their most vulnerable youth. Their findings align with the findings from other scholarly works on the benefits of restorative practices. Likewise, the present study supports the implementation of restorative practices in schools and emphasizes its potential for improving the school experience for all students.

With an array of restorative practices programs available to schools, more research needs to be conducted to identify factors that support high levels of implementation fidelity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The findings of Anyon's (2016)

qualitative study of three Denver public schools showed convincing results. The purpose of this study was to document the success of restorative practices in three model schools and identify strategies that can be replicated to sustain the implementation of restorative practices in other schools (Anyon, 2016). The sample consisted of 21 staff members from two secondary schools (middle and high school) and one primary school. They each served student bodies that were predominantly of color and low income, with a substantial number of students receiving English Language Learning (ELL) and special education support. Data was collected through interviews and focus groups over the summer of 2015, using a semi-structured conversation protocol. The data was then examined with Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software program that analyzed the transcripts of focus groups that were transcribed verbatim. Trustworthiness was further established through the use of inductive and deductive coding and inter-rater reliability across two researchers.

The results revealed four essential strategies for whole-school implementation of restorative practices. Foremost, was the presence of a principal with a strong vision and commitment to the restorative approach. Effective principals understand that restorative practices represent a philosophy and not a packaged program. They also were committed to equity and were able to communicate that restorative practices were not a fleeting program but that it was there to stay. The second most important strategy was staff buy-in, which was facilitated by supportive school leaders who listened empathetically, conveyed a commitment to a team approach to implementation, and provided practical support. Ongoing professional development was the third essential strategy. Trainings were practical and hands-on and were provided to all school staff who had the

opportunity to interact with students. Booster trainings were also provided throughout the school year and administrators, restorative practices coordinators, and teacher leaders were available for coaching and individualized training for staff. Lastly, the presence of a full-time coordinator was essential to the sustainable, school-wide implementation of restorative practices. The restorative approach to discipline is rooted in relationships, which is labor intensive. Full-time coordinators can dedicate the time needed to support this process, and thereby prevent administrators and mental health personnel from taking on more tasks in addition to their existing responsibilities.

These four essential strategies are utilized to examine the implementation of restorative practices in the current study. Anyon (2016) also notes that each school utilized multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for other universal approaches, such as reward systems and social-emotional learning curricula. They also emphasized communication (primarily through the use of interdisciplinary team meetings), as well as school-wide expectations and relationships, and transparent intervention and disciplinary protocols based upon data and the expectation of accountability.

## **Conclusion**

The subject study aligns with previous scholarship on the potential effectiveness of restorative practices in schools to ameliorate the school experience for all students. This review of the literature demonstrates that the theoretical framework supports the possibility that restorative practices can improve indicators of school success (i.e. achievement, attendance, and suspensions), by addressing the confluence of contextual factors that impede positive school experiences when left unaddressed. This study also extends previous scholarship by assessing the introduction of one restorative practices

framework implemented on a school-wide level (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2016).

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Chapter 3 details the research methodology for the present study. This quantitative study examines the impact of the introduction of the Culture of Care restorative practices approach on student achievement (Final GPA), attendance (Absences), and suspensions (In-school and Out-of-school Suspensions). A discussion on the research design presents the hypotheses used to explore the research questions that are analyzed in Chapter 4. Going further, a rationale for the selected statistical analysis is provided, along with a discussion of possible threats to the validity of the current study's conclusions. Thereafter, setting, sample, and population characteristics are reviewed. This chapter concludes with an overview of the intervention and procedures for collecting data, as well as the ethical research considerations that were applied to circumvent harm.

### **Methods and Procedures**

The current study explores the following research questions.

#### ***Research Question 1***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and achievement (Final Grade Point Average [Final GPA]) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

#### ***Research Question 2***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and attendance (Absences) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?



### ***Research Question 3***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and In-School Suspensions (ISS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

### ***Research Question 4***

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years?

### **Research Design and Data Analysis**

After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program before the 2021-2022 school year, multiple regressions were conducted to determine the association between achievement (Final GPA), attendance (Absences), In-School Suspensions (ISS) and Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS), and racial group (Black, Hispanic, and White) in the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. For both school years, separate regressions were conducted on each school success factor (Final GPA; Absences; ISS; OSS) to answer the research questions in the current study. The model estimated for each school year was:  $School\ \widehat{Success\ Factor} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Black\ Racial\ Group) + \beta_2(White\ Racial\ Group)$ . The hypotheses for each multiple regression are as follows:

H<sub>0</sub>: The model does not explain significant variance among racial group;

$$R^2 = 0.$$

H<sub>1</sub>: The model does explain significant variance among racial group;  $R^2 > 0$ .

For each multiple regression, there was one of the four dependent variables: 1) Final GPA, 2) Absences, 3) In-school Suspensions, and 4) Out-of-school Suspensions.

Racial groups (Black, Hispanic, and White) were the independent variables. Each coefficient was considered significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. The negative or positive designation of significant associations was determined within the context of the school success factor being analyzed. Additionally, one should note that when the relationship between school success and race is in question, significant results are not preferred. This is because it is not ideal for any racial group to be predicted to perform significantly better or worse than another. Therefore, significant associations found in the current study for one school year but not in the other are also discussed within the context of each school success factor, along with the possible impact of the restorative practices program.

### **Reliability and Validity of the Research Design**

The required statistical assumptions tests for multiple regression analysis are: (1) Multivariate normality; (2) Independence; (3) Multicollinearity; (4) Linearity; and (5) Homoscedasticity. These were reviewed to identify possible threats to the statistical validity of the current study. However, it is also important to consider other elements that pose a threat to statistical validity. One possible threat is the low reliability of treatment implementation. While the training material, format, and presenters remained consistent, there was no monitoring of the implementation of community circles in classrooms. This is mostly due to the grassroots nature of building teacher capacity and buy-in that is recommended for implementing the Culture of Care restorative practices framework. Likewise, with multiple teachers implementing community circles without monitoring, the likelihood increases for inconsistent and varied applications between classrooms. To minimize this threat, overt measures that monitor teacher implementation of restorative

practices would not be conducive to teacher acceptance. However, ongoing training in the form of incentivized voluntary staff circles may have provided the subtle implementation support needed to minimize this threat. Another strategy would have been to provide opportunities for feedback in the form of periodic staff surveys to inform the implementation team of the frequency of circles and the rate of adherence to best practices.

Threats to internal and external validity must also be considered. A major threat to the internal validity of the present study was a simultaneous historical event. The unanticipated COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted the middle school's three-year implementation action plan, training methods, and the intimate nature of community circles. For instance, social distancing prevented the use of a talking stick during community circles to prevent the spread of germs. In addition to social distancing measures, the hybrid learning model (classrooms with both in-person and remote learning students) also challenged the physical closeness and the sense of connectedness that traditional community circles purpose to create. To minimize this threat, teachers were trained in best practices for remote circles. For instance, teachers were encouraged to display the order of participation in the virtual meeting to replace the function of the talking stick. Imagery to foster closeness and connectedness was also encouraged, such as videos of campfires or fireplaces.

