Students’ Perceptions of Restorative Conferences in an Urban High School

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Abstract
Restorative justice practices allow students who violate school rules to face their victims and correct their offenses to repair the harm they have caused to someone or something. This study examined students’ perceptions of restorative conferences used in an urban high school. It examined students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on students’ behavior and their rationale for that behavior. Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyze data. This study identified three major themes a) types of behavior that caused a restorative conferences b) impact of restorative conferences on behavior c) conditions to have a positive outcome to a restorative conference. Student participants noted in this study that trust, maturity and understanding students’ moral development were essential to the results of a restorative conference.

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Dedication

First, I want to thank the St. John Fisher College faculty, to my Chair Dr. Kim VanDerLinden, who through this process helped me to find my scholarly voice, I am forever grateful for her scholarship and guidance through this process; to Dr. Dean Goewey, my committee member, whose leadership stories are inspirational; to Dr. C. Michael Robinson, who leads with humility and models servant leadership and to Dr. Linda Hickmon-Evans, who advised me with kindness and prayer. To all my Cohort 2 members and my team, Matt, Denise, and Jamie, thank you for your support. Also, thank you to Jody Manning for his friendship over the past nine years of graduate work.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, to my mother, Irene DiFlorio whose prayers and encouragement having given me hope to complete this journey. My father, Bob DiFlorio who inspires me to lead with faith and love, and whose guidance has given me peace and joy in my life - I hope I make you proud. To my four daughters Natale, Francesca, Adriana, and Alessia I love you so much, may this work be an example that through patience, hard work and perseverance you can achieve any goal you have set for yourself. Never give up girls. Never give up. Finally, I dedicate this work and my life to my wife, Lori. She has defined for me the meaning of family, hope, and love in my life. I could have never done this without her love and support. I love you. Sempre Avanti!
Biographical Sketch

Robert DiFlorio is currently the principal of a high school in an urban school district. Mr. DiFlorio attended Niagara University from 1989 to 1993 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts and holds Teacher Certifications in Social Studies Education (7 to 12) and an Elementary Certification (Pre-K to 6). He earned a Master Degree from Syracuse University in 1995 in Special Education and has taught children of all ages and learning types in an urban setting. He received his Certificate of Advanced Studies in Educational Administration from SUNY Cortland in 1999 and began his career as a school administrator at that time. In 2014, he earned another Certificate of Advanced Studies in Teaching and Curriculum from Syracuse University. Mr. DiFlorio began his doctoral studies in the Ed.D Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College in May of 2014. Mr. DiFlorio’s research was in the area of Restorative Justices Practice under the guidance of Dr. Kim VanDerLinden and received his Ed.D degree in 2016.
Abstract

Restorative justice practices allow students who violate school rules to face their victims and correct their offenses to repair the harm they have caused to someone or something. This study examined students’ perceptions of restorative conferences used in an urban high school. It examined students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on students’ behavior and their rationale for that behavior. Qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyze data. This study identified three major themes a) types of behavior that caused a restorative conferences b) impact of restorative conferences on behavior c) conditions to have a positive outcome to a restorative conference. Student participants noted in this study that trust, maturity and understanding students’ moral development were essential to the results of a restorative conference.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Reforms to improve American public school systems have focused on teachers’ evaluations, standardized test scores, the integration of technology, and a host of other initiatives. While some of these reforms may be controversial, most people would agree that public schools should be safe. Ideally, schools should be free of violence and other antisocial behaviors that disrupt the normal developmental processes that children undergo to attain an education and become productive citizens. Public schools are expected to manage minor mishaps in behavior within the classroom setting, as well as aggressive and violent youth.

How schools manage students’ behavior has been a growing concern. One approach used consistently for the past three decades is called “zero tolerance.” The idea of zero tolerance is to remove a student from school for his or her negative behavior. The theory is that by removing students from school, they will learn not to commit negative behaviors. In fact, the federal 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act requires school districts to suspend a student for a minimum of 1 year out of school if that student brings a weapon to school (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). However, research has suggested that the use of zero tolerance policies has negative effects on students’ academic performance, particularly students of color and students with disabilities (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008). Recognizing that zero tolerance policies may have negative effects on student achievement, some schools have begun to implement an approach called “restorative justice” (Zaslaw, 2010).

Restorative justice practices create opportunities for a person who has harmed another person or the community to make amends or restitution. For example, one
Restorative justice practice called restorative conferences also known as victim-offender conferences allow the perpetrator to face the victim and make amends to repair the relationship. Another method called restorative circles allows for several people to discuss problems within a community such as a classroom in a systematic way. The primary goal of restorative justice practices is to restore relationships to have a more peaceful community (Zehr, 2002).

Problem Statement

According to Robers, Zhang, and Truman (2010), over three million pre-K to twelfth-grade students are suspended annually from public schools. Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) identified that regular suspensions seem to increase the risk of academic failure. The researchers found that suspension from school is a moderate-to-strong predictor of a student’s probability of dropping out or not graduating on time. They also indicated that school suspensions might harm the learning process—suspended students may become less attached to school and subsequently, less motivated to achieve academically.

According to Nickerson and Spears (2007), students who are suspended from school are more likely to repeat the negative behavior in the future. The use of disciplinary tools, such as suspension, predicts increased student disruption. Nickerson and Spears argued that suspension from school can be prevented when school administrators take different approaches. Restorative justice is one approach that has gained momentum in schools over the past decade as an alternative to suspension. Restorative justice practices allow students who violate school rules to face their victims and correct their offenses. The premise is that students have an obligation to the
community to correct their offenses and that, in so doing, the students will learn from their behavior (Zaslaw, 2010).

Researchers have documented restorative justice practices and their effects, mostly with adolescents who were incarcerated. There is limited research on the use of restorative justice practices in U.S. schools, much less in urban schools (Mirsky & Wachtel, 2007). Therefore, this study focuses on urban high school students’ perceptions of a particular restorative justice practice called restorative conferences.

**Theoretical Rationale**

What school personnel do when a student misbehaves is complex, and, arguably, the reason why a student misbehaves, or what his or her reasoning is for the misbehavior, is equally complex. Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1958) theory of moral reasoning lends insight into this complexity by providing a framework to study students’ rationale for their behavior.

According to Kohlberg (1958), children develop moral reasoning sequentially and in stages. However, some children’s development may stop at a specific stage; therefore, their moral development may be compromised. Kohlberg suggested that an important part of moving through the stages of moral development is discourse that includes moral dilemmas. Allowing students to hear each other’s reasoning for their behaviors, particularly students who have reached the higher stages of moral reasoning, may have an impact on students whose development has temporarily stopped at an earlier stage. Thus, restorative justice practices, which allow the discourse of students’ reasoning for their behavior and the behavior of others, may be a forum for moral development to take place.
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand students’ perceptions of restorative conferences and their merits of changing students' behavior and the students’ rationale for their own behavior. Restorative conferences are conferences with a student who has committed a behavioral infraction or has hurt someone. The goal of the conference is to repair the harm the student has done to someone. While schools continue to use exclusionary practices as a means to discipline students, restorative conferences may be a viable alternative for addressing negative student behavior.

Research Questions

This study proposed three research questions:

1. After urban high school students’ attend a restorative conference, what are their perceptions of the restorative conferences?

2. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on their behaviors?

3. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on the reasoning for their behavior?

Significance of the Study

There are three potential significances to this study. First, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of restorative justice practices used in schools. Thus, adding to the body of research by understanding students’ perceptions of restorative justice practices may be a basis for understanding their complexities in future studies. Second, identifying whether a restorative conference has an impact on students’ behavior may add to the repertoire of student discipline methods and practices currently
in use, many of which have produced negative effects. Finally, understanding whether a restorative conference has an impact on students’ reasoning for their behavior offers insight as to whether a restorative conference has the potential to change students’ rationale for their behavior. In essence, gaining insight into students’ perceptions of restorative conferences and their impact on students’ behavior may provide information as a viable alternative to out-of-school suspension.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Kohlberg’s theory of moral development*—Through the use of moral dilemmas, Lawrence Kohlberg identified three levels and six stages of moral development in adolescents (Kohlberg, 2008).

*Restorative justice*—restorative justice practices allow students who violate school rules to face their victims and correct their offenses. The premise is that perpetrators have an obligation to the community to correct their offenses and that, in so doing, perpetrators will learn from their behavior (Zaslaw, 2010).

*Restorative justice practices*—victim and offender conferencing, circling, and peer mediation are types of meetings in which the goal is to allow the victim and perpetrator ways to rectify the harm that has been done (Zehr, 2002).

*Restorative conference*— Sometimes called “victim–offender conference,” these are meetings that involve a victim and an offender. The goal of the meeting is for the offender to repair the harm he or she has done to the victim.

*Urban school*—schools whose populations are often heterogeneous by race and serve high minority populations, English-language learners, and special education students, as well as a high population of students of low socioeconomic status as
indicated by the percentage of students who receive free or reduced lunches (Kemerer, Sansom, & Kemerer, 2005).

**Chapter Summary**

Throughout the United States, schools use out-of-school suspension to address negative behavior. The idea is that, if a student is removed from school, he or she will learn not to commit a negative behavior. Research supports the idea that suspension has negative effects on students’ behavior and their academic performance. One possible alternative to suspending students out of school is utilizing restorative justice practices. Restorative justice practices allow the offender to repair the harm he or she has done to a person or the community; allowing a student to repair the harm he or she has done to someone or the community may help the student learn from his or her actions and not repeat the behavior.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature, Chapter 3 discusses research methodology. Chapter 4 provides study findings and Chapter 5 discusses implications of the study.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of this literature review is to present the demographics of urban schools and the effects of the current discipline policies and practices used in public schools as a means to change students’ negative behavior. It provides information about the development of zero tolerance policies and the impact exclusionary practices have on specific student populations. In addition, it defines Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (1958) as it relates to high school students’ behavior. The chapter concludes with studies of the restorative justice practices used in the juvenile justice system and schools.

Review of the Literature

Education systems in urban U.S. schools are complex systems due to bureaucracy and diverse student populations. National data indicates that there are more incidents of violence in urban schools (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, and Morgan, 2013). An ethos of fear of violence in schools promoted the Safe School Gun Free 1994 Act that created school discipline policies and practices and attempted to prevent violence. These school discipline policies and practices called zero tolerance have not had positive results (Cameron, 2006). The results of school discipline policies and practices have had adverse effects on students of color and students with disabilities (APA, 2008; Lee et al. 2011; Suh et al., 2014 ). Some schools have begun to implement restorative justice practices to reverse the potential negative effects of zero tolerance policies (Zaslaw, 2010).
**Urban schools.** Urban school districts are defined by their location and demographics. Urban areas by definition are located in a dense population area of at least 1,000 individuals per square mile (Kincheloe, 2007). Urban districts and schools have large student enrollments and serve larger percentages of minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged students than suburban and rural school districts (Jacob, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007). Using data from the National Center of Educational Statistics, Siwatu (2011) created a portrait that compares urban and suburban school districts (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1

*Portrait of Urban and Suburban School Districts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban School District</th>
<th>Suburban School District</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- 28% and 29% of students enrolled in urban schools are African American and Hispanics, respectively.</td>
<td>- 12% and 15% of students enrolled in suburban schools are African American and Hispanics, respectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Students are less likely to share the same cultural and linguistic background as their teachers.</td>
<td>- Students are likely to share the same cultural and linguistic background as their teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 56% of students in urban schools participate in the free or reduced-priced lunch program.</td>
<td>- 32% of students in suburban schools participate in the free or reduced-priced lunch program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 17% of students are limited in English proficiency.</td>
<td>- 8% of students are limited in English proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- 40% of students in urban schools participate in a federally funded program designed to assist students who are at risk of failing to meet state academic standards.</td>
<td>- 20% of students in suburban schools participate in a federally funded program designed to assist students who are at risk of failing to meet state academic standards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another example of the difference in urban school districts compared to other school districts comes from the State of New York. According to the New York State Education Department (2015), half of the entire student population educated in New York State resides in these five cities: New York City, Yonkers, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. These are also known as the “Big 5 School Districts of New York State.”

Table 2.2 compares the five largest cities in New York State to 945 other school districts combined. As indicated in Table 2.2, in New York State, urban school districts serve the majority of African American and Hispanic students in the state.

Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Big 5 School Districts of New York State</th>
<th>945 Other School Districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>1,026,114</td>
<td>1,456,334</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>11,164</td>
<td>34,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African</td>
<td>290,854</td>
<td>131,021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>165,155</td>
<td>75,191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>417,780</td>
<td>139,741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>141,161</td>
<td>1,075,962</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adapted from www.nysed.gov (2015).*

Researchers have identified other attributes of urban schools settings; for example, urban schools are more likely to serve poorer communities and have fewer resources than suburban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996).

Finally, violence and disruptions are more prevalent in urban schools. A national survey by Robers et al., (2013) found differences between African American and White
students who reported being in a physical fight. For example, 35% of African American students indicated that they were involved in a physical fight, while 21% of White students reported that they were involved in a physical fight. The same study found that 5% of African American and Hispanic students reported being afraid of an attack or being harmed at school, while 3% of White students reported being afraid of being attacked at school (Robers et al., 2013).

Essentially, more than half of urban high school students are from minority ethnic groups. In addition, these schools serve poorer communities and have higher incidents of physical violence (Robers et al., 2013). Also, there is a greater perceived fear of harm indicated by students in urban schools than by those in suburban or rural areas (Robers et al., 2013). In an effort to reduce the number of behavioral infractions such as fighting and other mischievous behaviors, school personnel have attempted a variety of interventions. The most popular way to address negative behaviors in school is creating policies stating that, when a student commits a negative behavior, there are punitive consequences. These policies are called zero tolerance policies.

