



RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING BEHAVIORAL ISSUES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of nine elementary school teachers in implementing restorative practices to address behavioral issues in the Digos City Division. The teachers applied restorative strategies in their classrooms to promote positive learner behavior and resolve conflicts. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to extract the teachers' experiences. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Collaizzi's seven-step method to uncover the essence of their narratives. The thematic analysis revealed key challenges encountered by the teachers, including cultural sensitivity issues, difficulties balancing restorative practices with academic demands, and the lack of adequate training and support. These challenges affected how teachers implemented restorative practices in addressing behavioral concerns. Despite these difficulties, teachers applied coping mechanisms such as engaging in ongoing professional development, using technology for reflection and resource access, and educating both learners and parents about the principles of restorative practices. Teachers also emphasized the value of building a school-wide culture of restorative discipline and integrating positive behavioral interventions. The insights drawn from the study were the importance of culturally responsive approaches, the integration of restorative practices with academic expectations, and the provision of consistent training and institutional support. These findings suggest that with the right strategies and support systems in place, restorative practices can help foster a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environment.

KEYWORDS: Restorative Practices, Behavioral, Elementary Schools.

INTRODUCTION

Restorative practices as an alternative approach to managing learner behavior in educational settings. Restorative practices focus on building relationships, fostering accountability, and promoting a culture of respect and empathy among learners, teachers, and staff. This study investigates how restorative practices can effectively address disruptive behaviors, reduce conflicts, and promote positive learner behavior by encouraging open dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect. The decision to focus on restorative practices stems from the increasing recognition that punitive disciplinary measures often fail to address the root causes of behavioral issues and may contribute to a negative school climate.

This research is expected to benefit many stakeholders, particularly educators, school administrators, and learners. Teachers and school staff will benefit by understanding how restorative practices can improve classroom dynamics and reduce behavioral disruptions. The study's findings will provide educators with practical strategies to manage conflicts and foster positive relationships among learners, creating a more conducive learning environment. Additionally, learners stand to benefit from this approach, as it focuses on empathy, personal accountability, and conflict resolution, which can lead to improved emotional and social development.

The United States has shown that while restorative practices can reduce exclusionary discipline, their impact on behavioral and academic outcomes remains inconsistent (Fronius et al., 2019). In schools in Los Angeles, for example, restorative practices were more likely to be implemented in larger schools but faced challenges due to a lack of understanding and consistent application (Gregory et al., 2022). The shift to restorative practices requires a cultural change in schools, moving away from punitive measures to a more community-focused approach. However, this transition can be slow, often taking years to implement effectively.

In Cambodia, restorative practices have emerged as an alternative approach to traditional school discipline, with researchers seeking to understand their effectiveness in addressing behavioral challenges. Watts and Robertson (2021) conducted a study comparing two urban high schools over two school years, one implementing restorative practices and the other not. The results revealed that while the school with restorative practices saw a reduction in suspensions, it also experienced lower rates of tardiness, lessened absenteeism, and minor incidents compared to the school without restorative practices. The increased number of minor incidents may raise concerns, suggesting that restorative practices will not always prevent conflicts from escalating and might delay the inevitable need for more serious disciplinary action. However, this also suggests that restorative practices may lead to long-term improvements in learner behavior by addressing underlying issues more comprehensively.

In a Pennsylvania urban high school, the implementation of restorative practices exposed significant challenges in transitioning away from traditional disciplinary approaches. Joseph et al. (2021) identified key implementation



issues through a comprehensive mixed-methods study, revealing that the coexistence of punitive and restorative practices fundamentally undermined the effectiveness of the new disciplinary strategy. The primary obstacles included organizational resistance to complete systemic change, a lack of comprehensive staff training, and an institutional tendency to default to familiar punitive measures. Educators struggled to fully abandon long-established disciplinary protocols, resulting in a hybrid approach that diluted the potentially transformative impact of restorative practices.

In the Philippines, restorative justice practices have recently been introduced in local government units, and agencies, particularly in schools. However, there is still a lack of visible application, measurable outcomes, and research on their effectiveness. In the Philippines, teachers face significant challenges when it comes to discipline and restorative practices in the classroom. The Department of Education, as noted by Elahe (cited in Ancho, 2019), supports school leaders, teachers, and learners in enhancing their skills in teaching and learning. However, the department's policies prioritize the protection of learners from physical, verbal, and sexual violence, which can be inflicted by classmates, teachers, and other school staff (Philippine Department of Education, 2019). These challenges are often compounded by the need to maintain a balance between fostering a positive learning environment and addressing misbehavior. While restorative practices focus on resolving conflicts and rebuilding relationships rather than relying on punitive measures, they require a shift in how teachers approach discipline. Teachers must not only manage classroom behavior but also promote empathy, accountability, and understanding among learners. However, this approach can be difficult to implement, especially in classrooms with diverse learner behaviors and backgrounds.