There were also two possible threats to external validity. The first was the interaction of selection and treatment. The findings of the current study are only applicable to schools with similar demographic characteristics as the school observed in the current study. The second was the interaction of setting and treatment. There are

many restorative practices programs available to educators for implementation in their schools and districts. However, the results of this study relate only to other schools that implement the Culture of Care restorative practices program. To minimize both threats, detailed information about the school setting, the sample of students, and the components restorative practices program were provided to inform future research.

## **Setting, Sample, and Population**

### ***Setting***

The current study examined data from a middle school in a suburban district located near a large metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. The 2018-2019 school year was the last year of traditional K-12 learning and teaching model for the next three years. This is because March through June of the 2019-2020 school year marked the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This period included the shutdown of businesses, organizations, and schools to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Many school districts, however, responded with remote learning and instruction, a model that was not completely phased out of the middle school until the 2022-2023 school year.

Beginning in March 2020, learning was self-directed in the middle school with students following lesson plans posted to their Google Classrooms by their teachers. During the following 2020-2021 school year, a hybrid learning model was employed, which took on many forms. From September to December, half of the student population attended school for in-person instruction for two days per week (Monday and Tuesday) and the other half on (Thursday and Friday). On Wednesdays, all students learned remotely and were required to be present in their Google Meet classes for attendance.

They then had the option to complete their assignments independently at home or online with their teacher. This model supported the need for cleaning and social distancing measures and appeased the growing sentiment from parents, educators, and community members for students to return to school for in-person learning and instruction. By January 2021, all students were able to return to the school for in-person learning and instruction but the option to learn remotely from home was made available. Teachers were required to provide live access to their classroom instruction for remote students via Google Meet so that they could participate along with their peers learning in-person.

The traditional K-12 teaching model returned for most students during the 2021-2022 school year. All students were welcomed back for in-person learning. However, remote instruction was provided online through the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) for students whose parents opted for remote instruction. Remote learning students were removed from teachers' rosters but were monitored by an assigned district administrator who coordinated with district services as needed.

The 2022-2023 school year was the first school year since the onset of the pandemic that fully resembled pre-pandemic school years. All students were required to return to the school building for in-person learning and instruction. As in pre-pandemic school years, exceptions were made for homeschooling, and home instruction was only provided to students with medical documentation.

### ***Sample and Population***

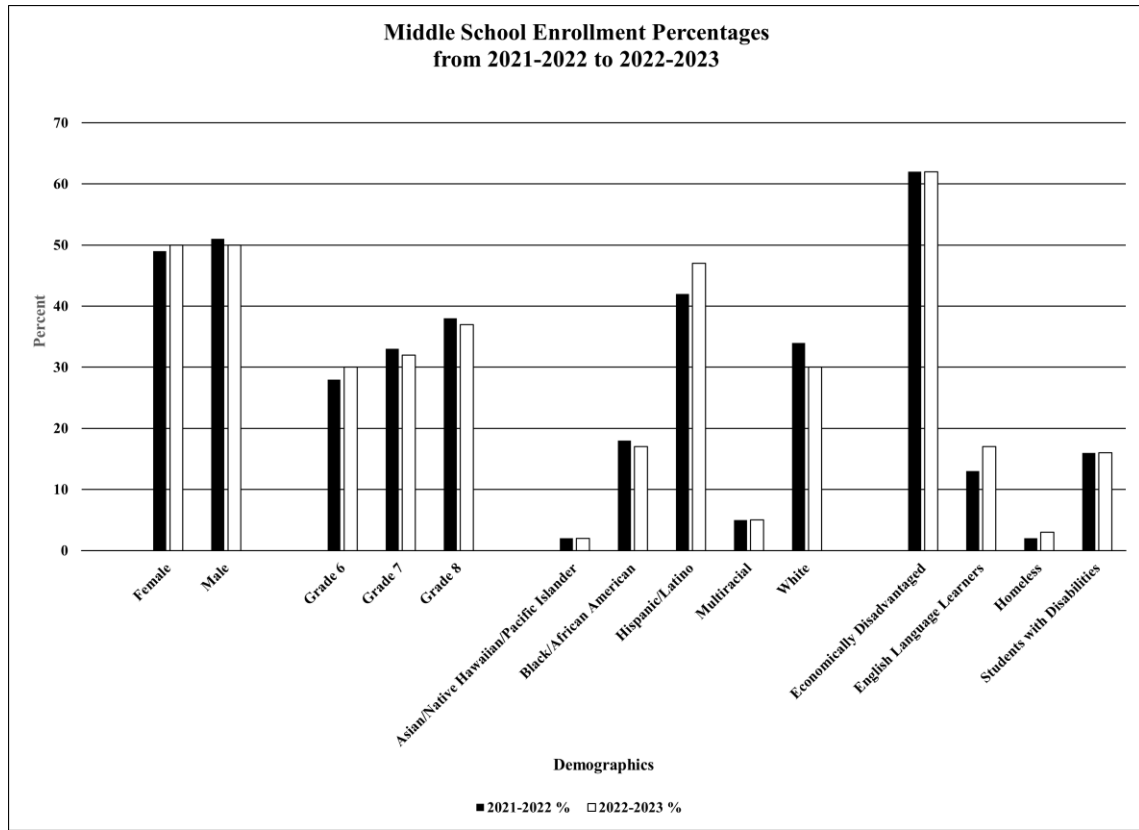
The samples used for each multiple regression analysis in the present study were nonprobability samples (Vogt, Gardner & Haeffele, 2012). Each sample consisted of archived student outcome data from the 2021-22022 and 2022-2023 school years. Figure

3 provides a percentage comparison of each sample. In June of 2023, there were 838 total students enrolled in the middle school with 419 male (50%) and 419 female (50%). In the sixth grade, there were 254 (30%) students, seventh grade 265 (32%), and eighth grade 309 (37%). Forty-seven percent of the student population was comprised of Hispanic or Latino students, 30 percent White, 17 percent Black or African American, five percent Multiracial, and two percent Asian or Hawaiian Native/Other Pacific Islander. English Language Learners represented 17 percent of the student population, 16 percent of students were classified with disabilities, 62 percent were characterized as economically disadvantaged, and three percent were classified as homeless (NYSED, n.d.).

An advantage of this population is that it is similar to the demographics of the other suburban middle schools in the area. Another advantage of this population is that it was conveniently available to the researcher for the current study. However, a disadvantage of the research is that the findings can only be used informationally to compare similar populations, despite the use of inferential probability statistics (Vogt et al., 2012).

**Figure 2**

*Middle School Enrollment Percentages for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 School Years*



## **Instruments**

For the present study, no instruments were used to obtain data. Archival data sources were used to explore the effects of the introduction of the Culture of Care restorative practices training program on student achievement, attendance, and suspension. These data were provided to the researcher by the district and obtained from the district's student management program called eSchool Data. Students' Final Grade Point Average (GPA) scores were used to assess student achievement. Absences were used to explore attendance outcomes and suspensions were evaluated using both In-school and Out-of-school Suspensions.

## **Intervention**

The present study explores the impact of the tier-one introduction of the Culture of Care restorative practices training program in a suburban middle school over the two school years that followed the phased rollout. As such, the introduction of this program occurred at Vygotsky's Interpersonal contextual level and consisted of staff training in community circles, which is tier one of the Culture of Care program. During the 2019-2020 school year, five teachers and one administrator were provided with the full, three-tiered Culture of Care training with the expectation to begin the process of turnkey training for all middle school faculty and staff. However, this training occurred two months before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which did not allow for turnkey training to begin within the same school year.