**School discipline policies.** According to Zaslaw (2010), since the late 1990s, schools have used zero tolerance policies as a method to combat negative student behavior; however, zero tolerance policies have not produced positive results or changes in student behavior. In fact, Zaslaw stated that zero tolerance policies for student behavior in schools have actually caused an increase in disciplinary action. Likewise, zero tolerance policies implemented in schools have had negative effects and have increased the recidivism of negative behaviors.
An annual study of school violence, sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Institute of Education Sciences in the U.S. Department of Education and the Bureau of Justice and Statistics during the 2008–2009 school year reported 38 violent deaths associated with schools. Likewise, during the 2009–2010 school year, there were 33 violent deaths associated with schools (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012). The researchers also collected data on other behaviors such as assault, theft, possession of a weapon, or drugs, bullying, and harassment. Of students in grades 9–12, 8% had at one point reported being threatened or even injured with a deadly weapon, such as a knife, gun, or a blunt weapon on school property. Around 7% of urban teachers and 6% of rural teachers reported the same. Additionally, there was no significant decline in any of these data points measuring as far back as 1992 (Robers et al., 2012).

The reality is that the punitive school discipline system evolved out of this context (Cameron, 2006). Given the extreme nature of the disciplinary offenses mentioned, it seemed that the simple response was to offer harsher punishments. Simply put, schools take disciplinary actions against the perpetrators of violence, aggression, and even minor behavioral infractions in an effort to extinguish these behaviors.

Noguera (2003) explained that school disciplinary practices share similarities with the criminal justice systems used to punish adults. A current school practice to address behavioral infractions typically involves some form of exclusionary practice. For minor disciplinary infractions, school personnel often exclude students from the classroom by placing them in secluded rooms, typically called in-school suspension, or having them sit in the principal’s office. For more serious behavioral infractions, such as fighting and
verbal aggression, students are suspended out of school for a certain period of time. This type of exclusionary practice mimics the adult penal system by removing a person from the location where the infraction occurs in an effort to rehabilitate him or her so that the behavior will not occur in the future. However, Cameron (2006) mentioned that exclusionary practices such as out-of-school suspension may not be effective in dealing with the actual issues. In fact, disciplinary methods such as out-of-school suspension in U.S. public schools even contributed further to reinforcing the behavioral issues (APA, 2008). Moreover, disciplinary policies that exclude students from school also exclude them from learning. Thus, school discipline policies that call for the exclusion of students for committing a violation of a school policy may have a negative impact on the students’ learning (Cameron, 2006).

Researchers have attempted to quantify and characterize school discipline policies. For example, Fenning et al. (2012) researched the discipline policies of 120 high schools that represented rural and urban communities from six different states. The researchers collected discipline policies or codes of conduct from each of the sample high schools. They then used an instrument to understand school discipline policies and procedures, and this instrument identified whether school discipline policies were consequential or responsive in nature. A consequential student discipline policy refers to a student committing a behavioral infraction and receiving a consequence, such as an out-of-school suspension. Responsive school discipline policies use approaches such as peer mediation, social skill building, or conferencing. Overall, the results of the study indicated that, across all states in the study, punitive measures, such as suspension and expulsion, were used more frequently, even in instances of minor disciplinary infractions.
such as tardiness and truancy (Fenning et al., 2012). In addition, the study identified the intent of schools’ actions when a student committed a behavioral infraction. The researchers concluded that the intent of most school discipline policies is to punish students who commit behavioral infractions in an effort to change their behavior.

Similarly, Nickerson and Spears (2007) stated that school discipline policies throughout the United States were often limited to an authoritarian approach that often restricted autonomy and used punitive measures to control behavior. This type of discipline practice, often called zero tolerance, results in students being automatically suspended from school if they disrupt, hit, punch, bully, or violate any rule the school has set (Nickerson & Spears, 2007). The researchers asserted that, in many states, when students break rules, many of which involve the most volatile issues of aggression, such as fighting or hitting, they are often brought to the administrator’s office, where some type of punishment is administered—the goal being to teach the student not to violate the rules again (Nickerson & Spears, 2007). While the school discipline policies dictate the consequences a student will receive, disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspension are evident in the discipline practice or implementation of the discipline policies.

**School discipline practices.** Written policies are in place to guide practice, however, the discipline practice, or follow through of the discipline policies, is where overuse of out-of-school suspension is evident. Nickerson and Spears (2007) used the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) public-use data files to study the extent to which authoritarian practices regarding school violence differ from educational or therapeutic approaches. The researchers used data from 2,270 public school principals throughout the United States. In the study, the researchers asked principals to indicate
whether they used specific procedures in their schools, such as the use of metal detectors, random searches, out-of-school suspensions, and detention. In addition, the study analyzed whether the schools used specific therapeutic programs to reduce violence (Nickerson & Spears, 2007). The results indicated that over 80% of the schools used punitive measures when dealing with minor behavioral infractions. Additionally, over 60% of the schools used suspension regularly for behavioral infractions, and 26% of the schools reported excluding students from their current schools completely by transferring them to different ones (Nickerson & Spears, 2007).

Anyon et al. (2014) examined school discipline processes in an urban school district. The researchers analyzed over 80,000 students in grades K–12 enrolled in public schools in Denver, Colorado. The researchers collected data including socioeconomics, race, special education services, and discipline. The results of the study indicated that out-of-school suspension was used more frequently than any other form of discipline. Suspension was used in reaction to a large range of students’ negative behavior, including defiance, class disruptions, verbal and physical aggression, the use and sale of drugs, destruction of school property, and possession of weapons. During the 2011–2012 school year, over 10,000 students were sent to the principal’s office for disciplinary action, and 46% were suspended out of school. Moreover, the study found that students were more likely to be suspended if they were a minority. The findings suggested that practices such as out-of-school suspension inadvertently target specific subgroups of a population.

**Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994.** School discipline policies and practices were developed in an effort to keep schools safe. Again, the idea is that, if a student commits a negative behavior, excluding that student from school will help the student learn from his
or her mistake and not commit the behavior again. To reinforce this notion, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 requires that all states receiving federal funds for education have a law that requires any student who is in possession of a firearm be expelled from school for one year. The act states that the expulsion is mandatory; however, the local school district may modify the term of the expulsion on a case-by-case basis (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Mongan and Walker (2012) studied the development of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 as well as the institutionalization of zero tolerance policies in schools from a historical perspective, identifying specific court cases that had a direct correlation to the development and implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools. According to Mongan and Walker, the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was to assert control over students in schools, especially in large urban schools, where the ethos during that time was of uncontrollable students regularly committing violent crimes. Mongan and Walker argued that the institution of zero tolerance policies was to serve as a deterrent, meaning that, if students were excluded from school for behavioral infractions, then the school would be less likely to have a violent incident. In addition, the language used within the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, and subsequent court case decisions, reinforced the impression that zero tolerance policies provide a safe school environment by allowing school personnel to expel students for possession of a weapon, regardless of what they intended to do with the weapon (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

The logic that supports the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and zero tolerance policies is that, if a student in a school commits a behavioral infraction, the student should receive punishment and will subsequently learn not to commit the infraction
again. There is support that this concept—if we punish the perpetrator, he or she will not repeat the behavior—has further evolved in U.S. public schools after the media covered school shootings in the early 1990s (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). Triplett et al. (2014) studied national school shootings between the 1990s and 2011 and focused on: (a) identifying whether school shootings overall were in urban or suburban areas and, (b) determining whether these events assisted the institutionalization of zero tolerance policies in urban schools. Triplett et al. used school shooting data from the early 1990s to 2011 and identified 116 school shootings between these dates and identified the population and geographic information for each school incident. They classified these incidents into four major categories: urban, suburban, town, or rural school districts. Triplett et al. (2014) determined that “72 incidences happened in rural or suburban schools, while 44 instances occurred in urban settings” (p. 385). The results of the study indicated that school shootings over the past decade were predominantly in suburban and rural schools, even though urban school districts had adopted and had maintained zero tolerance policies over the previous two decades under the pretense that schools would be safer (Triplett et al., 2014).

Triplett et al. (2014) noted that, as evidenced by the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education, inequalities in U.S. public schools exist, and policies implemented due to school shootings may reinforce inequities. The researchers contended that zero tolerance policies created after Brown v. Board of Education have continued to instigate racial injustices, particularly in urban areas. Moreover, zero tolerance policy mandates from federal and state governments instituted policies to deter drugs, weapons, and gang violence, and school shootings in the 1990s, reinforced the belief that zero tolerance
policies were a method to make schools safe. In addition, Triplett et al. contended that media coverage of school shootings during the 1990s instilled the notion that schools were unsafe and that increases in security measures must be taken, including zero tolerance policies for possession of weapons. However, local governments and boards of education have also interpreted the 1994 Gun-Free Safe School’s Act for zero tolerance for weapons possession as zero tolerance for minor infractions, such as excessive noise, vandalism, vulgar language, loitering, and disrespectful behavior (Triplett et al., 2014).

**Zero tolerance policies and racial disparities.** According to Skiba, Eaton, and Sotoo (2004), the majority of the research has cited results indicating that students from African American and Latino families are more likely than their White peers to receive suspension as a consequence for the same or a similar problem behavior. Over a 25-year period, according to national, state, district, and building-level data, students of color have received suspensions at rates 2 to 3 times higher than that of other students. The documentation of disciplinary overrepresentation of African American students has been highly consistent (Skiba et al., 2004).

Hoffman (2014) and Skiba et al. (2011) studied the effects of zero tolerance policies on students from different racial backgrounds. Hoffman (2014) hypothesized that, due to the growth of zero tolerance policies as a disciplinary practice in urban school districts, African American students would be suspended more often than White students. In addition, Hoffman hypothesized that increased use of zero tolerance policies would increase the percentage of minority students suspended out of school. Likewise, Skiba et al. (2011) studied racial and ethnic disparities in office referrals and disciplinary actions
taken by school administrators from a national database of 436 schools with more than 120,000 students.

Hoffman (2014) found that more African American students were recommended for expulsion in grades 7–12 during all 3 years of the study. Further, Hoffman found that, during the inception years of zero tolerance policies, there was an overall increase in recommendations for expulsions from school. However, whereas White and Hispanic expulsion recommendation rates increased only slightly, the expulsion recommendation rate for African American students doubled. Hence, Hoffman concluded that the use of zero tolerance policies in urban schools had a negative effect on African American students.

Skiba et al. (2011) categorized the types of behavior for which students were referred to the office for disciplinary action. They identified that students were referred to the office for minor misbehaviors, such as disruptions; noncompliance; moderate disciplinary infractions; major violations; and possession of weapons or drugs. The results of the study indicated that African American students in grades 6–9 were more likely to receive a harsher consequence than those of their White peers. Additionally, in kindergarten to fifth grade, African American students had approximately 4 times the odds of being suspended from school for minor disciplinary infractions than their White peers (Skiba et al., 2011).

In response to the disproportionate rates of suspension identified in research, the APA task force conducted an extensive review of the literature dating back as far as 1993, when zero tolerance policies began to be instituted in schools (APA, 2008). Additionally, the task force drew from national datasets that accounted for race, age,
gender, disability, and socioeconomic status and reviewed questionnaires regarding school climate and parental support for zero tolerance policies. The task force found that students rated their schools as less satisfactory in regard to climate when the schools used out-of-school suspension as a tool. When studies controlled for socioeconomic status, the same phenomena remained consistent, that is, when schools used suspension as a means to discipline, students had a less-satisfactory rating for school climate (APA, 2008).

Regarding differences based on student characteristics, the APA task force found that African American students were disciplined more severely for less serious behavioral infractions than any other group. Moreover, African American students were suspended out of school and rated their schools as less satisfactory when disciplinary practices such as out-of-school suspension were used.

**Zero tolerance policies and students with disabilities.** Students with disabilities are suspended out of school more frequently than non-disabled students. Studies that focus on students with disabilities indicated that students with emotional disabilities are often suspended out of school more frequently and for the same behaviors as their non-disabled peers. Moreover, when students with disabilities are suspended, they are more likely to be suspended in the future. Essentially, suspending students with disabilities had no effect on correcting students’ negative behaviors (APA, 2008; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014).

Sullivan et al. (2014) studied the effect of out-of-school suspensions on students with disabilities. The researchers hypothesized that patterns and predictions for out-of-school suspension would occur for specific disability types, race, socioeconomic status, and school characteristics. To study this hypothesis, the researchers used archival data
from 39 urban schools in Wisconsin. They first examined students with disability types and categorized them by race, gender, and socioeconomic status. After categorization, they included the number of suspensions for students of each disability type. Finally, the researchers included variables for school characteristics. The results indicated students classified with emotional disabilities and “Other Health Impaired” (OHI) were 3 times more likely to receive multiple suspensions than other disability types. Moreover, African American students were approximately four times more likely to be suspended than White students with similar disabilities.

Bowman-Perrott et al. (2013) studied students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. The goal of the study was to identify differences in any of these three groups of disabilities regarding out-of-school suspensions over time. The researchers used data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS), which was a nationwide data collection collected between the school years 1999–2000 and 2004–2005 and sampled students 6 to 12 years old. Data were collected in three waves, with 1 to 2 years between each wave. Participants in the study were selected first by a stratified random sampling of over 1,000 educational agencies. The results of the study indicated that students in the first wave who were suspended, were more likely to be suspended in the second and third waves. Additionally, the results indicated that students identified as learning disabled had higher odds of out-of-school suspension as a consequence in waves one and two compared to students with emotional disabilities and ADHD. Moreover, the ADHD group had higher odds of being suspended during waves two and three than learning disabled or emotionally disabled students. Emotionally disabled students who were suspended out of
school were more likely to be suspended out of school in all three waves of the study. In essence, out-of-school suspension predicts the possibility that students will be excluded from school, particularly students with disabilities.

Krezmien, Leone, and Achilles (2006) investigated students with disabilities using statewide archival data from Maryland. The researchers gathered data from students who were suspended out of school. The data from 2001–2003 was segregated by race and by disability. The researchers analyzed data by calculating the number of students who had been suspended per 1,000 students and then categorized them by race and disability separately, and then by race and disability together. Overall, suspension rates for the state of Maryland increased from over 85,000 in 1995 to over 130,000 in 2003, an approximate 59% increase during a 9-year period. Additionally, suspension rates were higher for students with emotional disabilities and African Americans. Students who were identified as both health impaired and African American were twice as likely to be suspended out of school than those categorized with the same disability but a different race. Likewise, a student identified as learning disabled and African American was more likely to be suspended out of school than a learning disabled student who was not African American. Hence, the state of Maryland showed that overall suspension rates for students with disabilities were higher than suspension rates for students who were not identified with a disability, regardless of race.