In June 2019, an incident was reported in which a teacher was verbally attacked, threatened with a stone, and struck with a knife after addressing a learner who was not wearing the proper uniform (GMA Public Affairs, video file, 26 June 2019). Additionally, two teachers in Leyte and Cavite committed suicide within two months in 2018, reportedly due to stress from non-teaching tasks, heavy workloads, and supervisory pressures. Teachers are expected to address discipline issues effectively while adhering to policies designed to protect learners. This dual responsibility—promoting learning and maintaining order—often puts teachers under immense pressure as they navigate the complexities of discipline, learner needs, and the expectations set by the school administration.

The need for professional development in handling restorative practices and discipline is increasingly important to ensure that teachers can create a safe and conducive learning environment without compromising their well-being or that of their learners.

In Digos City, schools are shifting from traditional punitive approaches to restorative practices to address behavioral issues in elementary learners. Restorative practices, such as circles, peer mediation, and conflict resolution, focus on repairing harm, fostering understanding, and rebuilding relationships rather than punishment. This approach encourages learners to take responsibility for their actions and make amends. Based on my observations, I've found that restorative practices not only address immediate behavioral concerns but also teach learners important life skills.

For example, when a conflict arises between learners, instead of resorting to detention or punishment, a circle or mediation session is organized. This allows both learners to express their emotions, gain insight into each other's perspectives, and work together to find a solution. This method often strengthens relationships between learners, as it helps them develop better communication skills and learn how to resolve conflicts respectfully.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learner behavior is increasingly challenging for teachers, making it difficult to manage classrooms and deliver instruction. To address this, teachers must find new ways to engage learners and support their emotional needs. When learners feel safe and supported, they are more focused and capable of learning. As Evans (2021) notes, emotional safety is key to helping learners regulate their behavior and succeed academically. Teachers must create environments where learners feel secure, fostering both their academic growth and emotional well-being.

Educators recognize that learners who feel safe are more likely to engage in learning rather than disruptive behaviors. However, at Huntington Elementary School, learner behavior challenges have escalated during the 2022-2023 school year. Data from the Tier 1 Behavior Team shows a significant increase in out-of-class movements across grades K-5, with the average number of calls rising from 15 per day in August to 26 in October, before dropping to 4 in December. This trend highlights the need for targeted strategies to address behavioral concerns and create a more supportive and secure learning environment for learners (Sellenrick, 2023).

Educators face the challenge of balancing academic instruction with the social and emotional needs of their learners to prevent disruptive behaviors. As research by Zimmerman-Leizerov and Jerome (2022) emphasizes, addressing these emotional needs is crucial for creating a learning environment where learners feel supported and understood. When teachers prioritize social-emotional learning and provide opportunities for learners to develop self-regulation, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills, they can reduce instances of disruptive behavior. A strong focus on emotional well-being not only helps learners manage their actions but also enhances their ability to engage in learning.



Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an effective approach for addressing behavioral challenges and fostering a safe and supportive learning atmosphere. SEL programs teach essential skills like self-regulation, empathy, and conflict resolution, which help learners build emotional intelligence and better handle social situations. According to research by Parker and Bickmore (2020), learners who engage in SEL programs tend to show improved behavior, enhanced academic performance, and better mental health outcomes. By incorporating SEL practices into everyday classroom activities, educators can help learners develop the emotional and behavioral skills necessary to create a positive, focused learning environment.

Studies consistently highlight those restorative practices, including restorative circles and conferences, encourage learners to take responsibility for their actions, which leads to improved behavior. When learners are provided with the chance to reflect on their actions and comprehend their effects on others, they cultivate a deeper sense of accountability (Fishman, 2021). By focusing on empathy, communication, and self-regulation, restorative approaches create a classroom environment where learners not only enhance their behavior but also become more actively involved in their learning.

Restorative justice frameworks, as outlined by Humphrey et al. (2020), emphasize the importance of accountability through reflection and dialogue rather than relying on punitive measures. This approach focuses on helping learners recognize the impact of their actions on others and engage in meaningful conversations to understand the consequences of their behavior. By prioritizing dialogue and reflection, learners are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions in a constructive way, fostering empathy and a sense of accountability. This shift from punishment to understanding not only helps learners learn how to make amends but also contributes to a reduction in repeated disruptive behaviors.

Mouhanna (2020), cultivating strong relationships within the classroom can decrease the occurrence of disruptive behaviors. When learners feel valued and supported by both their peers and teachers, they are more inclined to adhere to classroom expectations and demonstrate positive behaviors. Restorative circles, where learners have the opportunity to express their thoughts and listen to others, play a key role in building trust and empathy. This process helps create a sense of community that promotes positive behavior. Additionally, this relational approach strengthens emotional regulation, enabling learners to develop better social-emotional skills and reducing the reliance on behavior interventions.