The following school year (2020-2021), the same fully trained team conducted tier-one training in community circles for teachers in every core content area (English, Math, Science, Social Studies, and World Language). Tier one community circle training was also provided for the teachers and staff in the English as a New Language (ENL), Special Education, Speech, and Student Support (counselors, social workers, and psychologists) departments, as well as for the school library media specialist. In June of the same year, school building administration and all district leaders took part in the full Culture of Care restorative practices training program. Students who had exposure to community circles were those whose teachers were eager to implement tier-one restorative practices in their classrooms after receiving the training.

By the first school day with students during the 2021-2022 school year, all teachers and administrators (district and building level) received the complete restorative



practices program or the tier one introductory training that focuses on community circles. The first Superintendent Conference Day of the school year was dedicated to training in tier-one restorative practices. Also, teachers could choose to attend booster training throughout the school year, which was offered among other training to fulfill their required annual professional development hours. The opportunity increased for students to participate in community circles as more teachers began implementing them in their classrooms. Additionally, the middle school's Student Support Team (SST) regularly began pushing into classes to conduct community circles.

The school district continued to reinforce its commitment to implementing a Culture of Care as it had in 2021-2022, during the following 2022-2023 school year. This commitment was evidenced by providing each school building with Restorative Practices Coaches to support the implementation of tier-one community circles. Coaches were teachers who were fully trained in the Culture of Care program. Coaches attended monthly meetings and their primary objective was to increase staff buy-in by supporting their colleagues with the implementation of community circles in their classrooms. Avenues for students to participate in community circles remained the same.

### **Procedures for Collecting Data**

To collect the data for the current study, the researcher applied to St. John's Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval to conduct the present study. Written consent from the school district was required to complete the IRB application. Once notified that the present study was approved by St. John's University, the researcher notified the school district so that the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request could be executed.

No data from within the district was accessed or obtained before the completion of the FOIL request.

In preparation for answering each research question, data were first organized and screened in the Microsoft Excel files provided to the primary researcher through the FOIL request. This included the exclusion of non-pertinent data and missing data. Additionally, careful consideration was taken to ensure that the column names and data formatting in Excel were compatible for uploading and processing with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software by IBM. All collected data were uploaded and merged into two separate SPSS datasets for each school year explored in the research questions. A second cleaning of the data was then completed in SPSS. This included another screening for missing data and also for outliers. For the 2021-2022 dataset, data for 971 participants were provided. However, after cleaning the data to remove missing and outlying data, only 787 participants remained, leaving 83% of the original participants. For the 2022-2023 dataset, data for 897 participants were received. After cleaning the data, however, only 750 participants were left, leaving 86% of the participants. Lastly, each dataset was visually inspected for missing data and a descriptive statistics analysis was performed for each variable to complete the data preparation process.

### **Research Ethics**

For this archival study, multiple steps were taken to ensure ethical research and to prevent harm to persons and institutions. Foremost, approval to conduct the study was granted by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at St. John's University to conduct the current study. Written consent to use district data was also secured by the researcher and

not analyzed until the completion of the FOIL request by the district. Measures were taken to ensure student confidentiality and anonymity. The district's anonymity was also secured, and it was only described broadly in terms of regional location and population characteristics (Vogt et al., 2012). Additionally, measures were taken to ensure ethical representation for groups of people to avoid harmful conclusions or stereotypes (Vogt et al., 2012). Lastly, all data were triple protected with password protection and storage on an external hard drive in a locked desk drawer, which was only accessible by the researcher.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 3 described the methodology and procedures used to explore the research questions presented in the current study. The rationale for the research design and data analysis were provided, along with a thorough description of the data utilized and how it was collected and secured. The results from the data analysis for each research question are reported in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this quantitative, non-experimental study was to explore the association between school success after the tier-one introduction of a restorative practices program. Through the lens of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, achievement (Final GPA), student attendance (Absences), and suspensions (In-school and Out-of-school suspension) were examined in the two subsequent years following the tier one implementation by the 2020-2021 school year. Student achievement was examined at the interpersonal level. Student attendance was evaluated at the individual level and student suspension was assessed at the cultural-historical level. The analytical results from the four research questions in the present study are presented in this chapter, along with a summary of conclusions that provides context for discussion.

### **Results**

All data were screened before conducting the statistical analyses. First, racial groups with the smallest percentage of students were removed. Those that remained were the Black, White, and Hispanic racial groups, which made up 94% of the middle school's student population in both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. Next, both missing and outlying data were excluded from each sample. Data that remained was for students who had outcomes for each school success factor explored in the present study. Also, no outlying data was removed for Final GPA and In-school Suspensions. However, students who did not attend school for at least 50% of the school year were excluded, due to severe absenteeism or long-term Out-of-school Suspensions. Lastly, each dataset was visually inspected, and a simple descriptive statistics analysis was performed to complete the screen. Table 1 summarizes the variables and statistical analyses used in this study.

**Table 1***Variables and Statistical Analyses by Research Question*

2021-2022 School Year					
Research Question	DV 1	IV 1	IV 2	IV 3	Statistical Analysis
1	Final GPA	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
2	Absences	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
3	In-School Suspensions (Days)	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
4	Out-of-School Suspensions (Days)	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
2022-2023 School Year					
Research Question	DV 1	IV 1	IV 2	IV 3	Statistical Analysis
1	Final GPA	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
2	Absences	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
3	In-School Suspensions (Days)	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression
4	Out-of-School Suspensions (Days)	Black RG	White RG	Hispanic RG	Multiple Regression

The sample studied during the 2021-2022 school year included archival outcome data for 787 middle school students in grades six through eight. Students who opted for

Remote Learning were removed from the sample, as the focus of the study was to explore the school experience of students who attended school for In-Person Learning only. The distributions of each school success factor in 2021-2022 were as follows for all middle school students: 1) Final GPA ( $MD=85.09$ ,  $SD=9.10$ ), 2) Absences ( $MD=13.96$ ,  $SD=13.01$ ), 3) In-School Suspension ( $MD=.04$ ,  $SD=.33$ ), and 4) Out-of-school Suspension ( $MD=.91$ ,  $SD=3.38$ ). Outcomes by racial group are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*School Success Outcomes by Racial Group for the 2021-2022 School Year*

Racial Group	Total	Percent	Final GPA	Absences	ISS	OSS
Black	152	19%	80.51	16.47	0.15	2.38
White	288	37%	89.27	12.38	0.02	0.58
Hispanic	347	44%	83.64	14.17	0	0.53
<i>N</i>	787					

The sample studied during the 2022-2023 school year included archival outcome data for 750 middle school students in grades six through eight. Remote Learning was not an option during this school year; therefore, all data reflected the school experience of students who attended school for In-Person Learning only. The distributions of each school success factor in 2022-2023 were as follows for all middle school students: 1) Final GPA ( $MD=85.96$ ,  $SD=8.23$ ), 2) Absences ( $MD=14.13$ ,  $SD=13.41$ ), 3) In-School Suspension ( $MD=.04$ ,  $SD=.29$ ), and 4) Out-of-school Suspension ( $MD=.34$ ,  $SD=1.50$ ). Outcomes by racial group are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*School Success Outcomes by Racial Group for the 2022-2023 School Year*

Racial Group	Total	Percent	Final GPA	Absences	ISS	OSS
Black	143	19%	82.32	16.39	0.15	0.81
White	241	32%	90.3	11.99	0.02	0.18
Hispanic	366	49%	84.52	14.65	0.01	0.27
<i>N</i>	<i>750</i>					

***Research Question 1***

**2021-2022 Achievement (Final GPA).** Through the lens of Vygotsky’s interpersonal level of sociocultural theory, the first research question was: After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and achievement (Final Grade Point Average [Final GPA]) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years? First, the results from the 2021-2022 school year are in focus.