**Zero tolerance policies and their effects on academic achievement.**

Researchers have identified that zero tolerance policies have negative effects on students’ academic performances. While the goal of zero tolerance policies is to maintain order in schools and address students’ negative behavior, students cannot learn if they are not in
school (APA, 2008; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014). Thus, policies that exclude students from school also exclude them from time-in-class learning.

Triplett et al. (2014) noted that exclusionary discipline practices from zero tolerance policies have a negative effect on student learning. Exclusionary practices increase the time students spend unsupervised and decrease the time students spend in an academic setting. Additionally, Gregory et al. (2010) identified that repeated suspensions increase the risk of academic failure. The researchers studied two demographically similar cohorts matched on gender, race, grade level, socioeconomic status, and limited English proficiency. The researchers then compared the group of students who had received at least one suspension with another group of students who had received no suspensions. In the first year of the study, the group of students suspended out of school was three grade levels behind in the subject of reading compared to students who were not suspended. Moreover, they were approximately five grade levels behind in reading levels 2 years later. The researchers stated that suspension may have initiated or maintained students’ processes of withdrawal from learning.

In the same study, Gregory et al. (2010) indicated that suspensions from school might hurt students’ learning—suspended students may become less connected to school, less likely to obey school rules, and, consequently, less motivated to achieve academically. Students who are less connected to school may also be more likely to turn to criminal activities and become less likely to experience academic success. Finally, the researchers found that students who were suspended were more likely to be suspended again in the future. Moreover, the findings suggested that African American students
were 3 times more likely to be suspended out of school for similar behaviors as White students. Thus, the type of action school administrators take in regard to disciplining students may impact their academic success.

Lee, Gregory, and Fan (2011) studied the correlation between students’ suspension rates and dropout rates using 289 public high schools located in Virginia. Lee et al. hypothesized that schools that implemented zero tolerance policies would have higher dropout rates than those that did not (Lee et al., 2011). To investigate the correlation between student suspension and dropout rates, the researchers sampled 25 ninth-grade students from each of the 289 schools in the study. They surveyed approximately 2,000 students using the Aggressive Attitudes Scale, which assessed students’ attitudes about their personal feelings toward aggressive behavior. In addition, the researchers compared schools with high suspension rates to schools with low suspension rates and found that “schools typically suspended approximately 22% of their students over the course of the school year had a dropout rate (3.52) that was 56% greater than the dropout rate (2.26) for schools that suspended only 9% of the students” (Lee et al., 2011, p. 184). Thus, the results indicated that schools that used suspension as a primary disciplinary tool increased dropout rates for all students.

More specifically, Lee et al. (2011) compared schools with high suspension rates to schools with low suspension rates and found that schools with low suspension rates also had low dropout rates. Also, schools with high suspension rates had higher dropout rates. According to Lee et al., this finding suggests that suspending a student increases the likelihood that student will drop out. Additionally, the researchers found that ninth-grade students’ attitudes are an important factor in the dropout rate. The researchers
concluded that students who have more aggressive attitudes have a higher rate of misbehavior, possibly leading to suspension and later dropping out of school.

Although Lee et al. (2011) found a correlation between students who were suspended and their dropping out of school later, the study did not show that the cause of students’ dropping out was the suspension itself. Some researchers have identified a causal relationship between zero tolerance policies and the widening of the achievement gap between African American students and White students (Suh, Malchow, & Suh, 2014). Suh et al. (2014) studied the causes of the widening gap between African American students and White students using national longitudinal surveys of youth data from two specific cohorts from 1979 and 1997. Over 11,000 students were analyzed in this study. The researchers analyzed the two cohorts’ dropout rates, which indicated that in 1979 the dropout rate was 15% and 17% for White and African American students, respectively, resulting in an approximate 2% racial gap. However, in 1997 the rates for both cohorts saw a decrease. Approximately 9% of White students dropped out, whereas 14% of African American students dropped out, thus increasing the gap between White and African American students by approximately 5%. The researchers also noted the establishment of zero tolerance policies in schools between the years 1979 and 1997. For those two cohorts, suspensions for African American students increased by more than 30%, leading Suh et al. to conclude that one of the causes of the dropout gap between White and African American students was the implementation and use of out-of-school suspensions. Additionally, African American students comprised 17% of the total student population and accounted for 34% of all out-of-school suspensions. Hence,
African American students were over 3 times more likely to be suspended out of school than White students when zero tolerance policies were implemented (Suh et al., 2014).

As a result of zero tolerance policies, students were suspended disproportionately and dropout rates increased for low socioeconomic students and students with disabilities (APA, 2008; Lee et al. 2011; Suh et al., 2014). Hence, questions arise as to what approaches might impact students’ behavior and their reasoning for that behavior.

**Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning.** Lawrence Kohlberg (1958) hypothesized that human beings develop moral reasoning in stages. Kohlberg’s theory is divided into three levels: pre-conventional moral reasoning, conventional moral reasoning, and post-conventional moral reasoning. Within each level, there are two stages; thus, a total of six stages make up Kohlberg’s theory of moral reasoning. Kohlberg studied 84 male participants from 1958 until 1978, proposing the same moral dilemmas and capturing the male participants’ responses. Additionally, studies have been done adding subjects with cultural and gender differences. For example, Bergling (1981) used data from Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands to compare over 1,000 males and females ages 10 to 16. After the statistical analysis of all the data points, Bergling (1981) concluded that “Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, describing the step-by-step development of moral judgment for early childhood to adolescence, has found considerable support and seems to be fundamental to instructional planning throughout the school ages” (p. 86).

Moreover, in a longitudinal study of more than 20 years, researcher James Rest noted how scores have proven favorable for Kohlberg’s theory. After an extensive review of the literature of more than 70 studies, after controlling for gender biases,
Kohlberg’s theory of moral development was found to be correct (Rest, 1986). In addition, Rest stated, “at this time, it is clear that Kohlberg and his associates have succeeded grandly in what they originally set out to do” (Rest, 1986 p. 468).

Cohn, Bucolo, Rebellon, and Van Gundy (2010) conducted a study with over 200 high school students using Kohlberg’s theory and identified that moral reasoning may predict school rule-violating behaviors. The researchers surveyed students three times during the course of one year, and they concluded that high school students who have high levels of moral reasoning are less likely to violate school rules (Cohn et al., 2010).

**Restorative justice practices.** According to Zaslaw (2010), zero tolerance policies have not produced positive results or changes in student behavior; instead, they caused an increase in disciplinary action and have produced negative effects and increased recidivism of negative behavior. However, an emerging practice that has the potential to change students’ behaviors is restorative justice.

Repairing the harm one has done to another is not a new concept. Forgiveness or restoring a relationship has been taught since biblical times. Additionally, restorative justice has its roots in many indigenous cultures: Native American tribes in the United States and Canada, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Aboriginal people of Australia. These indigenous cultures have placed emphases on living in a community and restoring relationships when they are harmed (Strang & Braithwaite, 2001). For hundreds of years, indigenous cultures have used a distinct discourse that takes place between the victim and the offender, with other members of the community present to assist with the discourse and observe the process of reconciliation (Strang & Braithwaite, 2001).

However, the use of restitution or repairing the harm a perpetrator has done to a
victim did not become popular in the justice system until the 1970s (Umbreit, Coates, & Vos, 2007). From the 1970s through the present, the criminal and juvenile justice systems worldwide have used restorative justice practices. During the 1990s, countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and England instituted restorative justice practices, particularly within the juvenile justice system, in an effort to reduce recidivism rates (Bazemore, 1998). Because restorative justice practice is a complex idea, it cannot be defined simply. However, many scholars fundamentally agree that restorative justice practices allow a person to repair the harm he or she has done to the person he or she has hurt. According to Zehr (2002),

> Restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible. (p. 37)

Using this definition of restorative justice, researchers have studied the effects of restorative justice practices in the juvenile justice system.

**Restorative justice practices from the juvenile justice system.** According to Rodriguez (2007), restorative justice practices lowered the recidivism rate in juveniles who participated in a restorative justice program more than in those who did not participate. Rodriguez examined data from the Maricopa County, Arizona, juvenile database that included more than 5,000 adolescents with a mean age of 14. Rodriguez found that participants in restorative justice programs had slightly lower recidivism rates than those who did not participate in these programs. For example, 66% of the juveniles who attended a restorative justice program did not recidivate compared with 64% of the
juveniles in the control group (Rodriguez, 2007). However, the study relied on data from the juvenile courts and did not control for specific offenses, such as drug use or possession; thus, the results may not generalize, so there is a need for further studies that control for more variables. Rodriguez affirmed that restorative justice programs have the potential to reduce recidivism of delinquent behavior.

A report issued by the Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, and Center for Families, Children, & Courts (2000) compared juveniles who committed a crime and participated in a victim–offender reconciliation program, to those who did not participate in a victim–offender reconciliation program in six counties in the state of California. The report stated that, in five of the six counties where students attended a victim–offender reconciliation program, the recidivism rate was much lower than the comparison group’s rates. For example, in Los Angeles County, after 1 year, 23 of the 153 juveniles (15%) who participated in the victim–offender reconciliation program were rearrested as compared to 25 of the 81 juveniles (30%) who were rearrested but did not participate in the program.

**Restorative justice practices in schools.** Carter (2013) noted that, conceptually, restorative justice practices in schools are not clearly defined. In general, the literature suggests that the goal of restorative practices in schools is similar to that of the justice system in that it seeks to improve relationships between students and the community by repairing any harm done to someone. This repair can be done in private or in large groups, often called “circles” or “conferencing.” Carter suggested that the goal of restorative justice practices in schools is to maintain a peaceful atmosphere; thus, when someone has done harm to the community, that person is obligated to repair the harm.
Mirsky and Wachtel (2007) surveyed 919 high school aged students who were released from an alternative school. The adolescents were placed in this specific alternative school through the judicial system, and all of the students were identified as at-risk and had criminal records. The study showed reductions in the recidivism of violent or criminal behavior among adolescents who participated in restorative justice practices. One year later, the study was replicated with 858 discharged students. The findings were congruent with those from the first study, indicating that exposure to restorative justice practices reduced the chance that students would exhibit criminal or delinquent behavior (Mirsky & Wachtel, 2007).

Roland, Rideout, Salinitri, and Frey (2012) studied the effect of restorative justice interventions in seven Canadian schools in southwestern Ontario. Two high schools represented both rural and urban schools, and five elementary schools represented both rural and urban schools. Roland et al. (2012) investigated the effect of restorative justice on students’ personal, social, and academic success by examining students’ academic records and office referrals. The researchers collected data at two different times from September 2008-June 2009 and September 2009-February 2010. According to Roland et al., there was a decrease in the total number of behavioral infractions among students from the first data collection time to the second as well as a decrease in behavioral infractions in the high schools. In addition, 11th grade and 12th grade students’ attendance increased. This study lends support to restorative justice practices as a possible method to decrease the number of behavior infractions and increase attendance rates.

Vaandering (2014) studied restorative justice practices and their effect on teachers’ relationships with students and the culture and climate of a school. The
researcher identified two elementary schools with similar populations of 600 students. The researcher then used on-site observation and semi-structured interviews with school administrators and other school personnel to collect data. Vaandering then coded all of the field notes from the observations and the transcribed semi-structured interviews and concluded that, if the implementation of restorative justice practices was to be effective, schools must shift away from a rule-based hierarchal system of school policies and practices and move toward a culture focused on building students’ relationships with one another and with staff.

**Two specific restorative justice practices used in schools.** There are two predominant restorative justice practices used in schools. The first is called “restorative circles” or, as they are also identified in the literature, “peacemaking circles” or “talking circles.” The restorative circles practice tends to address conflict within the community and is designed to invoke a community dialogue. In a restorative circle, participants are arranged in a circle. Often, they pass a “talking piece” from one participant to another, which assures only one participant speaks at one time. There are also one or two facilitators of the circle called “circle keepers.” The circle keeper discusses an issue within the community or what an individual or individuals in the circle have done. The participants in the circle then discuss how the issue or the harm that was done has affected them. Since restorative circles involve a community, such as a classroom of students, there may be a few outcomes. One outcome of the restorative circle may be to come to a consensus on a topic, such as when students can use cell phones in the class or why some students are late for class. Other topics may include why students feel bullied or offended by their peers. Essentially, a restorative circle encourages participants to
listen to each other to understand all community members’ perspectives to develop consensus and harmony within the community (Zehr, 2002).

The second practice is called “restorative conferencing” or, as it is also identified in the literature, “victim–offender conferencing” or “sentencing circles.” Restorative conferences were initially used in the United States in the criminal justice system. In this context, restorative conferences allowed the victim to confront the perpetrator and express the harm that perpetrator caused. Sometimes, the outcome of a restorative conference would be a signed restitution agreement. Restorative conferences in schools are similar to those used in the criminal justice system. For example, if one student is caught stealing another student’s cell phone, the students would be required to meet with a facilitator, where the victim would express how he or she felt when the other student took the cell phone and the student who committed the violation would express his or her feelings about taking the cell phone. In the end, the perpetrator in this example, would have to provide some agreed-upon restitution in some manner (Zehr, 2002).

**Chapter Summary**

Urban schools are diverse in both race and socioeconomic status. This diversity enhances the complexities of serving urban school students in the schools (Jacob, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007; Siwatu, 2011). While the media coverage of school shootings may have created the ethos that schools are unsafe, the 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act instituted the idea that exclusionary practices, such as expulsion from school, would keep schools safe (Mongan & Walker, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). School districts in the 1990s continued with this notion that exclusionary measures should be used as a means to change students’ negative behavior and began instituting policies, such as zero
tolerance. After three decades of zero tolerance policies instituted in schools, research has identified the negative effects they have had on students of color and students with disabilities (APA, 2008; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Sullivan et al., 2014). Thus, restorative justice practices, the idea that a student should repair the harm he/she has done to someone, may be a positive alternative to suspension.