Palfreyman (2019), schools that adopt restorative practices experience a decline in suspensions and office referrals. Learners involved in restorative practices are less likely to let conflicts escalate and more likely to use problem-solving strategies to prevent future behavioral problems. By focusing on the underlying causes of disruptive behaviors, such as unmet emotional needs or insufficient social skills, restorative practices help create a more supportive atmosphere. This approach encourages learners to take responsibility for their actions in a constructive, non-punitive manner.

Restorative practices, which focus on dialogue, accountability, and repairing harm within a community, have become more popular in educational environments. However, applying these practices in culturally diverse classrooms presents notable challenges. One key issue is the assumption that restorative practices, which draw from both indigenous and Western justice traditions, can be universally applied without taking into account cultural differences in communication, concepts of justice, and conflict resolution. As a result, educators might unintentionally impose practices that do not align with their learners' cultural values or norms, which can lead to ineffective or even harmful results (Pyne, 2019).

Research Questions

The primary research aim of this study was to examine elementary school teachers' implementation of restorative practices in their classrooms, focusing on how these practices improved learner behavior, enhanced social-emotional skills, and fostered a positive, inclusive school culture. To address this aim, three questions were used to guide the research.

1. What are the experiences of elementary school teachers in implementing restorative practices?
2. How do elementary school teachers cope with the challenges of implementing restorative practices?
3. What insights can be drawn to effectively implement restorative practices in the classroom?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used qualitative research, specifically phenomenology. Interviews were conducted with individuals who had direct knowledge of a particular event, situation, or experience. Phenomenology was employed in this study to explore the fundamental aspects of life events experienced by a specific group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Tenny et al. (2022), phenomenology focused on the study of the meaning of phenomena or the study of the particular. The primary goal of phenomenology was to accurately describe, as faithfully as possible, the experiences of those involved in the phenomenon.

The researcher adopted a phenomenological inquiry approach, paying close attention to subjective interpretations and biases when analyzing the participants' statements (Juma, 2023). This approach aimed to



identify the significance of the event, situation, or experience, leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Research Participants

The study involved nine (9) teachers from the Digos City Division, South District, who had been class advisers for at least three (3) years. These participants were purposively selected, with no specific restrictions based on age, sex, or marital status. To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, the sample size was categorized based on the size of the schools where the teachers were employed. Three teachers were selected from Remedios N. Saplala Elementary School, categorized as a big school. Another three teachers were chosen from Colorado Elementary School, representing a medium-sized school. Finally, three teachers came from Arcaflor Maniapao Elementary School, a small school.

In qualitative research, a smaller sample size was typically sufficient to reach saturation—when no new insights were generated by additional participants. This approach ensured that the study’s results were both comprehensive and meaningful, balancing depth and practicality (Young & Casey, 2019).

Creswell (2014) emphasized the importance of purposive sampling in qualitative research, noting that it allowed researchers to identify individuals or groups who were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon being studied. Creswell also highlighted those qualitative studies typically involved smaller sample sizes, ranging from 5 to 25 participants, depending on the study’s focus and the depth of inquiry required. This approach ensured that the data collected was detailed and context-rich, which was essential for generating meaningful insights.

Data Analysis

In this study, all the data collected was carefully examined and thoughtfully analyzed. Firstly, I described my personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. I began with a full description of my own experience of the phenomenon. This was an attempt to set aside my personal experiences so that the focus could be directed to the participants. I developed a list of significant statements. Then I found statements about how the individuals had experienced the topic, listed these significant statements as having equal worth, and worked to develop a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements. I took the significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information, called “meaning units” or themes. I wrote a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon. Next, I wrote a description of “how” the experience happened. This was called the “structural description,” and I reflected on the setting and context in which the phenomenon had been experienced.

Finally, I wrote a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage represented the “essence” of the experience and was the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implications

Elementary school teachers described three central themes in their experiences implementing culturally responsive and restorative practices: challenging cultural sensitivity, difficulty integrating restorative practices with academic pressures, and lack of support and training. Many teachers reported struggling with cultural sensitivity, expressing uncertainty about how to effectively engage with learners from diverse backgrounds without unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes or causing harm.

This challenge was often compounded by a lack of formal training in cultural competency. In addition, teachers found it difficult to balance the demands of restorative practices, such as building relationships and facilitating conflict resolution, with the constant pressure to meet academic benchmarks and standardized testing goals. These academic demands frequently left little time or flexibility to meaningfully incorporate restorative approaches into their daily routines.