A linear multiple regression was conducted to explore the association between racial group and Final GPA. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p < .05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were inspected. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution appeared mostly normal. A visual inspection of the histogram showed a slight negative skew; however, most scores fell within two standard deviations of the mean and the P-P plots demonstrate slight deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson

statistic was 1.20, which is within the acceptable range of one and three to meet the assumption of independence. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 4, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 14% of the variance of the Final GPA,  $R^2=.14$ ,  $p<.001$ . Additionally, significant associations were found between Final GPA and the Black and White racial groups, as well as for the Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression ( $\beta_0=83.64$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The Black racial group was a significant predictor of Final GPA,  $\beta_1= -3.13$ ,  $p<.001$ , meaning their Final GPA was predicted to be 3.13 points less than the Final GPA of Hispanic students. The White racial group was also a significant predictor of Final GPA,  $\beta_2=5.63$ ,  $p<.001$ , which means that their Final GPA was predicted to be 5.63 points greater than the Final GPA of Hispanic students.

**2022-2023 Achievement (Final GPA).** Utilizing the same hypotheses, the second part of Research Question 1 looked at the relationship between Final GPA and racial group for the 2022-2023 school year and was also examined using a linear multiple regression. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p<.05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were inspected. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a



histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution appears mostly normal. A visual inspection of the histogram shows a slight negative skew; however, most scores fall within two standard deviations of the mean and the P-P plots demonstrate slight deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.27, which was within the acceptable range of one and three and does not meet the assumption of independence. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 4, the null hypothesis was rejected. 1. The model explains 14% of the variance of the Final GPA,  $R^2=.14$ ,  $p<.001$ . Additionally, significant associations were found between Final GPA and the Black and White racial groups, as well as for the Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression ( $\beta_0=84.52$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The Black racial group was a significant predictor of Final GPA,  $\beta_1= -2.20$ ,  $p=.004$ , meaning their Final GPA is predicted to be 2.20 points less than the Final GPA of Hispanic students. The White racial group was also a significant predictor of Final GPA,  $\beta_2=5.78$ ,  $p<.001$ , which means that their Final GPA was predicted to be 5.78 points greater than the Final GPA of Hispanic students.

**Table 4***Regression Comparison of Final GPA on Racial Group*

Variable	Final GPA (2021-2022)			Final GPA (2022-2023)		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>
Constant	83.60***		.45	84.52***		.40
Black	-3.13***	-.14	.82	-2.20**	-.11	.75
White	5.63***	.30	.68	5.78***	.33	.63
$R^2$	.14***			.14***		
$\Delta R^2$	.14			.14		
<i>N</i>	787			750		

*Note.* Significance at  $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Research Question 2**

**2021-2022 Attendance (Absences).** Through the lens of Vygotsky’s individual level of sociocultural theory, the second research question was: After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and attendance (Absences) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years? First, the results from the 2021-2022 school year are in focus.

A linear multiple regression was conducted to explore the association between racial group and Absences. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p < .05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. Though most scores fell within two standard deviations of the mean, a visual inspection of the histogram also showed a positive skew. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced deviations from the linear trend. The

independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was .55, which was not within the acceptable range of one and three and does not meet the assumption of independence. However, this assumption can be assumed met, as the Durbin-Watson assumption usually applies to longitudinal data. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 5, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 1% of the variance of the Absences,  $R^2=.01$ ,  $p=.006$ . The Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression, showed a significant association with Absences ( $\beta_0=14.17$ ,  $p<.001$ ). However, the Black and White racial groups were not significant predictors of Absences, in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_1=2.30$ ,  $p=.068$ ;  $\beta_2= -1.80$ ,  $p=.082$ ).

**2022-2023 Attendance (Absences).** Utilizing the same hypotheses, the second part of Research Question 2 looked at the relationship between Absences and racial group for the 2022-2023 school year and was also examined using a linear multiple regression. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p<.05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. Though

most scores fell within two standard deviations of the mean, a visual inspection of the histogram also showed a positive skew. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was .09, which was not within the acceptable range of one and three and does not meet the assumption of independence. However, this assumption can be assumed met, as the Durbin-Watson assumption usually applies to longitudinal data. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 5, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 1% of the variance of the Absences,  $R^2=.01$ ,  $p=.004$ . The Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression, showed a significant association with Absences ( $\beta_0=14.65$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Additionally, the White racial group was a significant predictor of Absences,  $\beta_2= -2.66$ ,  $p=.016$ , meaning their Absences were predicted to be 2.66 points less than the Absences of Hispanic students. Lastly, the Black racial group was not a significant predictor of Absences, in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_1=1.74$ ,  $p=.185$ ).

**Table 5***Regression Comparison of Absences on Racial Group*

Variable	Absences (2021-2022)			Absences (2022-2023)		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>
Constant	14.17***		.70	14.65***		.70
Black	2.30	.07	1.26	1.74	.05	1.31
White	-1.80	-.07	1.03	-2.66*	-.09	1.11
$R^2$	.01**			.01**		
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01		
<i>N</i>	787			750		

*Note.* Significance at  $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Research Question 3**

**2021-2022 In-School Suspensions (ISS).** Through the lens of Vygotsky's cultural-historical level of sociocultural theory, the third research question was: After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and In-School Suspensions (ISS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years? First, the results from the 2021-2022 school year are in focus.

A linear multiple regression was conducted to explore the association between racial group and ISS. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p < .05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. While most outcomes fell within two standard deviations of the mean; most outcomes were also equal to zero, which appears to have contributed to a positive skew upon visual inspection. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced

deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.84, which is within the acceptable range of one and three and meets the assumption of independence. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 6, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 3% of the variance for ISS,  $R^2=.03$ ,  $p<.001$ . Also, the Black racial group was found to be a significant predictor of ISS ( $\beta_1=.15$ ,  $p<.001$ ), meaning that ISS for Black students was predicted to be .15 occurrences higher than ISS for Hispanic students. However, the White racial group was not a significant predictor of ISS occurrences in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_2=.01$ ,  $p=.58$ ), and the association between ISS and Hispanic students was not observed to be significant ( $\beta_0=.00$ ,  $p=.87$ ).