Chapter 3 will provide the research methodology for this study. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the study and Chapter 5 provides implications of the study.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Dealing with negative behavior in schools is a multifaceted problem that becomes more complex in urban school districts when there are compounding problems, such as poverty, disabilities, and language barriers. Schools are expected to address students’ negative behavior. Recent studies have shown that suspending students out of school has negative effects. One possible alternative to suspension is restorative justice practices (Anyon et al., 2014; APA, 2008; Robers et al., 2012).

This study focused on urban high school students’ perceptions of restorative conferences. The study used qualitative research methods, specifically face-to-face semi-structured interviews, to study students’ perceptions of restorative conferences. Qualitative research seeks to understand complex problems when variables cannot be easily identified or measured (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Taylor, Bodgan & DeVault, 2015) understanding how students describe their experience and how they feel after attending a restorative conference is one such complex problem. Interactions among people are difficult to capture and measure because there are no instruments to capture an individual’s thoughts, opinions, or actions. Qualitative research studies have the potential to capture peoples’ thoughts and feelings that are often overlooked when reducing individuals to a number or a statistic (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Taylor, Bodgan & DeVault, 2015). This study’s primary goal was to capture student participants’ thoughts, feelings, and rationale for their behavior after they participated in a restorative conference. Moreover, the analysis of the
data, which included direct reporting and coding of the student participants’ responses, allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth study of students’ experiences with restorative conferences.

**Research Context**

In accordance with the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board, and the participating school district’s research review process, the school district, school and students must all have pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of all involved. Thus, the school district, school, and students in this study all have aliases. The school district is referred to as Central City School District, the school is referred to as Franklin High School, and the students are each designated by a letter of the alphabet.

The Central City School District comprises 33 schools with approximately 21,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. Franklin High School is one of five high schools in the Central City School District and has a total student population of approximately 1,100 students: 41% African American, 22% White, 20% Hispanic, 15% Asian, and 2% multiracial. There are more than 100 students with special needs, and 81% of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. The graduation rate for the 2014–15 school year was approximately 40%, and there were almost of 1,400 days of out-of-school suspensions for the 2014–15 school year.

According to Mulder (2014), in a report from the New York State Attorney General’s Office, the Central City School District suspends more students out of school than any other city in the nation. During the 2015–16 school year, Franklin High School implemented restorative justice practices in an effort to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions. A full-time staff member who is trained in restorative justice
practices was hired at Franklin to conduct restorative conferences with students. At Franklin, when a student is referred to the principal’s office for a behavioral infraction, a school administrator or a teacher may request a restorative conference with a trained facilitator as an alternative to suspension. In most cases, the behavior intervention specialist, who is trained in restorative conferencing, facilitates the conference at Franklin High School. The goal of the conference is for the student who committed the behavioral infraction to repair the harm he or she has done. At the beginning of the conference, the facilitator explains the general rules for the meeting, such as who will speak first and the overall purpose of the meeting. Typically, after the general rules are established, the facilitator explains why the victim and the offender are having the restorative conference and then allows the person who has caused the harm to speak. Then, the student who committed the infraction has a chance to explain what happened from his or her perspective and to attempt to repair the harm that he or she has done.

At Franklin High School, when a student attends a restorative conference, the behavior intervention specialist, an adult who is trained in restorative conferencing, informs the students about the rules of the conference, which simply consist of allowing one person to speak at a time and that everyone must listen to the person speaking. At Franklin, the adult will usually ask the student who caused the harm to speak first and explain how he or she feels and what he or she will do to repair the harm they have done. The victim will then respond to the student, and the conversation will continue until there is consensus among the students. In most incidents at Franklin High School restorative conferences occurred the day the incident happened. For example, when a student participant threatened another student and was sent to the principal’s office by a teacher
the student participant met with an administrator. The administrator met with the student participant and requested a restorative conference with the behavior intervention specialist. The behavior intervention specialist then facilitated the restorative conference.

**Research Participants**

The researcher conducted a purposeful sample to select student participants for the study. According to Gentles, Charles Ploeg and McKibbon (2015), a purposeful sampling is used to select participants that have knowledge of a particular topic or had lived experiences that match the researcher’s area of study. In this study, the researcher selected 10 urban high school students who attended no more than two restorative conferences in Phase 1. The rationale for selecting students who had no more than two restorative conferences is that they may recall the one or two experience with a restorative conference with more clarity. The justification to not select students who attended multiple restorative conferences was the possibility of the students becoming confused between the various restorative conferences.

The selection of the 10 student participants occurred in two phases. Phase 1 identified student participants with disciplinary code violations and participation in restorative justice practices. During Phase 2, individual student’s profiles were created, and participants were selected.

Phase 1 consisted of two parts:

1. The researcher requested from the school principal, a list of students who committed a discipline code violation during the 2014–15 school year and then committed a similar infraction during the 2015–16 school year.
2. The researcher cross-referenced the principal’s list of students with the
school’s social worker and assistant principal, who identified students who attended a restorative conference. It is possible that students attended multiple restorative conferences; however, for this study, the researcher selected only students who attended one or two restorative conferences. The purpose of selecting only students who had only attended one or two conferences is that they recalled their experience of a restorative conference with less confusion. (See Appendix A.)

Phase 2 consisted of two parts:

1. The researcher generated lists of students based on the identification of potential participants in the first phase.

2. The researcher completed a student information form for each student listed in part one (see Appendix B). The student information form included the following: age, gender, race, grade, date, and a detailed account of the behavioral infraction that resulted in a restorative conference.

Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) indicated that qualitative studies that use interviews as a means to collect data can establish trustworthiness by interviewing participants until data saturation is reached. Data saturation is defined as the point at which data from interviews are replicated or redundancy occurs. There is no consensus among qualitative researchers as to a specific sample size that will establish data saturation for a study; nevertheless, qualitative research generally agrees that a number of factors can affect the number of interviews needed to achieve data saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). For example, the quality of interviews, procedures to select participants, and time needed to conduct the research need consideration to justify the
sample size for a qualitative research study. In this study, conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with students who attended one or two restorative conferences during the 2015–16 school year provided adequate information to achieve data saturation.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The researcher created semi-structured interview questions to collect data from the participants and submitted these questions to a trained restorative justice trainer for review of and feedback on the questions. According to Roller and Lavrakas (2015), it is advisable for qualitative researchers to consult with experts or peers in the field when deciding how constructs should be measured.

The researcher used two procedures to capture the data from the semi-structured interviews. Two digital recorders were used. If there were technical problems with one recorder during an interview, then the second recorder provided a backup of the data. In addition, the researcher took field notes during each interview to capture participants’ nonverbal gestures. Both the digital recorder and the field notes will be stored in a locked container in the researcher’s home for a period of 3 years.

The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews individually and face-to-face. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing all participants to express their feelings, perceptions, and the rationale for their behavior after a restorative conference. The researcher required informed consent by both the student and their parents or guardians. The researcher explained the purpose of the study that all interviews are confidential, and that pseudonyms will be given to all participants in the study so that confidentiality will be maintained. The researcher also explained to all participants that
they are volunteers and that they do not have to answer any questions if they do not want to respond.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in six stages. Stage 1 began with general inquiries about the participants’ personal situation in order to build rapport with each student participant so as to better facilitate an open conversation about restorative conferences. During Stage 2 specific questions reminded the student participant of the incident of misconduct. (This information was gleaned from the data collected during the selection process.) The purpose of these questions was to prompt the student participants to remember the situations that caused them to break a school rule and required them to experience a restorative conference. In Stage 3 the researcher asked specific questions about the student participants’ perceptions of the restorative conferences in an effort to collect their thoughts and feelings about their participation in a restorative conference. During Stage 4 the researcher asked questions about how the student participants felt after participating in a restorative conference and whether it had any impact on their behavior. In Stage 5 questions were asked about the participants’ rationale for their behavior and whether the restorative conference had an impact on them. In Stage 6 participants were asked whether they had additional thoughts and feelings regarding restorative conferences. Appendix C includes examples of these semi-structured questions.

The researcher developed semi-structured interview questions through interviews done with restorative justice trainers. The researcher shared the purpose of the study with three restorative justice trainers, and each gave the researcher examples of questions they would ask students who attended a restorative conference to solicit feedback from the
students regarding their perspective of the conference. In addition, the restorative justice trainers gave examples of questions they would ask student participants to solicit feedback on whether the restorative conference had an impact on the students’ behavior and their rationale for their behavior. The researcher then created a matrix from the notes taken during the interviews and created preliminary questions. These questions were shared with the restorative justice trainers and edited. Protocols and questions that were asked in the semi-structured interviews are provided in Appendix C. Appendix D highlights the list of questions for each associated stage. Appendix E is the letter of approval from the school district and Appendix F is the letter of support from the school principal.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis took place in three stages. During Stage 1, the researcher read and reread the transcripts of the interviews to become intimate with the data. The researcher then used a descriptive coding method. Descriptive coding means closely studying the data and comparing them for similarities and differences. Descriptive coding is intended to be a starting point to provide the researcher with codes or themes for further investigation (Saldaña, 2012).

Stage 2 employed pattern coding. According to Saldaña (2012), pattern codes are explanations or codes that make inferences from emerging themes. Pattern coding is useful as a secondary coding process to assist the researcher in identifying major themes, examining explanations in the data, and identifying patterns of human relationships. Thus, in Stage 2 the researcher sought to develop patterns or themes from the four datasets identified in Stage 1.
Finally, during Stage 3 the researched used a coding method called *codeweaving*. According to Saldaña (2012), codeweaving is a method used to interpret how individual components of the study weave together by integrating key code words and phrases into a narrative form. In this stage, the goal was to identify major themes in the study and search for themes in the data that addressed the research questions.

**Trustworthiness.** According to Creswell (2007) and Roller and Lavarakas (2015), to establish trustworthiness, the study must have credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. If these four elements are established within a qualitative research study, then the findings may be more relevant and could add to the body of literature on restorative justice practices used in schools.

**Credibility.** The credibility of qualitative research refers to the data collection aspects of the research design and whether the research questions are investigated accurately. Credibility is established in a qualitative research study by ensuring that the defined targeted populations are studied and that the data gathered are aligned to the research questions (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). In this study, credibility was established by the participant selection process. Student participants who had a disciplinary infraction during the 2014–2015 school year and the 2015–2016 school year and who also attended a restorative conference during the 2015–2016 school year were selected to participate. By selecting participants in this manner, credibility was established because the research questions asked in the study were focused on student participants who experienced a restorative conference.

In addition, the semi-structured research questions were developed in collaboration with restorative justice trainers. Specifically, the restorative justice trainers
assisted with the development of the questions that were asked to student participants and were focused on the topic of the perceptions of restorative conferences. Thus, the creation of the interview protocols also established the credibility of the study.

**Transferability.** Transferability refers to the accuracy of the data collected and to what extent the data can be generalized or applied in other settings (Creswell, 2007). Peer debriefing and reflexive journaling are two ways this study established transferability.

According to Roller and Lavrakas (2015), peer debriefing uses an impartial peer who is an expert in the subject area and is known to be objective and rigorous to provide feedback to the researcher. In this study, the researcher employed the expertise of a restorative justice trainer to review proposed semi-structured interview questions.

Roller and Lavrakas (2015) stated that a reflexive journal is a written document that researchers use to judge the quality of the data gathered. Specifically, a reflexive journal gathers data on the researcher’s process and provides written details about what happened during the work in the field. Therefore, after each semi-structured interview, the researcher wrote in a reflexive journal to note the data-gathering process.

**Dependability.** Dependability, which focuses on the data-gathering process, is a measure of the researcher’s success in ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, Creswell (2007) stated that dependability is the ability to demonstrate that the study can be replicated. A proposed method for establishing dependability is the use of an external audit (Shenton, 2004). During each stage of the data collection and analysis process, the researcher consulted a trained
restorative justice trainer and an experienced qualitative researcher to confirm that the
data collection and the analysis were consistent with the research questions.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability establishes that the data was analyzed
deliberately and methodically; it also establishes that the results of the study can be traced
back to the data collected (Shenton, 2004). This study used an audit trail when the
findings were completed. The audit trail is a visual representation of the process for data
interpretation and the findings from the study. Thus, the audit trail demonstrates where
major themes and findings were gathered from the data collected.

**Positionality of the researcher.** The researcher is a high school principal in the
Central City School District, however, the study did not take place at the researcher’s
high school. In addition, since it is possible that students can transfer from one high
school to another, the researcher checked student participants’ records and did not select
students who had attended the researcher’s high school. Informed consent was obtained
from both parents and students. Confidentiality was explained to all participants along
with the role of the researcher versus the role of a school official. At the start of and
throughout the interview process, the researcher acknowledged the power difference by
addressing it openly and honestly. The researcher verbalized to the student participants
why he was researching restorative conferences as well as his interest in understanding
restorative conferences from the students’ perspectives.

**Chapter Summary**

This qualitative study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews to gain an
understanding of students’ perceptions of restorative conferences. The researcher
selected 10 students from an urban high school to participate in this study, and the student
participants were selected using a two-phase process. The student participants were interviewed and the interviews were transcribed. The transcript of the interviews were coded and then analyzed using a three-stage process.

In Chapter 4 the findings of the study will be discussed in detail and in Chapter 5 the implications of the study are discussed along with recommendations for future use of restorative justice.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to identify urban high school students’ perceptions of restorative conferences and whether a restorative conference had an impact on their behavior or their reasoning for their behavior. Three themes were derived from the analysis of the data obtained from the study.

This chapter describes the types of behavior urban high school students had that led to a restorative conference. It explains the participants’ perceptions of restorative conferences on their behavior and their perceptions of the impact that a restorative conference had on their reasoning for their behavior. Additionally, it will explain student participants’ perceptions of the conditions necessary to have a restorative conference.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. After urban high school students attend a restorative conference, what are their perceptions of the restorative conferences?
2. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on their behaviors?
3. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on the reasoning for their behavior?