Furthermore, educators consistently cited a lack of support and professional development as a major barrier. They felt unprepared to implement these practices and noted that without sufficient guidance, resources, or administrative backing, even the most well-intentioned efforts were difficult to sustain. Collectively, these themes highlight the need for systemic support, targeted training, and a shift in priorities to create space for both academic achievement and equitable, relationship-centered teaching.

The analysis revealed that elementary school teachers employed several coping mechanisms to support the effective implementation of restorative practices, with three key themes emerging: engaging in ongoing professional development, leveraging technology for support and reflection, and providing learner and parent education on restorative practices. Teachers recognized that continuous professional development was essential in building their confidence and competence in applying restorative strategies.

Through workshops, training sessions, and peer collaboration, they were able to deepen their understanding and refine their techniques, making their classroom management more inclusive and relationship-focused. In addition, educators increasingly relied on technology as a means to enhance their practice. Digital tools offered opportunities



for reflection, such as recording and reviewing classroom interactions, and enabled teachers to access resources, communicate with colleagues, and track learner behavior more effectively. Another significant coping strategy involved educating both learners and their parents about restorative practices.

Teachers found that when learners and families understood the principles behind these approaches, such as accountability, empathy, and community building, there was greater cooperation and consistency between home and school environments. Collectively, these strategies empowered teachers to navigate the challenges of implementing restorative practices and fostered a more supportive and sustainable framework for learner development.

Lastly, the insights drawn from the analysis further highlighted two additional themes that support the effective implementation of restorative practices among teachers: integrating restorative practices into school-wide culture and incorporating positive behavioral interventions. These themes reflect broader mechanisms that contribute to the success and sustainability of restorative approaches. Teachers emphasized that when restorative practices are embedded into the overall school culture—rather than applied in isolation—they become more impactful, fostering consistency and a shared sense of responsibility among staff and learners.

This integration creates a unified framework where expectations, communication, and disciplinary approaches are aligned with restorative values. In addition, the use of positive behavioral interventions was identified as a complementary strategy that reinforces restorative practices by proactively encouraging appropriate behavior and fostering strong, respectful relationships. Together, these insights highlight the importance of systemic support and a cohesive school environment in ensuring the effective and lasting implementation of restorative practices.

The findings of this study affirm the theoretical underpinnings of restorative justice and critical pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000) and Zehr (2005). The teachers' experiences reveal that while restorative practices promote empathy, accountability, and improved learner behavior, their implementation is shaped by the broader socio-cultural and institutional structures within schools. Consistent with Kincheloe and McLaren's critical theory, restorative practices, though intended as transformative, may be co-opted by prevailing disciplinary paradigms unless educators critically examine whose interests are served. This was evident when participants noted that restorative processes were sometimes undermined by rigid academic schedules or administrative resistance.

Zehr's vision of restorative justice as a paradigm shift toward healing and community-building is reflected in how teachers described deeper learner relationships and reduced conflict. However, as Aoki (1989) suggests, the effectiveness of restorative practices varies based on whether schools adopt a merely technical orientation (e.g., following steps without philosophical grounding) or a critical one that centers relationality and context. Therefore, for restorative practices to fully realize their transformative potential, educators must be supported not only in procedures but also in embracing a critical, interpretive orientation that reshapes how justice and discipline are conceptualized in educational spaces.

Future Direction

In light of the findings and the significance of this study, several key directions are recommended to strengthen the implementation of restorative practices in schools and benefit various stakeholders within the educational system.

Teachers, as the primary implementers of restorative practices, must be prioritized in efforts to create more inclusive and responsive learning environments. The researcher recommends that the Department of Education provide continuous and comprehensive professional development opportunities for teachers. These should focus on equipping educators with practical strategies for applying restorative approaches, managing behavioral issues constructively, and fostering empathy, accountability, and open communication in the classroom. Ongoing support and mentoring systems should also be established to ensure consistent implementation and teacher well-being.

Learners are the central beneficiaries of restorative practices, and schools should actively support their social-emotional development. The researcher recommends that learners be taught the core principles of restorative practices, such as taking responsibility for their actions, resolving conflicts peacefully, and developing empathy for others. These life skills will not only improve learner behavior but also prepare learners for meaningful participation in their communities.

At the system level, the Department of Education is encouraged to institutionalize restorative practices as part of the official school discipline policy. This includes developing clear guidelines, frameworks, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that restorative approaches are applied consistently and effectively across all schools. Institutional support, policy alignment, and resource allocation are essential for sustaining the long-term impact of these practices.

Finally, the study's findings point to the need for further research. Future studies are encouraged to examine additional dimensions of restorative practices, particularly their effectiveness in diverse school settings and their integration with academic goals. Research could also explore post-pandemic challenges, the role of family and community engagement, and comparative analyses across different regions to identify best practices and inform policy development.



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