**2022-2023 In-School Suspensions (ISS).** Utilizing the same hypotheses, the second part of Research Question 3 looked at the relationship between ISS and racial group for the 2022-2023 school year and was also examined using a linear multiple regression. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p<.05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a

histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. While most outcomes fell within two standard deviations of the mean; most outcomes were also equal to zero, which again appears to have contributed to a positive skew upon visual inspection. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 2.11, which is within the acceptable range of one and three and meets the assumption of independence. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 6, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 3% of the variance for ISS,  $R^2=.03$ ,  $p<.001$ . Also, the Black racial group was found to be a significant predictor of ISS ( $\beta_1=.14$ ,  $p<.001$ ), meaning that ISS for Black students was predicted to be .14 occurrences higher than ISS for Hispanic students. However, the White racial group was not a significant predictor of ISS occurrences in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_2=.01$ ,  $p=.809$ ), and the association between ISS and Hispanic students was not observed to be significant ( $\beta_0=.01$ ,  $p=.460$ ).

**Table 6***Regression Comparison of In-School Suspensions (ISS) on Racial Group*

Variable	ISS (2021-2022)			ISS (2022-2023)		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>
Constant	.00		.02	.01		.02
Black	.15***	.18	.03	.14***	.19	.03
White	.01	.02	.03	.01	.01	.02
$R^2$	.03***			.03***		
$\Delta R^2$	.03			.03		
<i>N</i>	787			750		

Note. Significance at  $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Research Question 4**

**2021-2022 Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS).** Through the lens of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical level of sociocultural theory, the third research question was: After the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, what is the association between racial group (Black, White, and Hispanic students) and Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS) for the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years? First, the results from the 2021-2022 school year are in focus.

A linear multiple regression was conducted to explore the association between racial group and OSS. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p < .05$  for significance testing. To determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. While most outcomes fell within two standard deviations of the mean; most outcomes were also equal to zero, which appears to have contributed to a positive skew upon visual inspection. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced



deviations from the linear trend. The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was .68, which was not within the acceptable range of one and three and does not meet the assumption of independence. However, this assumption can be assumed met, as the Durbin-Watson assumption usually applies to longitudinal data. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 7, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 5% of the variance for OSS,  $R^2=.05$ ,  $p<.001$ . The Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression, showed a significant association with OSS occurrences ( $\beta_0=.53$ ,  $p=.003$ ). Additionally, the Black racial group was found to be a significant predictor of OSS ( $\beta_1=1.85$ ,  $p<.001$ ), meaning that OSS for Black students was predicted to be 1.85 occurrences higher than OSS for Hispanic students. The White racial group, however, was not a significant predictor of OSS occurrences in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_2=.05$ ,  $p=.86$ ).

**2022-2023 Out-of-school Suspensions (OSS).** Utilizing the same hypotheses, the second part of Research Question 4 looked at the relationship between OSS and racial group for the 2022-2023 school year and was also examined using a linear multiple regression. For this analysis, the alpha level was set to  $p<.05$  for significance testing. To

determine if the data were appropriate for the analysis, the five assumptions of linear multiple regressions were considered. Multivariate normality was evaluated using a histogram and a P-P plot of the regression residuals. The distribution did not appear normal. While most outcomes fell within two standard deviations of the mean; most outcomes were also equal to zero, which again appears to have contributed to a positive skew upon visual inspection. The P-P plots also did not appear normal with pronounced deviations from the linear trend.

The independence assumption was assessed through the Durbin-Watson test of autocorrelation. The Durbin-Watson statistic was 2.08, which is within the acceptable range of one and three and meets the assumption of independence. Multicollinearity was assessed by estimating the correlation between each of the independent variables. The assumption was found to be met with no correlation greater than .8 among the independent variables, with Tolerance values greater than .2, and with VIF values less than 10. Finally, linearity and homoscedasticity were assumed because the relationship between any two-value dummy variable and the outcome is linear, as it is for the racial group variables in the present study.

**Table 7***Regression Comparison of Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS) on Racial Group*

Variable	OSS (2021-2022)			OSS (2022-2023)		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>
Constant	.53**		.18	.27***		.08
Black	1.85***	.21	.32	.55***	.14	.15
White	.05	.01	.27	-.09	-.03	.12
$R^2$	.05***			.02***		
$\Delta R^2$	.04			.02		
<i>N</i>	787			750		

*Note.* Significance at  $p < .05$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Using the results from the regression, as shown in Table 7, the null hypothesis was rejected. The model explains 2% of the variance for OSS,  $R^2=.02$ ,  $p<.001$ . The Hispanic racial group, which was the Constant or reference group for the regression, showed a significant association with OSS occurrences ( $\beta_0=.27$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Additionally, the Black racial group was found to be a significant predictor of OSS ( $\beta_1=.55$ ,  $p<.001$ ), meaning that OSS for Black students was predicted to be .55 occurrences higher than OSS for Hispanic students. The White racial group, however, was not a significant predictor of OSS occurrences in relation to the Hispanic racial group ( $\beta_2= -.09$ ,  $p=.48$ ).

**Conclusion**

Chapter 4 discussed the results from the analyses used to explore the four research questions in the current study. A detailed explanation of the data was provided for each research question and the results were explored according to their respective hypothesis. The significant associations found between each school success factor and racial group in the 2021-2022 school year unfortunately remained significant during the 2022-2023

school year. Additionally, the association between Absences and the White racial group demonstrated significance in the 2022-2023 school year after having no significant relationship the year prior. As a result, the idealistic pursuit of insignificant associations between school success and racial group seems to be ongoing. However, it is notable that Final GPA scores increased, and Out-of-school suspensions decreased for all students during the 2022-2023 school year. Absences also decreased for Black and White students, but the rate of in-school suspensions remained relatively the same for all students. The implications of these results and connections to prior research will be discussed in Chapter 5, along with the limitations of the present study and recommendations for future practice and research.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

In this study, Vygotsky's three sociocultural contextual levels were used to explore the tier-one impact of a restorative practice program on student success factors at each level. Student achievement (Final GPA) was examined at the interpersonal level. Student attendance (Absences) was explored at the individual level and student suspensions (In-school and Out-of-school) were assessed at the cultural-historical level. This chapter discusses the implications of these findings, however, one should note that while one school success variable was prioritized at each contextual level, they are not fully isolated from the others, as demonstrated in prior research. Limitations of the current study will also be discussed, followed by recommendations for future practice and research.

### **Implications of Findings**

After the tier one introduction of a three-tiered restorative practices program, school success was first explored through achievement (Final GPA) for each racial group. The results showed that the significant associations between Final GPA and each racial group observed during the 2021-2022 school year were still present in the 2022-2023 school year. Final GPA scores, however, increased on average for each racial group, with the greatest increase found for Black students.

While academic achievement can also be categorized at Vygotsky's individual level, the literature often explores the impact of school and family on student achievement, which are both components of Vygotsky's interpersonal level (Kagan, 1990; Pratt et al., 2016). Considering the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on racial minority students and their families (Fortuna et al., 2020l; Singu et

al., 2020), one might have expected achievement scores for Black and Hispanic students to decrease. However, the present study suggests that the introduction of restorative practices in the middle school was a beneficial factor that contributed to the improved Final GPA scores of all students.