Data Analysis and Findings

From the data analyzed three major themes emerged. First, student participants indicated that specific behavior led to a restorative conference. Second, student participants explained the impact if any a restorative conference had on their behavior or
the reasoning for their behavior. Third, student participants explained conditions to have a positive outcome of a restorative conference.

Student participants. All participants in this study had a restorative conference for reasons ranging from minor verbal confrontations to more serious behaviors such as physical attacks. After review of the principal’s list provided from the 2014 – 15 school year and the 2015 – 16 school year, it was found that the student participants’ behavior was similar for all participants both years. For example, if a student committed minor negative infractions during the 2014-15 school year such as tardiness to class, they committed similar minor negative infractions during the 2015 – 16 school year. Likewise, if a student had more serious infractions such as a verbal attack on another student during the 2014 – 15 school year, they had a similar behavior during the 2015 – 16 school year. However, this particular school year Franklin High School had implemented restorative conferences. All student participants volunteered for this study. The researcher provided a description of the study and signed consent was obtained from the student participants as well as his or her parents or guardians. Also, each student participant was similar in that they all qualified for free and reduced lunch and attended the same high school. However, each student participant was unique in their life and school experiences and gave their individual perspectives during face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

In regulation with the Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College and the participating school district’s guidelines, the school and all student participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Thus, the high school in this study was referred to as Franklin High School and student participants were designated by a letter of
the alphabet. Table 4.1 shows all student participants’ demographic data as it relates to race, age, and gender.

Table 4.1

*Student Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant G</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant H</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant J</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identified themes.** This chapter is divided into three themes based on the study’s findings. The first section highlights the incidents that led to a restorative conference. This section describes the types of behaviors that the student participants exhibited that caused staff to intervene and hold a restorative conference. The second section explains student participants’ perceptions of the restorative conference and the impact restorative conference may or may not have had on the student participants’ behavior or their reasoning for their behavior. The third explains student participants’ perceptions of the necessary conditions of a restorative conference to have positive outcomes. Table 4.2 shows the themes and sub-themes of the findings.

Table 4.2
**Summary of Research Questions, Themes and Sub Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. After urban high school students attend a restorative conference, what are their perceptions of the restorative conferences?</td>
<td>Behavior that led to a restorative conference</td>
<td>Student-to-student problems caused by rumors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct, student-to-student attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived disrespect by a teacher to a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on their behaviors?</td>
<td>Restorative conference impact</td>
<td>Impact on behavior and reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Change in behavior does not mean the relationship is repaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking about behavior to avoid a negative consequence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on the reasoning for their behavior?</td>
<td>Condition to have positive outcomes of restorative conferences</td>
<td>Trusting staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trusting staff and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maturity and moral development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 1: Behavior that led to a restorative conference.** Three behaviors prompted a restorative conference among student participants. The first was a verbal attack from the student participants on other students resulting from alleged rumors about the participants. The second was a direct verbal or physical attack intended to harm another student. In the third type of incident, the student participants argued with a teacher and were sent out of the classroom for disrupting the classroom environment.

**Student-to-student problems caused by rumors.** Some student participants said they believed that a student was talking about them and spreading rumors. These student participants who believed other students were talking about them had a restorative
conference because they became verbally aggressive toward the student they believed was spreading rumors about them. Also, these student participants justified their verbal aggression by explaining that the other student was spreading rumors and, therefore, they were justified in aggressively confronting the other student. Participant J provided this perspective:

I was mad at this girl because I heard she said something about me and I was going to fight her. She was fronting and talking stuff like that. So I was like, ‘You want to disrespect me, then we can fight.’ Then I seen her in the hallway and she was looking at me, so I went over and confronted her. (Participant J)

Essentially, Participant J “heard”—meaning, heard from another student—that the victim was spreading rumors about her and therefore felt justified in confronting the other student and challenging her to a fight (by saying, “If you want to disrespect me, then we can fight”). Meanwhile, the victim was unsure of what was occurring and was unaware of the rumors.

Other examples of incidents in which rumors resulted in a restorative conference came from Participant I, who commented, “It was like these girls didn’t like me, I don’t know why. It was over drama, like I heard her talking about me, so I in-boxed her on Facebook: ‘Why are you talking about me behind my back’? This incident caused Participant I to confront the student in the hallway, and a heated argument ensued. Participant I stated that she said, “You want to fight me right now”? Participant I then relayed “I tried to go out of my class.” Participant I tried to attack the other student, but the staff intervened before the incident became physical. Participant I stated, “Mrs.
Kelley pushed me back in the classroom, and she called for one of the security officers that work here, and he took me to the social worker.”

Participant C slapped a student and called her names. Participant C explained that she did not like what the other student was saying about her to a friend. The victim came to an administrator because she felt threatened. Participant C explained:

She felt unsafe here. After the conference, we talked everything over and we figured out the only reason I really had a problem was because another student was doing the ‘he said, she said,’ which I kind of figured it was like that already.

Finally, Participant H reported, “I was avoiding everything like the talk about me and the rumors and everything. Then, when I started getting tired of it and actually speaking up for myself, that’s when everything started.” When Participant H said she “actually started speaking up,” she was explaining that she confronted the other student in an aggressive manner, which prompted the staff to send Participant H to the office.

In each of these three incidents, rumors were the catalyst that caused the student participants to confront and threaten other students aggressively. They all led to a conference.

**Direct, student-to-student attack.** Another behavior that resulted in student participants having a restorative conference was direct verbal or physical attacks on other students. Some student participants revealed that they had hit, mocked, antagonized, and threatened to fight other students. For example, Participant B explained, “This kid wanted to play basketball with us and we were losing and I got upset and I said he sucked and he shouldn’t play basketball.” Participant B said he had a restorative conference with the student because the other student believed he was going to have a problem with
Participant B. The other student sought the attention of a school social worker to assist him in confronting Participant B.

Participant D explained, “I was coming at his head, so he got mad and stuff and started arguing.” When Participant D stated, “I was coming at his head,” he explained that he was antagonizing the other student in the classroom by calling him names and mocking him. This incident caused the argument between Participant D and the student that resulted in a restorative conference later that day.

Finally, another participant said:

We were in class and we were all saying some jokes about him, cracking on him. He had come to school; he wore this funny outfit or something like that. I was cracking on him, and these girls were laughing, which wasn’t making it any better for him. (Participant G)

Participant G explained how he was name-calling and hurting another student’s feelings. This caused Participant G and the student to have a verbal argument, which resulted in a restorative conference.

Participant A stated, “My best friend was dating a guy and he cheated on her, so I ended up confronting him. I told him if I see him I would punch him in the face.” Participant A stood up for a friend and then threatened another student with physical harm.

Finally, Participant E stated, “I was going to fight this boy because I was messing with one of his friends and he jumped in and started messing with me, so I was like, ‘Let’s fight.’ Then I smacked him in his face.”
**Perceived disrespect by a teacher to a student.** The third behavior that resulted in a restorative conference was a student participant having a negative interaction with a teacher. Participant B had a confrontation with a teacher about the teacher’s interactions with another student. The participant stated:

> The teacher was like, ‘You’re a dummy for answering like that.’ But everybody knows this teacher plays around and stuff like that, but my friend, he’s a sensitive kind of kid, so you can’t really do that. So, the teacher didn’t know. And then I step up for him, and I’m like, ‘Yo, Mister you can’t do that to him.’ And we got into an argument. He ended up kicking me out. (Participant B)

Participant B described standing up for a friend when he perceived that a teacher had mocked his friend. This behavior caused a disruption in the classroom and the teacher sent Participant B to the office. He later had a restorative conference with the teacher.

Participant F was disruptive in class by talking while the teacher was talking. Due to this behavior, the student was sent out of class a few times over the course of the 2015–16 school year. The student requested a conference with the teacher so that he would not get sent out of the classroom.

Participant G referred to another student in the class as having crabs. This incident generated classroom disruption, and when the teacher addressed this behavior, Participant G told the teacher to “eat me and suck my dick.” In another incident, Participant G stole the teacher’s keys to her supply cabinet and was caught on camera with them. He was required to return the keys and have a restorative conference with the teacher.
Essentially, there were three types of behaviors that resulted in students having a restorative conference at Franklin High School: rumors spread about the participants; direct verbal or physical attacks; and negative classroom behaviors, such as arguing with a teacher. Table 4.3 indicates the participants and their related behavior infraction.

Table 4.3

Student Participants and the Behaviors That Resulted in the Behavior Infraction

In essence, these behaviors prompted the staff at Franklin High School to conduct

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Behavior infraction</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>1. Confronted her friend’s boyfriend who was cheating on her and threatened him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>1. Mocked a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Confrontational and argued with a teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>1. Slapped a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant D</td>
<td>1. Provoked and mocked a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant E</td>
<td>1. Slapped a student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant F</td>
<td>1. Classroom disruptions and did not follow the teacher’s directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant G</td>
<td>1. Mocked another student and called a teacher names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Stole the teacher’s keys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant H</td>
<td>1. Confrontational and argued aggressively with another student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant I</td>
<td>1. Confrontational and argued aggressively with another student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant J</td>
<td>1. Confrontational and argued aggressively with another student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a restorative conference as a means for the participants to repair the harm they had done.
Also noted, all of the incidents that lead student participants to a restorative conference were interpersonal and mostly caused hurt feelings and not physical harm. Moreover, the restorative conference was used to prevent further problems that might have caused a student-to-student physical altercation or an uncomfortable relationship between a student and teacher.

**Theme 2: Restorative conference impact.** The second theme in this study explains student participants’ perspectives of the impact that restorative conferences had, or not had, on student participants’ behavior, or reasoning for their behavior. Several students in the study claimed that after attending a restorative conference their behavior, as well as the way they think about their behavior, changed. Some students claimed that after the conference their behavior changed, but they did not repair the relationship with the other student, and their thinking did not change. A couple of students claimed that the conference had no impact on their behavior or their thinking about their behavior.

**Impact on behavior and reasoning.** Participants had two main perceptions of the impact of the restorative conference on their behavior. The first perception was by acknowledging the harm they had done, their behavior changed. Several participants indicated that there was a positive change in their behavior and attributed this change to the restorative conference.

Student participants specified that when they acknowledged the harm they had done following a restorative conference, their behavior changed. Participant B explained that he realized he harmed another student by mocking him. After he had attended a restorative conference, Participant B explained that it impacted his behavior because before the restorative conference he did not realize that his words would cause harm, and
he believed he was joking with the other student. Participant B stated, “You know, most times I say something bad about how a person is but really, usually joking with them. But I don’t do anything else because I saw how it could really hurt somebody’s feelings.” Participant B illustrates why students perceived that the restorative conference had resulted in a change in their behavior. Participant B was unaware that he had hurt another student’s feelings. Initially, Participant B thought he was joking with the other student. However, after he attended a restorative conference, he understood that he hurt someone’s feelings. Participant B explained that because he now understood how his behavior hurt someone, he would avoid saying something that would hurt someone in the future. Participant D had a similar response to a restorative conference having an impact on behavior. Participant D stated:

I think about what I have to say before I say it, and I think that’s a big change. I think before, I used to look at myself like I’m right no matter what I say. I can’t take it back. Now I’m starting to realize that I can’t take nothing back what I said, so I’ve got to watch what I say before I say it.

Participant D said before the restorative conference, he thought about a particular situation only from his perspective and that his perspective was correct. However, after the restorative conference, he explained that he now has to consider another person before saying something he may regret.

When Participant C described the conference she indicated that it had an impact on her behavior. Participant C stated, “I’m not as mean as I was. I actually realized that certain people are not what we think they are.” She continued to explain that her behavior changed by ignoring negative behavior when confronted with rumors about her
Participant C stated, “Every time someone says, ‘Oh, did you know that this person said something bad?’ I just turn and walk away, like I don’t care.” She also indicated that if she encountered the student again with whom she had the minor verbal confrontation, she would, “be nice and talk to them.” Participant C’s response indicated that before the restorative conference, she would hear rumors and react to them negatively. However, after the conference, she explained that she would avoid listening to rumors and, therefore, avoid problems.

Similarly, Participant D explained, “I realized that it was ignorant and unnecessary, so I feel like I have to watch what I say. The conference was a big part of making me realize that.” In summary, Participant D commented that if he had not participated in the conference, he would have had more conflicts in school:

I think I would’ve been in a lot more different conflicts because I still wouldn’t watch what I said before I say it. If the conference hadn’t happened I wouldn’t have changed my attitude and stuff. That got me out of future conflicts because I can watch what I say. (Participant D)

Finally, Participant J explained her perception that restorative conferences had changed her behavior in her following statement:

If we didn’t talk, we would have fought. Like, if you want to work something out and you have to deal with your problems. A lot of kids have problems you can talk with each other and work it out instead of fighting and getting suspended from school and what not, and things get better. In the past, I would fight someone if they were disrespecting me and I would get suspended. Then I said
they are not worth it and my education is the most important thing to me, so I said I better change and do the right thing. (Participant J)

Participant J’s response implied that since she had participated in a restorative conference and was able to speak with the other student, she solved the problem instead of fighting. Moreover, Participant J explained that in the past, she would fight and be suspended from school. Now she believed that she can solve her problems by talking.

Similarly to Participant J’s perspective, Participant F claimed that if the restorative conference had not occurred, she would have fought the other student. Participant F explained, “You can't resolve everything in fighting. Fighting doesn’t help, it just makes things worse, so you got to learn how to talk it out, I guess.” Participant F explained that if she never had a conference, “We would have probably fought.” Participant F also explained that if the conference never occurred she believed she would repeat the behavior that caused her to have a restorative conference. Participant F explained that she would not repeat the behavior now because she realized the confrontation she had with another student might have led to further physical confrontations with other students who were family members of the victim.