The relationship between the tier one introduction of the restorative practices program and school success was next explored through attendance (Absences). A significant association was found only for Hispanic students in both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. Another notable finding for the 2022-2023 school year was that the association between Absences and the White racial group demonstrated significance after having no significant relationship the year prior. Additionally, on average Absences for White students decreased, they remained relatively the same for Black students, and unfortunately increased on average for Hispanic students.

Self-regulation, as described by Vygotsky (Schunk, 2020) is an individual factor that appears to be related to school attendance. It is developed through one's internal beliefs about and view of themselves in response to social interactions (Schunk, 2020). These social interactions in the school environment contribute to the school's climate and can positively and negatively impact student attendance. According to Santibañez & Guarino (2021) and Schoenberger (2012), however, absenteeism starts to increase for middle school students, but the current study demonstrated that not all racial groups in this middle school sample demonstrated this trend at the same rate (Jenkins, 1995). One might wonder then if the likelihood for White students to have significantly fewer absences than Hispanic students is the result of positive internal beliefs that White students have about themselves in response to their social environments. Likewise, one

could speculate if higher Absences for Hispanic students is related to the nature of the internal beliefs Hispanic students may have about themselves in response to their social environments. The latter bears pondering, especially when Hispanic representation is more sparse than Black representation among the middle school's teaching staff and when Hispanic representation was not yet present among the Restorative Coaches during the time of the present study. As a result, the outcomes for student attendance in the present study seem to be a function of more than individual factors (i.e. self-regulation; Schunk, 2020), and prior research points to interpersonal factors (family and school; Kagan, 1990; Pratt et al., 2016) and cultural-historical influences (i.e. implicit biases and race; Jenkins, 1995; Kagan, 1990; Lynn & Parker, 2006) that must also be factored in when seeking to fully understand the impact that restorative practices had on student Absences.

The association between the tier-one introduction of the restorative practices program and school success was also explored through In-School Suspensions (ISS). A significant relationship was observed only for Black students in both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. Additionally, there was also no major change in In-school Suspensions for any racial group.

The significant association between In-school Suspensions and the Black racial group, unfortunately, continues to align with the well-documented and pronounced relationship in the United States between student suspensions and race. While race is an individual factor, its interaction with implicit bias must be considered through Vygotsky's cultural-historical lens in pursuit of understanding the nearly 50 years of research (Skiba et al., 2002), which documents disproportionate representation of Black

students, and other racial minority groups, in school disciplinary data. As shown in Tables 1 & 2, the Black racial group had the smallest percentage of students compared to the percentage of students for the White and Hispanic racial groups. Therefore, despite the introduction of restorative practices, the current study indicated that Black students continued to be disproportionately associated with In-school Suspensions.

Lastly, the relationship between the tier-one introduction of the restorative practices program and school success was explored through Out-of-school Suspensions. A significant relationship was observed for Hispanic and Black students in both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years. Out-of-school Suspensions, however, decreased on average for each racial group, with the greatest decrease observed for Black students.

The decrease in Out-of-school Suspensions for every racial group demonstrates another instance in the present study where the introduction of restorative practices contributed to improved outcomes. For Hispanic and Black students in particular, these results are encouraging in light of the well documented phenomenon of disproportionate discipline for racial minority students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al. 2014; Payne & Welch, 2018; Skiba, 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). It suggests that negative patterns of discipline inequity in schools understood at Vygotsky's cultural-historical level (Schunk, 2020), can be positively influenced and even mitigated with intentionality. According to Skiba et al., 2002 and Townsend, 2000, this intentional approach should include culturally sensitive programming and training that brings about awareness and changes in practices, as was provided in the Culture of Care restorative practices framework implemented in the current study.



## **Relationship to Prior Research**

It is important to note that the improvements observed in the 2022-2023 school year occurred two school years after the implementation of the tier-one restorative practices program and the complete transition back to in-person learning and teaching in schools after the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Additionally, while the presence of restorative practices may not have removed the relationship between school success factors and racial group, what is most notable from the present study is that even the initial implementation of a three-tiered restorative practices program has the potential to improve school success for all students, in various ways (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014).

The outcomes of the current study, therefore, give credence to recommendations in prior research for vital school responses in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, one of the recommendations of Fortuna et al. (2020) mentioned creating environments in schools and other community settings that foster relationship building. The values of restorative practice prioritize relationships, and the respect and responsibility required to nurture and maintain them. It can therefore be presumed that the tier-one introduction of restorative practices in the middle school contributed to improvements in the school environment that were conducive to the outcomes in the present study.

Loades et al. (2020) looked at the relationship between the social isolation period during the pandemic and loneliness among children and adolescents. They found that longer intervention in classrooms yielded small to medium effects in reducing loneliness, while shorter intervention did not. The hallmark of tier-one restorative practices is

Community Circles. These are intended to become a sustained part of the classroom culture. According to Loades et al. (2020), since loneliness involves social comparison, the shared experience of social isolation during the pandemic had the potential to mitigate its negative impact. As such, Community Circles likely helped students feel a part of a group, where they belonged and could share common experiences, such as those related to the pandemic. This shows that while students need meaningful connections with their teachers in the post-pandemic era, they also need each other.

The findings in the present study also correspond with the findings of Darling-Hammond et al. (2020). In their meta-synthesis of the research on restorative practices, overwhelming evidence was found on the benefits of restorative practices in the area of school discipline, and mixed results were found in the area of attendance. This was also observed in the current study. The presence of tier-one restorative practices decreased Out-of-school Suspensions for all students, with the greatest decrease occurring for Black students. However, in the area of attendance, Absences increased for Hispanic students and decreased for White students, with the association between Absences and the White racial group demonstrating significance in year two after having no significant relationship the year prior. This presents an opportunity for educators to ponder contributing factors, such as the possibility that the school environment is more affirming toward White students (Kagan, 1990; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Skiba et al., 2002; Winfield, 1986). However, if Hispanic students report being provided the same treatment and opportunities in their school as White students (Lynn & Parker, 2006), educators should then consider if they are afforded the same advantages (Gooden & Myers, 2018; Fortuna

et al., 2020; Singu et al., 2020) outside of school and what the school can do to close the gap (Paul, 2016) and advance equity.

The works of Kagan (1990), Lynn & Parker (2006), Skiba et al. (2002), and Winfield (1986) each looked at teacher beliefs or implicit biases. Skiba et al. (2006) went further and recommended training in culturally competent strategies for classroom management and relationship-building. While neither works specifically addressed administrator beliefs and implicit biases, it is not a stretch to presume the same type of training would be beneficial for school leaders, many of whom are former classroom teachers. In the current study, the administrative team at the middle school is comprised of former classroom teachers who, along with all district leadership, received the full Culture of Care training in restorative practices before the 2021-2022 school year. When this is considered, the decrease in Out-of-school suspensions for all students in year two, which was greatest for Black students, aligns with a possible shift in administrator beliefs after having been trained in restorative practices. Going further, even if the shift in beliefs did not occur for school building administrators, then an apparent shift at the district level, to whom the school leaders are accountable for their use of exclusionary discipline, could confidently be presumed.

### **Limitations**

The current study presented some limitations, which included threats to statistical, internal, and external validity. One limitation was the violated assumptions of statistical tests for multiple regressions that were conducted for each analysis. First, conclusions about linearity and homoscedasticity were not able to be assessed due to the dichotomous nature of the racial group variable that needed to be dummy-coded for the regression.

However, the assumptions of normality, independence, and multicollinearity were able to be reviewed. The research question that met the most statistical assumptions was Research Question 1 for the 2021-2022 school year. The reason for low statistical validity in the areas of assumptions is unclear, however, it is likely related to the unequal sample sizes.

The loss of subjects was mostly due to missing data that excluded many participants from the analyses. This posed a threat to the internal validity of the present study. For the 2021-2022 dataset, data for 971 participants were provided. However, after cleaning the data to remove missing and outlying data, only 787 participants remained, leaving 83% of the original participants. For the 2022-2023 dataset, data for 897 participants were received. After cleaning the data, however, only 750 participants were left, leaving 86% of the participants. While the current study had enough participants to retain statistical power for each multiple regression, it seems likely that the loss of participants had an impact. Another threat to the internal validity of the present study was the addition of Restorative Practices Coaches to support the implementation of tier-one community circles during the 2022-2023 school year. Coaches were teachers who were fully trained in the Culture of Care restorative practices program. While coaches remained a form of tier-one educator support, this simultaneous event makes it difficult to distinguish its impact from the effect of the tier-one educator training in restorative practices provided before the 2021-2022 school year.

Another limitation was the interaction of setting and treatment which presents a threat to the external validity of the current study. In preparation for the post-social isolation period of the pandemic and return to in-person learning and teaching in schools,

in addition to restorative practices, the middle school employed other three-tiered approaches to support student success. For instance, social-emotional learning (SEL) was emphasized at the classroom level, and at the school level, the Response to Intervention (RTI) process was revamped. As such, the results of the present study are limited, not only to schools with similar demographics but also to those with the same three-tiered approaches present in the setting at the same time. One should note, however, that this setting characteristic is likely to become more common and therefore less of a limitation. This is because multi-tiered systems of support such as these are present in the literature as recommendations or concurrent school supports that should be implemented along with restorative practices (Anyon, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

Foremost, it is recommended that policymakers and educational leaders adopt and commit to the implementation of restorative practices in their schools (Payne & Welch, 2018). This commitment was demonstrated by the district of the middle school in the current study when a full-time Restorative Practices Coordinator was established during the 2023-2024 school year. A full-time coordinator was identified by Anyon (2016) as the fourth of four crucial components for the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools. The next recommendations, therefore, emphasize these components, but it is proposed that the Restorative Practices Coordinator be the driving force behind them. The coordinator must prioritize relationships with school leaders to cultivate administrative commitment and a strong shared vision. Anyon (2016) found that principals with a strong commitment to and vision for restorative practices in their schools were a crucial component for the successful implementation of restorative

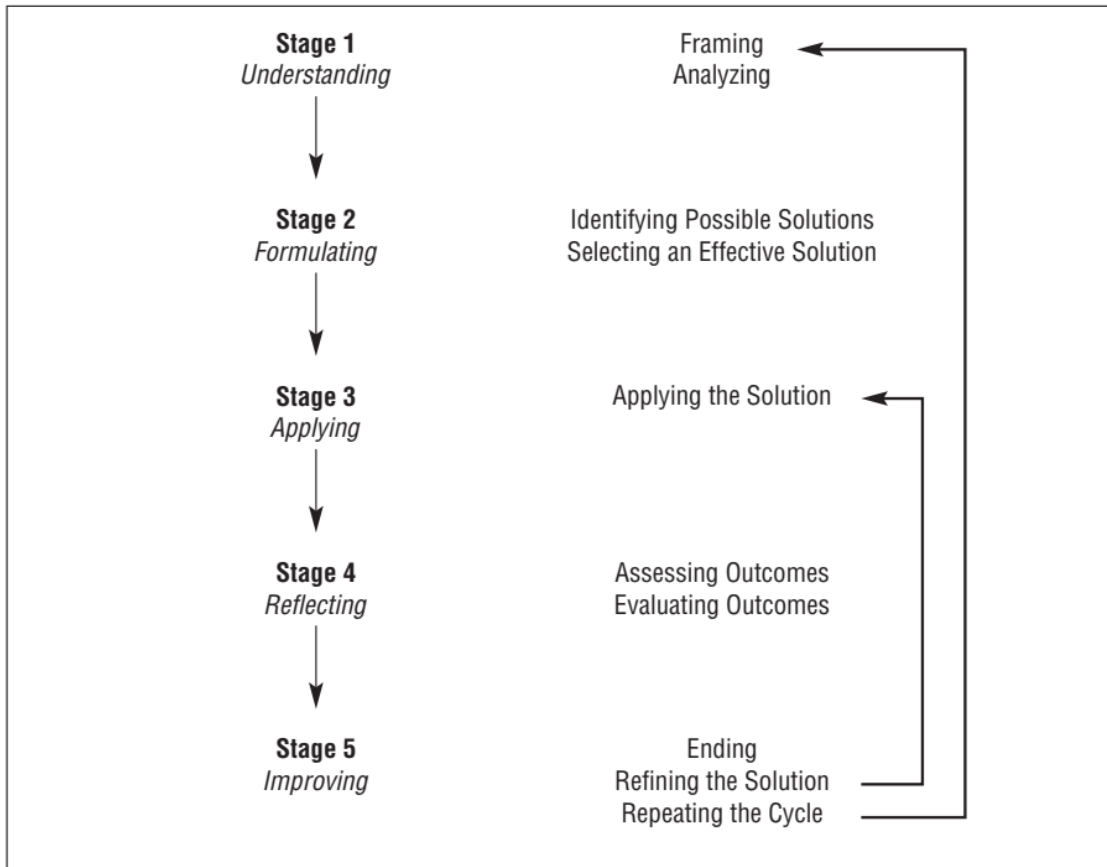
practices. The relationship between the coordinator and principal is also key for consistent messaging about the restorative approach and adherence to best practices implemented with fidelity. Next, the coordinator should work with building principals, and other school leaders, to identify teachers and other staff members as likely first adaptors and implementation supporters. These educators will be crucial for staff buy-in (Anyon, 2016), which is another key component for the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools. Lastly, the restorative practices coordinator should develop practical, hands-on training for all school staff who interact with students. The coordinator, however, must be careful to design the professional learning opportunities in an ongoing fashion (Anyon, 2016) to ensure continuity of support and reinforce implementation fidelity.

The regular and consistent utilization of surveys is another recommendation for future practice. The first type of survey recommended is climate surveys, which can come in the form of purchased packages that include various surveys and analytic services, or publicly available surveys with established reliability and validity. For either option, annual use of a climate survey is recommended to close the feedback loop. The information gained from these climate surveys will help promote the success of the restorative practices program being implemented and identify areas of improvement needing the Five-Stage Problem Solving Model proposed by Kowalski (2012; Figure 3). Lastly, while the results of climate surveys can also inform professional learning opportunities applicable to staff members' expressed needs, feedback surveys from those training sessions are also important for assessing their effectiveness. Information can be gained about the perceptions of the presenter, the content, and the process of the training,

as well as suggestions for future training. These invaluable insights can then be used for the continued development of professional learning opportunities that are desired by staff members to strengthen the implementation of restorative practices in their schools.