Participant B explained that the restorative conference did change the way he thinks about his behavior and that he will avoid hurting others in the future. Participant B explained, “I kind of think that experience helped me become the person I am today, a better person than I used to be.” Participant B explained that before the restorative conference, he believed others did not care about his feelings and did not believe he could hurt another person’s feelings by making negative comments. Participant B further
explained that this particular experience changed his reasoning for his behavior.

Participant B stated:

So for him to show that my words could actually hurt somebody, that showed me that I should be different, like I shouldn’t be like everybody else. I should just help everybody feel good; nobody should feel bad about themselves at all.

Participant B said that because he understood that he hurt someone, he made a conscious decision to change his reasoning for his behavior. He explained that it was during the restorative conference when the other student explained that Participant B's words hurt him. Participant B expressed that he learned to assess his behavior and think about the impact it would have on another person.

Participant I shared an experience similar to Participant B’s. When questioned about whether the restorative conference had had an impact on her thinking about her behavior, Participant I explained that the experience of learning that she had hurt someone, and hearing that person explain how she felt hurt, taught her to think about the impact her behavior could have on another person. Participant I stated, “I think it changed me because I can know how to approach you better and stuff like that, instead of making a big ordeal about it, just coming up to you and talking to you.” Participant I stated, “I think it changed me” meaning that the restorative conference had changed her after she had the experience of approaching another person and discussing the issue rather than causing a confrontation or harming that person.

**Change in behavior not reasoning.** Participant H explained that the conference had changed her behavior by avoiding the other student but it did not repair the relationship.

Before the incident, I was avoiding everything like the talk about and the rumors
and everything. Then, when I started getting tired of it and actually speaking up for myself, that's when everything started. At first, I wasn’t willing because I felt like, why talk junk about somebody or why start something with somebody? Why would you start and then go to a meeting? But then after a while, I’m like, Okay, if she’s willing to stop doing what she’s doing, then I’m willing to talk to her about it. (Participant H)

Participant H explained that her behavior had changed by avoiding the other student. She said:

I don’t look at her, even when she walks in the room, I don’t look at her or nothing because people take looking, if you don’t like the person, they take looking as, ‘Okay, what you want to do?’-type thing. I just don’t look at her.

(Participant H)

Participant H described the restorative conference as changing her behavior by avoiding the other student. However, she explained that her feeling for the other student did not change, and she did not repair the relationship. Participant H explained, “I feel like she still has underlying feelings or feelings that she didn’t actually tell in the conference, but we don’t talk to each other now.”

Participant I explained that she learned from a restorative conference to not involve herself with rumors and to avoid negative behaviors. However, similar to Participant H, she explains that she may still have to address issues with other students by fighting. Participant I clarified that if someone were to cause physical harm to one of her friends, she would defend them. Participant I stated:

I don’t do drama like that anymore, I don’t care for it, I try to block it away from
I try to dodge it a little bit, it’s like, uh, yeah, I mean I always have my friends’ backs. If it comes down to people trying to jump you, I would tell you to try to work it out, but if they really want to fight you and you fight, I’m there. If someone does jump in, I will jump in for you because you are my friend and I know you will have my back, because you have had my back before.

(Participant I)

Essentially, both Participant H and Participant I changed their behavior by avoiding the other students and the negative behavior. However, from Participant H’s perspective, the other student still may have negative feelings for her. Likewise, from Participant I’s perspective is that if someone confronts one of her friends and wants to fight, she will participate.

**Thinking about behavior to avoid a negative consequence.** Participant C explained that after the conference, she would think before she acted in a negative manner to avoid a negative consequence such as an adult being upset with her, or a more formal consequence such as out of school suspension. Participant C explained that because she had caused harm to someone and had to have a restorative conference, she was “yelled at.” Participant C’s explanation of being yelled at indicates that an external variable, such as an adult being upset with her behavior, was the motivation behind not repeating the negative behavior. Moreover, Participant C explained that she does not like getting yelled at because she is an “emotional person and every time I get yelled at I just start crying.” Participant C’s response supports the notion that while the restorative conference brought attention to her behavior, its impact on her reasoning for not committing the behavior lay in avoiding a punitive measure, such as an adult yelling at
Likewise, Participant E’s reasoning for not committing a negative infraction was directly related to a consequence. Participant E explained that a consequence dictates how a person behaves. She explained that if there were no formal negative consequences such as out of school suspension, then she would continue to act in a negative manner. Participant E believed if she avoided negative behavior she would avoid a formal negative consequence. Participant E explanation reinforced the perception that it was not the restorative conference that created a change in reasoning for not committing a negative behavior, but rather, the consequences that would follow if Participant E did not take part in the restorative conference.

Finally, Participant F’s perception of the impact a restorative conference had on the reasoning for her behavior, addressed the notion that consequences for behavior, and not the restorative conference, had an impact. Participant F commented that if the restorative conference had not occurred, she could have had a physical altercation with another student. However, Participant F indicated that after the conference, she believed there was a change in her thinking “because you can’t resolve everything in fighting. Fighting doesn’t help; it just makes things worse, so you got to learn to talk it out, I guess.” When the researcher inquired whether she would commit the behavior again that had led to the restorative conference, Participant F indicated that she would not. However, Participant F reported that it was not the harm she had caused the other person or the restorative conference that affected a change in her reasoning for her behavior. Rather, Participant F suggested, the incident drew attention to her, and she believed more people would have become involved in the situation with her and the other student.
Participant F explained that if more people had become involved in the situation, there would have been more potential for physical harm to her. Therefore, she participated in the restorative conference to demonstrate to the other student and staff that she repaired the relationship and that she was not going to hurt the other student or threaten her further.

*No impact.* Participant E explained that restorative conferences were “meetings so you do not get in trouble,” meaning that students will not get suspended if they attend one. Therefore, from Participant E’s perspective, she would not get suspended if she participated, and she told the adults what she believed they wanted to hear. Likewise Participant G explained that the impact of the restorative conference depended on who was in the conference and the circumstances that led to the conference. Thus, Participant G explained, the impact of the restorative conference on the reasoning for a person’s behavior may depend on how the person feels about the person who was harmed. Participant G explained that if he likes a particular person, then he would be willing to repair the relationship. However, if one dislikes the person, one may simply say what the person wants to hear in the conference and not genuinely mean what he or she said.

In essence, several student participants indicated that there was an impact on their behavior and reasoning for their behavior after they attended a restorative conference. Some student participants claimed that after they acknowledged that they hurt someone, their behavior and their thinking about their behavior changed. However, other student participants claimed that while their behavior changed, their reasoning for their behavior did not. Finally, a few students explained that they there was no impact on their behavior.
or reasoning for their behavior, and they believed that they avoided conducting themselves in a negative manner to avoid negative consequences such as suspension.

**Theme 3: Condition to have positive outcomes of restorative conferences.**

Some student participants indicated that trust was a necessary condition for a conference to have an impact on students’ behavior. A few student participants indicated that there was a need to have trust in the staff members who conducted the conference. Other student participants reported that in order for the conference to have a positive impact, they needed to have trust in the other students attending the conference. Additionally, few student participants indicated that maturity was necessary to have a positive restorative conference.

**Trusting staff.** According to some of the student participants, it was important to have a trusting relationship with the staff conducting the restorative conference. Student participants explained that if they trusted the staff facilitating the restorative conference, they were more likely to have a positive outcome. Conversely, if they did not trust the staff they would more likely not tell the truth in the conference and instead tell the adults what they wanted to hear.

For example, Participant J said:

I mean, some adults just want to hurry up and get the conversation over so they don’t have to spend a lot of time in school. Sometimes the staff just has to talk to some kids to find out what’s going on in their lives. I don’t know. It’s like, if you trust someone that you can tell what you want, and you know it won’t get spread out to the whole school. Also, you know that they are going to do what they say. It’s like, if you trust someone, no matter what happens, they got your back; they
will always be there for you. (Participant J)

Participant J explained that by trusting the staff, the students would have the confidence to confide in them, and they would be safe no matter what harm they had done to another person. Participant J explained that by trusting the staff they would have the assurance that the problems the students experienced would remain confidential.

Participant F expressed that trusting staff was necessary to having an honest conversation in the restorative conference. Participant F explained, if you do not have trust in the staff, you will not tell the truth in the conference and will tell the staff what she thinks the staff wants to hear. Participant F stated, “if you don’t trust them, you just tell them what they want to hear and then, after the meeting, just do whatever you want.”

**Trusting staff and students.** Finally Participant H explained that students have to be willing to trust staff as well as other students. Participant H stated:

Some kids already have trust issues when it comes down to friends so when things like that happen, they already don't trust people. It's going to be hard to repair something that wasn't really there. When you cross the line of trust, it's really hard to repair that. (Participant H)

Thus, Participant H indicated that trust is necessary to repair the harm they had done. Participant H suggested that if students did not have trusting relationships with staff or students, it would be difficult to repair the relationship.

Similarly, Participant D explained that trust in the staff and the other students were essential to having a positive outcome in a restorative conference. Participant D described that by trusting the adults they understand the students’ personalities and can communicate with them in ways they understand so that a supportive conference will
take place. Likewise, when students know each other and develop trusting relationships they can redevelop trust, and repair the relationship they once had. Participant D stated, "I know the conference will be better if it's somebody I know, if it's somebody I didn't know, what's the point? I don't know you." Essentially, Participant D suggested that if it is someone he does not have a relationship with then it's not worth repairing.

Likewise, Participant G explained,

I can’t speak for anybody else, but I know me personally it doesn’t take a lot to get me upset, so when I get upset I just go from being upset to being calm in a couple minutes. It actually depends on who’s around me. (Participant G)

Therefore, from Participant G’s perspective “it depends on who’s around me” meaning if a restorative conference were to have an impact on his behavior, or his reasoning for his behavior, he would have to be in a calm frame of mind and would need to trust and respect the staff and students in the meeting.

**Maturity.** Participant H explained that while some people should think about their behavior if it hurt someone, she believed the situation depended on the person.

Participant H explained that if a person is “not the hard type of person, like cold-hearted,” (meaning that life experiences have not made the person callous), the person should be able to understand the harm he or she has caused someone and be willing to repair it. Participant H believed she could think about her behavior and repair the damage to the relationship. However, she explained that if a person was not mature, then he or she would not be able understand the harm they had caused someone and therefore would not be able repair the harm they had caused. Participant H expressed the belief that some
students may say whatever they want in a restorative conference simply to get out of any further consequences.

Similarly to Participant H’s explanation, Participant D explained that the impact a restorative conference has on a person’s reasoning for their behavior depended on the maturity and life experiences of that individual. For example, Participant D explained, if a person has a negative personality, he or she is going to escalate situations in a negative manner. Participant D stated:

If I walk around as a negative person, I’m obviously not going to be the bigger person in the situation. I’m going to get mad. I’m going to talk junk back, and then she’s going to get her cousin or somebody, and then a fight is going to escalate. (Participant D)

However, Participant D further explained that if you were a mature person, you would find a way to avoid a negative behavior and attempt to repair the harm to prevent it from escalating into a physical altercation. In fact, Participant D stated, “If you’re a mature person, it’s not going to lead to a fight, more than likely.”

Participant J’s explanation was similar to Participant D’s. Participant J explained that to repair the harm a person had done to another, they must possess the maturity needed to empathize. Participant J stated, “It just really depends on the person, if they’re being mature and owning up to what they did or if they just really want to be someone, not be mature not care about others.” Participant J expressed that by having maturity, the perpetrator will take responsibility for the harm they have done and can repair the relationship. Conversely, by not being mature or having the moral development to
understand the harm they have caused, the perpetrator may have difficulty repairing the relationship.

*Moral development.* Where some student participants explained that maturity is a factor in having a positive restorative conference they also indicated that students need higher levels of moral reasoning. For example, when Participant H explained that if a person is “cold-hearted” she is referring to a person’s moral development and the ability to sympathize with others. While Participant H referred to this notion as maturity, she also conveyed the idea that a person has to have the capacity to reason and make positive decisions for those they have harmed to repair the relationship. Participant D explained that a situation could lead to a fight if a student does not possess the moral reasoning to avoid potentially harmful situations. Also, Participant J clarified this by explaining, to have a positive restorative conference students have to “care about others” to repair the harm they have done. Participant J’s idea of caring about others indicated that the perpetrator needs to have the ability to think about others well being to repair a relationship.

Thus, the participants in the study explained that three conditions that were necessary to have a positive outcome in a restorative conference. First, some student participants explained that they needed to trust the adults facilitating the conference. Also, a few student participants claimed that they needed to trust the adults and the other students attending the conference. Finally, some student participants explained the need to have a level of maturity or moral development to understand the ramifications of their behavior.
Summary of Results

Three major themes emerged when examining urban high school students’ perspectives of restorative conferences. The first theme explained the types of behavior student participants committed to attend a restorative conference. The second theme described the impact if any restorative conferences had on student participants’ behavior or their reasoning for their behavior. The third theme represented the student participants perspectives of the described the essential conditions necessary for a restorative conference to have positive results.

Chapter 5 will explain the potential implications of restorative justice practices, limitations of the study, how the use of restorative conferences relates to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development and recommendations for further research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Throughout our nation exclusionary practices such as out-of-school suspensions are used to address negative student behavior. The notion, if you remove a student from the learning environment, students will learn to behave properly. Procedures and policies were created in order to remove students from the school environment in the hopes of teaching students’ appropriate social skills. The literature suggests that suspension or policies such as zero tolerance have, over the past three decades, produced negative effects on students’ behavior and their academic performance (APA, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011). To reverse the effects of the previous three decades of exclusionary practices, schools are searching for alternatives to address students’ negative behavior. One possible alternative suggested in the literature is restorative justice practices. Restorative justice practices allow the offender to repair the harm he or she has done to a person or the community (Bazemore, 1998; Carter, 2013; Shah, 2012; Zaslaw, 2010). By allowing a student to repair the harm he or she has done to someone or the community the student learns from his or her actions and does not repeat the behavior. However, studies done in the United States that suggests restorative justice practices can change students' behaviors is limited. Even more limited are studies done in the United States urban areas (Hurley et al., 2015; Mirsky & Wachtel, 2007).

Urban schools are distinct in that they serve mostly poor students and students of color. This distinction compounds the difficulties of teaching and learning in an urban school setting (Jacob, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007; Siwatu, 2011). Incidentally, media
coverage generates a culture that urban schools are unsafe and give local and national government officials a passage to create policies that aim to make schools safe by a means of eliminating students from the classroom. While the intent of zero tolerance policies was to create safe schools, research indicates that they have had far more negative effects on students of low socio-economic status, students of color, and students with disabilities. Thus, research has established that African American students are 3 times more likely to be suspended from school for the same infractions than are White students (APA, 2008; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Sullivan, et al., 2014). School districts, particularly in urban settings, have begun to implement restorative justice practices.

Restorative conferences are useful for addressing students’ negative behavior, particularly when the conditions of trust and students’ levels of moral development are high. This research adds to the repertoire of methods school personnel can use in attempting to change students’ negative behavior. Restorative conferences could also decrease the number of out-of-school suspensions that have resulted in negative outcomes for students, particularly students of color, and students who are disabled. Thus, restorative practices could decrease disproportionate out-of-school student suspension rates.

This study focused on three research questions:

1. After urban high school students attend a restorative conference, what are their perceptions of the restorative conferences?

2. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on their behaviors?
3. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have on the reasoning for their behavior?

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College and the participating school district approved this study. Participants in the study volunteered and signed informed consent forms. In addition, the researchers obtained consent from the participants’ parents or guardians. Ten students who each had no more than two experiences with a restorative conference participated in the study. Before the face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, the researcher completed a student profile form and, with the assistance of three restorative justice practitioners who had experience holding restorative conferences with urban high school students, developed interview questions.

The researcher entered the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and data from the student profile forms into a qualitative software program, Atlas.ti, then completed a three-phase process to analyze the data. Phase 1 used descriptive coding, which, according to Saldaña (2012), provides the researcher with codes or themes for further investigation. The researcher then employed Phase 2 pattern coding, a secondary coding process to isolate emerging themes in the data (Saldaña, 2012). Finally, the researcher then completed a third level of coding called code weaving to complete the analysis. From this analysis, three major themes emerged:

1. The behaviors that caused a restorative conference.
2. The impact on individual students.
3. Conditions of the restorative conference

This study’s findings provide insight into how urban high school students perceive restorative conferences. The study contributes to a scholarly understanding of
how restorative conferences may affect students’ behavior or the reasoning for their behavior. Some urban schools across the United States are implementing restorative justice practices to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions and counter the effect of the past three decades of zero tolerance policies. However, empirical studies supporting restorative practices in urban high schools in the United States is limited (Hurley et al., 2015). Therefore, studying student participants in an urban high school adds to the emerging data on restorative practices used in schools as an alternative to suspension.

Implications of Findings

This study’s findings come from the perspective of urban high school students. The study analyzed urban high school students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences had on their behavior and reasoning for their behavior. Evidence found in this study may lead to an understanding of the potential effectiveness of restorative practices. Drewery (2004) explained that the premise of deploying restorative justice practices in schools is to place students at the center of the process of addressing misconduct by giving them a voice in deciding the outcome and consequences. Also, restorative justice practices in schools could be a viable alternative to out-of-school suspensions. The themes this study identified demonstrate the usefulness of restorative practices as an alternative method of disciplining students and changing students’ behavior.

This study’s finding has implications on the appropriate use of restorative conferences as an alternative to zero tolerance policies. It will give insight as to the circumstances that caused a restorative conference. The implications of this study also
explain critical conditions necessary for a restorative conference to have positive outcomes as described from the student participants’ perspective. Moreover, this study’s findings reveal implications for embracing restorative justice practices as a school-wide philosophy to reduce negative behaviors and harmful disciplinary practices such as out of school suspension.

**Appropriate use of restorative conference.** According to student participants in this study, when the student participants committed a negative infraction that caused harm to another student or staff member, restorative conferences were used. The negative behaviors that they caused harm, were verbal threats and insults that could have led to more problems for the students and more problems within the school. For example, some of the student participants who heard rumors confronted and threatened another student. The staff at the school used a restorative conference to deescalate a situation that could have led to further problems. In other situations where student participants confronted teachers in a negative manner, the school staff used a restorative conference to repair the relationship with the teachers. Again, by repairing the relationship between the student participants and the teachers, a stressful situation that could have become even more stressful was deescalated. Therefore, restorative conferences are useful in changing students’ negative behavior and reducing out of school suspension when they are appropriately used to repair relationships that have the potential to cause further harm to someone.

**Implications of conditions for a restorative conference.** Three conditions are critical for implementing restorative conferences as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. First, school personnel must themselves develop trust in the restorative
process to ensure their participation. Second, school personnel must understand students’
maturity, levels of moral development, and how much they trust other students and the
staff performing the restorative conference. Third, school personnel must be familiar with
students’ levels of moral reasoning as measured by Kohlberg’s theory of moral
development.

**Trust.** According to the student participants, for a restorative conference to have
positive outcomes the participants must have trust in both the adults and the other
students. School personnel using restorative conferences must find ways to develop trust
among students and staff within the school. Student participants indicated that when they
trust the student in the restorative conference, and trust the adult facilitating a restorative
conference, they participate in a manner that is productive. Conversely, when students do
not feel trust they will tell the adult what they want to hear and not make a genuine effort
to repair the relationship with the victim. School personnel can develop trust by
explaining and modeling restorative conferences for students. For example, if students
have the opportunity to participate in a mock restorative conference they may develop
trust with each other as well as the facilitator.

**Maturity.** Additionally, the student participants in this study indicated that the
perpetrators must have the necessary maturity to be able to empathize with the victims
during a restorative conference. For example, student participants indicated that you
have to “be mature” or “be the bigger person,” to have a positive outcome. Students who
can listen to another person in the conference, hold a conversation without becoming
overly agitated and disruptive, may have a more positive outcome from a restorative
conference. According to some of the student participants in the study, a restorative
conference is not worth doing if the person is not mature and will not participate in a genuine manner.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The student participants explained that some students would not sympathize with his or her victim, making the restorative conference unproductive. Kohlberg’s theory of moral development relates to the student participant’s explanation of the idea that a student who has not developed moral reasoning may not change either their reasoning or their behavior after they attend a restorative conference. For example, according to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, a student could be functioning at a pre-conventional level of moral reasoning and therefore will make decisions in the best interest of him or herself and not consider the victim’s feelings.

Kohlberg defined pre-conventional moral reasoning as driven by obedience and punishment; the adolescent will not violate rules simply because of the punishment he or she will receive. In addition, Kohlberg and Power (1981) stated that a person at this level of moral development makes decisions based solely on how the outcome will serve his or her personal interests. This relates directly to the student participants’ notion that a student may say whatever he or she must to serve his or her interests. On the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning peoples’ reasoning for their behavior is to serve themselves. Thus, they often lack the ability to empathize with others and recognize the harm they have caused another person.

However, if a student is functioning at a conventional level of moral development, he or she may view the consequences as the impetus for a change in behavior. Kohlberg (1958) defined Level 2—the conventional level of moral reasoning—as the stage where
people take social norms into consideration. At this stage, a person considers other people’s feelings and reviews how those feelings will be affected. During this stage, a person makes moral decisions based on doing what is good to maintain social norms (Kohlberg, 1978). Students functioning at the conventional level of moral development view law and order, and maintaining social norms, as the motivation to correct their behavior. The consequence of out-of-school suspension, informing parents of the incident, or punishing the student would suffice. Some student participants in this study indicated that the school’s traditional consequences, such as out-of-school suspension, prevented them from continuing to conduct themselves in a negative manner.

In addition, student participants in this study indicated that when they acknowledged the harm they had done to someone, their behavior and their reasoning for the behavior changed. According to Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, the students who acknowledge the harm they have done and have the ability to view a moral dilemma from all sides are functioning at the post-conventional levels. According to Kohlberg’s post-conventional levels of moral development, an individual focuses on the social welfare of the group and considers rules and laws regarding their effect on the group or society (Kohlberg, 1958).

Understanding student moral development may assist school personnel in selecting the type of interventions to apply when a student commits a negative infraction. In essence, if school personnel understand where students are in their moral development, they can implement the interventions that are the most likely to change a student’s negative behavior. In Figure 5.1 we see the stages of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development and students’ perceptions of a restorative conference.
Figure 5.1. The stages of Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development and students’ perceptions of a restorative conference.

According to some student participants in the study, the student participants acknowledged the harm they had done at the conference. The student participants described this experience as the moment of moving from a conventional stage of moral reasoning, where law and order or consequences for negative behavior are external to a post conventional level of moral reasoning. However, the student participants described
that at the time they acknowledged the harm they had done, they changed the reasoning for their behavior. Therefore, the restorative conference may be the moment where students learn empathy, and students may move from a conventional or pre-conventional stage of moral reasoning to a post-conventional stage.

**Whole-school philosophy to restorative justice practices.** According to Payne and Welch (2015), restorative justice programs should be considered as a whole-school philosophy that would infiltrate the education system on all levels. Restorative justice practices have implications for the entire school community. Carter (2013) described that a holistic school approach to restorative justice practices that encompasses all stakeholders may create a peaceful school climate where students can repair the relationships they have harmed. The present study’s findings indicate that restorative conferences change urban high school students’ behaviors, thus there are implications for teachers, principals, and superintendents, and boards of education. Implications with these stakeholders include a shift in thinking about the way students are disciplined in schools, the types of professional development offered, and the resources available to make a systematic and philosophical change in the methods used to discipline students.

**Implications for teachers.** First, teachers have to have a philosophical shift in thinking about how to discipline students. Teachers need to understand the negative effects of zero tolerance policies and understand the merits of restorative justice practices. Also, teachers have the ability to develop trusting relationships with students and create a culture of trust within their classroom. Therefore, a change in teacher training programs and professional development for teachers that include methodologies to teach trust is critical.
If teachers can identify students’ maturity and moral development they can apply interventions that could benefit students’ moral development and character. Several student participants in this study explained that a restorative conference had an impact on their behavior. Thus, professional development for teachers that includes methods to developing trust with students and identifying students’ maturity and moral development, would be essential to implementing a successful restorative justice program. Again, if teachers have trusting relationships with students, and understand the student’s level of maturity and moral development, they could apply restorative practices, such as a restorative conference, as an alternative to the traditional and punitive measure of discipline.

**Potential implications for school principals.** Similar to teachers, school principals need to have a philosophical shift in how to discipline students. School principals have to recognize that a “one size fits all” model of disciplining students needs to change. School principals need to understand restorative justice practices and create opportunities for students and staff to developing trusting relationships. School principals also need to understand the appropriate use of restorative justice practices and under what conditions they will be most effective and which students will garner the greatest benefit. Consequently, changes in principal professional development should occur: this includes sharing methods that create a positive and trusting school culture, promoting the merits of restorative justice programs, and encouraging the appropriate use of restorative justice programs. According to Roland et al., (2014), school leadership can assist in developing school- wide philosophical shifts from punitive forms of disciplining students to restorative approaches, by offering restorative justices practices training as
educational opportunities for school administrators and teachers.

**Potential implications for school boards and superintendents.** If school boards and school superintendents understand the negative impacts of zero tolerance policies, and the merits of restorative justice practices that change students’ behavior from negative to positive, they will need to create procedures and policies to address this opportunity to improve school culture. Also, school boards and superintendents would need to support the efforts of alternatives to disciplining students by allocating resources for professional development in this area. They would also need to support the efforts and measure the effectiveness of restorative justice the programs.

A universal philosophical shift from zero tolerance policies and procedures, to restorative approaches will have implications for teachers, principals, school policies, and procedures. By changing the way students are disciplined in schools, the types of professional development, and the allocation of resources, a shift may occur to the idea that if a student repairs the harm they have done, they will learn from their negative behavior, and develop their moral reasoning.

It is clear that schools need to implement alternative methods of disciplining students to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions. These alternatives require several approaches. Schools should take caution in implementing only restorative conferences without offering other means of discipline that might be more beneficial to some students. Schools should evaluate school discipline data as well as their students’ needs and provide training to staff, students, and parents regarding these alternative methods. Moreover, systematic adoption should include the organizational change necessary for implementing alternative methods such as restorative practices with a
whole-school approach. According to Hurley, et al. (2015), when schools use disciplinary procedures sporadically and inconsistently, they have a less positive impact on students’ behavior. Roland, et al. (2012) asserts that when school systems use whole-school approaches, and all staff subscribes to the fundamental philosophy and practices that allow students to repair the harm that they have done, these programs are more likely to succeed.

Limitations

This study has limitations concerning sample size, participant selection, researcher position, and data collection method.

Sample size. Ten student participants were selected and volunteered for this study. This is a small sample size and limits the transferability of the study. In addition, the study took place at only one urban high school, which limits the perspectives of the student participants.

Participant selection. All students selected for the study had either one or two experiences with a restorative conference. The number of restorative conferences limited the student participants’ experience and therefore their knowledge of restorative conferences. It is plausible, if students had additional experiences with restorative conferences, then they might have viewed the conferences differently. The student participants had attended one or two restorative conferences and did not have persistent negative behavior. All the participants were from the same school and had the same restorative conference facilitator. Therefore, generalization should proceed with caution. In addition, the perpetrators or offenders were interviewed, rather than the victims, thus
limiting the researchers’ perspective of the data to that of the perpetrators and not the victims.

**Positionality of the researcher.** The researcher is a high school principal in an urban school. The researcher’s position was disclosed to the student participants in the study before the semi-structured interviews occurred. Although the researcher explained the study to the student participants and differentiated the role of the researcher versus the role of a school official, the students may have viewed the researcher as an authority figure and not disclosed their true perspectives.

**The method of data collection.** The study used face-to-face interviews, which may have caused students to hide their actual feelings. Also, the interviews were semi-structured, which may have led some participants to focus only on questions asked rather than discuss everything relevant to them about restorative conferences and their potential impact on the students’ behaviors. In addition, students may not have had the maturity to understand various questions asked during the semi-structured interviews, specifically issues that referred to the reasoning behind their behavior.