**Figure 3**

*Kowalski's (2012) Five-Stage Problem Solving Model*



The final recommendation is for schools to move away from paper disciplinary referrals to an electronic platform for staff to use. One popular option is Google Forms, which is a part of the Google Suite for Education that is widely used in many K-12 schools. The school's existing student information system may also be an option but may require considerable collaboration between the district's technology specialists and student information system company for function expansion. One of the benefits of an

electronic disciplinary referral platform is that it saves time for teachers. Retrieving paper copies of disciplinary referrals from the main office takes time away from teachers' planning time, as does searching for it (or the most recent version of it) in a shared network folder on their computer. The time a teacher can save by simply bookmarking it to their internet browser's bookmarks bar or conducting a few clicks in their school's student information system is invaluable. Saving teachers' time can prevent situations from going unreported that would have otherwise benefited from a restorative approach. Another benefit of an electronic disciplinary form is timely reporting and by extension timely response. This is crucial for timely consequences and restorative responses. Lastly, an electronic platform for disciplinary referrals allows for easier quantitative processing of disciplinary data. As a result, classrooms in need of restorative support can be more easily and objectively identified. Additionally, electronic disciplinary data could facilitate associations between the presence of restorative practices in classrooms and student disciplinary referral data (Gregory et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2002).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

One recommendation for future research is for more quantitative studies on the impact of restorative practices in schools to add to the existing wealth of qualitative research. Qualitative research is important for understanding the subjective impact of restorative practices on its participants. The growth of restorative practices in schools over recent years is evidence that there are many school and district leaders for whom the findings of qualitative research are enough to encourage the implementation of restorative practices in their schools. However, the current study sought to add to the quantitative literature on restorative practices for educational leaders who may prefer



quantitative results before implementing a restorative practices program. Also, there is a considerable amount of skepticism that surrounds the notion of restorative practices in schools. Demonstrated quantitative success in the outcomes that school districts prioritize, might provide the final, objective piece of evidence that change agents and educational leaders need for successful advocacy of restorative practices in their district. To strengthen advocacy efforts, quantitative research should also explore the impact of restorative practices across varying measures of time, with different populations, and in settings (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This is because there is value in assessing how soon improvements can be observed once the implementation of restorative practices begins, as well as the extent of improvements with longer periods of implementation time. It is also important to assess if the benefits of restorative practices present differently across gender lines, socioeconomic status, and even geographical settings, for students in urban and rural communities.

To add further validity to the use of restorative practices in schools, researchers should seek to design quasi-experiments to explore the impact of restorative practices. While the randomization of true experiments is ideal, it violates the grassroots, voluntary requirement for engagement in the implementation of restorative practices in schools. For instance, outcomes might be skewed for a classroom with an unwilling teacher randomly assigned to the treatment group of a true experiment. Additionally, quasi-experiments have the increased potential to control for variables in the setting, among the subjects, and for the treatment to minimize threats to validity.

Lastly, mixed-methods studies are recommended for future research. They have the potential to combine the strengths of the aforementioned qualitative, quantitative, and

quasi-experimental research designs. Combining subjective and objective outcomes, with the ability to make comparisons to a control group seems advantageous for the exploration of restorative practices in schools. Furthermore, it is also recommended that mixed-method studies include an examination of disciplinary referrals at the classroom level (Skiba et al., 2002). Quantitatively, inferences could be made before and after the impact of a restorative practices program by taking a look at the differences in referrals, as well as the reason for referrals and for whom. Coupled with qualitative findings from the student and teacher perspective, much information can be gained about the effectiveness of restorative practices in schools at the classroom level.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the current study demonstrate that two years after the tier one introduction of a restorative practices program, associations between school success factors and racial groups are likely to remain. This is consistent with the literature, which recognizes that deep paradigm shifts take time to cultivate (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Though some schools have demonstrated improvements after the implementation of restorative practices in as little as three years (Anyon, 2016), it may take ten years in other schools for anticipated results to be observed (Jain et al., 2014). Finally, most noteworthy is that two years after the complete transition back to in-person learning and teaching in schools after the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, improvements were observed for every racial group in the areas of achievement (Final GPA scores) and Out-of-school suspensions; with the greatest improvements occurring for Black students. This shows that the presence of restorative practices in schools can help educators and

school leaders advance equity and improve the school experiences for all students, as they traverse the post-pandemic realities impacting their school communities.

## APPENDIX A IRB APPROVAL MEMO

Date: 1-17-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-148

Title: AMELIORATING SCHOOL EXPERIENCE WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Creation Date: 12-5-2022

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Faith Thompson-Lee

Review Board: St John's University Institutional Review Board

Sponsor:

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### Study History

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Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	<b>Exempt</b>
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### Key Study Contacts

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<b>Member</b>	Joan Birringer-Haig	<b>Role</b>	Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	birringj@stjohns.edu
<b>Member</b>	Faith Thompson-Lee	<b>Role</b>	Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b>	faith.thompsonlee@stjohns.edu
<b>Member</b>	Faith Thompson-Lee	<b>Role</b>	Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b>	faith.thompsonlee@stjohns.edu

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## APPENDIX B DISTRICT CONSENT

March 14, 2023

### To Whom It May Concern

This will acknowledge that Faith Thompson-Lee, doctoral candidate at St. John's University, requested permission to conduct archival research with existing data from the [REDACTED] District in order to complete her dissertation to explore the impact of the introduction of restorative practices on student outcomes and perceptions. We have interpreted her request to be a request for records that will be produced pursuant to the Freedom of Information Law ("FOIL") and not produced in connection with her capacity as a District employee. For the purpose of her research, Ms. Thompson-Lee may not have access to data other than what is provided to her through FOIL.

I understand that Ms. Thompson-Lee's planned dissertation is entitled, "Ameliorating School Experience with Restorative Practices" and she will need to obtain middle school data provided by the District through FOIL to complete her study. The requested records include students' final GPA, attendance, and suspension (in-school and out-of-school) data from the 2017-2018 school year through the 2023-2024 school year. An additional record will be the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Exit Survey, which is provided annually by the middle school Guidance Department for the same time period. Such records will be produced to Ms. Thompson-Lee as required by FOIL, with any personally identifiable student data removed or redacted as required by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ("FERPA").

I understand that if I have further questions about this research study, that Ms. Thompson-Lee can be reached at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]. I also understand that if I have any research-related concerns that I can contact Ms. Thompson-Lee's mentor, Dr. Joan Birringer-Haig, at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]. Lastly, should I have questions about St. John's Internal Review Board (IRB) approval, I understand that I can contact Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Ph.D., Chair, St. John's Internal Review Board, at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

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Vita

Name	<i>Faith Thompson-Lee</i>
Baccalaureate Degree	<i>Bachelor of Arts, University at Buffalo, Buffalo Major: Psychology</i>
Date Graduated	<i>June, 2004</i>
Other Degrees and Certificates	<i>Professional Certificate in School Counseling (2006)</i>  <i>Professional Certificate in Mental Health Counseling (2016)</i>  <i>Professional Certificate in Educational Leadership, (2018)</i>  <i>Master of Education, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, Major: School Counseling</i>
Date Graduated	<i>February, 2006</i>