**Recommendations**

There are several recommendations from studying urban high school students’ perspectives on restorative conferences. First, school personnel, parents, and community members such as Board of Education members and other policymakers must understand the negative impact that zero tolerance policies have on students. In addition, to infiltrate the culture of the school and create a shift that will be more beneficial to students, schools must be prepared to implement alternative methods of disciplining students in a systematic, whole-school approach. Also, schools must be proactive in addressing
students’ negative behavior by teaching students about restorative justice practices.
Implementing restorative justice practices in schools requires further research to support their merits in changing students’ behavior. Furthermore, instruments are needed to measure the effectiveness of restorative justice practices used in schools that include the entire schools’ perception of the practice and their effectiveness. Finally, implementing a process and structure is necessary to introduce restorative justice practices in schools, and best practices should be studied, emulated, and evaluated.

Recommendations for schools using restorative justice practices. Schools currently using restorative justice practices should allocate resources to dedicate a staff member trained in restorative justice practice to provide professional development, and monitor, and access the effectiveness of the restorative justice practices in the school. This dedicated staff member should provide training for teachers in the area of when restorative justice practices, such as a restorative conference, should be used. They should also provide school personnel training that centers on developing a culture of trust, and understanding students’ maturity and levels of moral reasoning. This dedicated staff member should review students’ discipline data such as the frequency of suspensions and restorative practices used. Monthly review of the data with the school’s administrators and teachers should be exercised to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of restorative justice practices and the use of out-of-school suspension.

Teachers and principals will need to understand when restorative justice practices are most effective in changing students’ behavior. Again, restorative justice practice such as restorative conferences work best when students are mature enough to hold a controlled conversation. Teachers and principal will need the skills to identify the
maturity of a student to assess if a student can hold a controlled conversation. Also, school staff should consider holding a pre-assessment before a restorative conference. During the pre-assessment school personnel should identify if the student has the necessary conditions of, trust, maturity and moral development to make an informed assessment as to whether a restorative conference will have a positive outcome.

Furthermore, when students are at the conventional level of Kohlberg’s levels of moral reasoning, students will understand the harm they have done and be able to repair the relationship with the other person. Therefore, professional development must be offered for school personnel in the area of identifying students’ moral reasoning. This allows school personnel to identify if a restorative conference will be productive. This will also allow for the victim to not become re-victimized.

Some participants claimed that once they acknowledged the harm they have done their reasoning and behavior changed, and they developed empathy for others. However, student participants also indicated that an immature person or a person functioning on a pre-conventional level of moral reasoning would be unwilling to change and would only tell the conference facilitator and the other student what they wanted to hear. Thus, re-victimization is possible when a perpetrator is not genuine during a conference. Essentially, the perpetrator would lie about his or her feelings during the conference and continue to act a negative manner towards the victim. Choi, Bazemore, and Gilbert (2012), who analyzed restorative justice programs in the justice system, explained that victims could feel anxious about attending a restorative conference and that the perpetrator’s refusal to take the restorative conference seriously could marginalize their feelings. If school personnel understand where students are regarding their moral
development, they may be more likely to use a restorative conference when the perpetrator is more likely to change his or her behavior and the victim more willing to accept the perpetrator’s efforts to repair the relationship.

**Recommendations for schools using zero tolerance policies.** Schools that are currently using zero tolerance policies need to review the research on the effectiveness of such policies. These schools should review their discipline data and identify disproportionately among various groups of students such as students of color or students with disabilities. If the student population is homogeneous the school must consider the effectiveness of out of school suspension in changing a student behavior. Finally, schools should consider alternative methods of disciplining students such as restorative justice practices. Committees of administrators and teachers should review the literature and begin the implementation of restorative justice practices by involving the whole school in the philosophical shift from zero tolerance to restorative practices.

**Further research.** Restorative justice practices implemented in urban high schools require further study. Restorative justice practices such as restorative conferences are not clearly defined. Therefore, school personnel must define how restorative justice practices are implemented in their schools. Since restorative justice practices are not operationalized this may lead to the inconsistent practice of restorative conferences and therefore inconsistent results. Moreover, since restorative justice practices are not clearly defined there are currently no instruments that measure its effectiveness (Hurley et al., 2015).

**Operationalizing restorative justice practices.** Schools across the nation define restorative justice practices differently. According to Hurley et al. (2015) who
interviewed 50 experts in the field of restorative justice practices, it was necessary to determine what restorative practices are and operationalize them in standard ways. Therefore, further studies in this area could explain the merits of restorative justice practices. However, the practice’s standardization must be operationalized to understand its effectiveness as a viable alternative to traditional methods of disciplining students in school.

Likewise, the perspective of the victims who attend restorative conferences should be studied to understand whether such conferences affect their behavior or the rationale for their behavior. While realizing and recognizing behavioral changes in the perpetrators or offenders is necessary, understanding the impact that these practices have on victims is equally necessary.

There is a need for a systematic approach to restorative justice practices and methods to implement them in schools. The idea of restorative justice practices is that the perpetrator should repair the harm he or she has caused to an individual or the community. Researchers in this area should develop best practices, and practitioners should remain faithful to the routine processes to solidify and evaluate fidelity to restorative justice practice programs.

**Instruments to measure progress.** Instruments should be created to measure the effects of restorative justice practices in schools and their effects on students’ behavior and the rationale for their behavior. Currently, no instruments measure such phenomena, and future studies should seek to design and evaluate potential tools. Essentially, instruments that collect data on the effectiveness of restorative justice practices such as restorative conferences should include the perspectives of school personnel, parents,
student offenders, and student victims. It is from all of these perspectives that the effects of restorative justice programs can be measured.

**Best practices for instituting and evaluating restorative justice practices.**

Research on best practice of restorative conferences must continue. Studies should focus on the most effective procedures to facilitate a restorative conference, when they should occur, and with whom. Procedures should be systematized to maximize the effectiveness of restorative justice practices and studies should focus on identifying the most effective practices.

**Effects on specific populations of students.** Studies should be done on the effects restorative justice practices have on specific populations of students who are most affected by zero tolerance policies. African American students and students with disabilities are negatively impacted by zero tolerance policies. Restorative justice practices should be studied within the context of how these practices affect populations such as African American students and students with disabilities. Also, studies on the effects of restorative justice practices have on gender should be done. Questions such, as are restorative justice practices more efficient with females, males, and transgender youth have not been studied thus far.

**Conclusion**

Restorative justice practices are not new. Indigenous cultures have used them to create more a harmonious society, particularly after a person has harmed someone or the community. The juvenile justice system adopted restorative justice practices to deal with youth who have victimized an individual or the community. Nevertheless, research in this area is limited in urban schools where restorative justice programs are currently
beginning to be implemented. Therefore, research of restorative justice practice in urban
schools is essential.

This study captured and analyzed the perceptions of restorative conferences
among urban high school students. Three restorative justice practitioners reviewed semi-
structured interview questions to address the three research questions in this study:

1. After urban high school students’ attend a restorative conference, what are their
perceptions of the restorative conferences?
2. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have
on their behaviors?
3. What are students’ perceptions of the impact that restorative conferences have
on the reasoning for their behavior?

A purposeful sample was used to select students for this study. Students who had
the experience of attending one or two restorative conferences were chosen and
volunteered for the study. Student participants and their parents or guardians signed
consent to participant in the study. Through the use of semi-structured face-to-face
interviews, data was gathered and analyzed. Qualitative researchers, reflexive journaling,
and the consultation with restorative justice trainers established the credibility of the
major themes found in this study.

Major themes in this study include the types of behaviors that caused the staff at
Franklin High School to require students to attend a restorative conference. Participants
described the three types of behaviors as threats to another student caused by rumors,
threats of physical attacks on a student, and classroom disruptions. When examining the
participants’ perceptions of whether a restorative conference had an impact on their
behavior, several participants explained that attending the restorative conference did have an impact on their behavior. However, when asked whether a restorative conference had an impact on their reasoning for their behavior, some student participants indicated that restorative conferences had no impact. Other student participants said it had an impact. A few student participants claimed that any impact of a restorative conference on student participants reasoning for his or her behavior would depend on the maturity level of the students. Additionally, student participants indicated that to have positive outcomes in a restorative conference they need to have a trusting relationship with school personnel conducting a restorative conference and trust in the other students attending the conference.

This study's findings of restorative justice practices have wide implications for understanding students’ moral development, implications for teachers, school principals, school boards, and school superintendents. By understanding students' moral development, school personnel can apply intervention such as restorative justice practices with students with whom the practice will be successful. The use of restorative justice practices can bring hope to eliminating zero tolerance policies and other exclusionary practices, which have not produced positive results. Restorative justice practices provide a philosophical shift from zero tolerance to inclusion and repairing harm a student has done to others or the community. The literature repeatedly suggests African American students are 3 times more likely to be suspended from school than White students, and students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended out of school than students with non-disabilities, therefore, schools must change the way they discipline students.
Although restorative justice practices are one alternative to disciplining students, research in this area must continue.

In summary, a whole school systematic approach should be taken to implement alternatives to disciplining students in schools such as restorative justice practices. Schools should be proactive and directly teach this alternative method of discipline. Through the direct instruction of restorative justice practices, students may learn positive social behaviors that may allow them to function effectively in school. Further studies in this area of restorative justice practices should focus on understanding its viability as an alternative to traditional methods of disciplining students. Moreover, instruments used to capture the effectiveness of restorative justice practices are essential in measuring its effectiveness and understanding best practices.
References


Appendix A

Principal Interview Data Collection

Student Name: _______________________________________

Grade level:___________

Age:______________

Gender:______________

Race:______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of discipline infraction for 2014–15 school year</th>
<th>List of discipline infraction for 2015–16 school year</th>
<th>List of discipline infraction that resulted in a restorative conference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Student Profile Form

Student Name: _______________________________________

Student participant’s pseudonym: ___________________________

Grade level: ______________

Age: ______________

Gender: ______________

Race: _____________

Date of incident: ______

Description of incident that resulted in a restorative conference:

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Appendix C
Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Prior to the interview, the researcher will say the following to the participants: I am conducting this study to learn more about urban high school students’ experiences with restorative conferences. This is a volunteer process, and you do not have to answer any questions you don’t want to answer. All volunteers are anonymous, and your real name will never appear in any documentation connecting you to the study. Again, the purpose of the study is to understand urban high school students’ experiences with restorative conferences. I am going to ask you some questions now. Again, if you do not want to answer any questions or if you feel uncomfortable, just let me know, and we will stop the interview.

Below is a list of questions for semi-structured interviews. During the interview, the researcher may ask additional questions for clarification purposes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you do for fun?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you participate in any extracurricular activities at school? If so, what? If not, what would you participate in if the school offered it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you remember on ______ (date) when you (researcher will read from behavior record incident), and you had to attend a restorative conference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you recall who was in attendance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you remember the outcome of the conference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me what you thought about the restorative conference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you think about attending the restorative conference?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did the restorative conference make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you explain the restorative conference to someone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After you attended a restorative conference, did you think the experience changed your behavior? Why or why not? In what ways do you think it changed your behavior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you saw the person you had the conflict with, how would you act/behave?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After you attended the restorative conference, did you think it changed the way you think about your behavior? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think you would repeat the behavior that caused you to have to attend the restorative conference? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experience from the restorative conference that we didn’t discuss today?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix D

*List of Questions and the Six Stages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Questions for participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Stage 1: General inquiries about the participants’ personal interests for rapport building | What do you do for fun?  
Do you participate in any extracurricular activities at school? If so, what? If not, what would you participate in if the school offered it? |
| Stage 2: Reminder of the misconduct that led the participant to attend a restorative conference | Do you remember on _____ (date) when you (researcher will read from behavior record incident) and you had to attend a restorative conference?  
Do you recall who was in attendance?  
Do you remember the outcome of the conference? |
| Stage 3: What are the participants’ perceptions of the restorative conference? | Can you tell me what you thought about the restorative conference?  
What did you think about attending the restorative conference?  
How did the restorative conference make you feel?  
How would you explain the restorative conference to someone? |
| Stage 4: Do participants feel that the restorative conference had an impact on their behavior? | After you attended a restorative conference, did you think the experience changed your behavior? Why or why not?  
In what ways do you think it changed your behavior?  
If you saw the person you had the conflict with, how would you act/behave? |
| Stage 5: Do participants feel that the restorative conference had an impact on the rationale for their behavior? | After you attended a restorative conference, did you think it changed the way you think about your behavior? Why or why not?  
Do you think you would repeat the behavior that caused you to have the restorative conference? Why or why not?  
Is there anything you would like to tell me about your experience from a restorative conference that we didn’t discuss today? |
| Stage 6: Do participants have any additional information they would like to share about restorative conferences? |  |
Appendix E

Letter of approval for research

December 15, 2015

Robert DiFlorio
Project Director: Students’ Perceptions of Restorative Justice Practices in an Urban High School

Dear Mr. DiFlorio:

The Research Review committee has received your request to conduct research in the . Your proposal, titled “Students’ Perceptions of Restorative Justice Practices in an Urban High School”, has been approved to be conducted during the 2015-16 school year with the following stipulations and requirements:

1) Prior to interviewing of students, all parental consent forms must be retrieved and on file not only by your research team, but sent to the . No student can be interviewed until signed forms have been submitted to .

2) Research cannot commence until full approval from St. John Fisher College’s Institutional Review Board.

Prior to research starting, please forward a copy of principal’s letter of support and any other documentation that supports the stipulations outlined in this letter. Upon receipt, we will provide you with a letter of permission to commence your study that is specific to locations, start and end dates.

Please feel free to contact my office with any questions. I can be reached at 315-435-4284

Sincerely,


Xc: Research Review Committee
Appendix F

Letter of support from school principal

November 23, 2015

To Whom It May Concern:

I give Robert DiFlorio permission to have access to our school for his research in the area of restorative justice practices in urban high schools. In addition, I give him permission to interview students when written consent from the student’s parents is obtained.

Sincerely

Principal