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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing Conflict Management in Groupwork: University Students' Perceptions of Restorative Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore university students' perceptions of restorative practices as a means to manage conflicts in group work. Employing a qualitative approach, the research analyses transcribed conversations of participants in a natural setting resembling their daily lives. Semi-structured and focus group interviews were conducted with forty-five university students from the same class, and the sessions were recorded electronically. The data analysis began during the interviews, and field notes were taken to identify key themes. The findings indicate that university students exhibit positive attitudes towards restorative practices. These practices are reported to positively affect students' communication skills, empathy, and relationships through activities like classroom circles and conflict resolution. The study highlights positive perception of restorative practices in resolving team work issues, together with additional benefits, including enhanced social-emotional learning, stronger peer connections, and a conducive atmosphere for meaningful discussions.

1. Introduction

University life plays a crucial role in students' academic and personal development, but it also brings its fair share of challenges, one of which is groupwork. When being asked to work together in groups, students from different cultural backgrounds may experience arguments, leading to strained relationships (Hajovsky et al., 2020). Although young adults are supposed to be mature and fully developed in emotional control, students often struggle to resolve these conflicts effectively. In fact, the capacity to collaborate well within teams does not develop spontaneously (Opdecam & Everaert, 2018). Despite being aware of this fact, many teachers and lecturers tend to have an unconscious expectation that university students possess the capability to collaborate, resulting in the lack of emphasis on providing guidance in team skills (Bolton, 1999). Their focus typically revolves around the content of the lessons, rather than providing guidance on how to effectively work as a team (Opdecam & Everaert, 2018). Consequently, participating in student project teams can lead to frustration and a negative perception of teamwork, rather than fostering an understanding and appreciation of its benefits (Bowen, 1998). Although instructors are encouraged to engage in groupwork to gain insights into the group learning process (Norman et al., 2004), they often have limited time to support numerous groups in a classroom. This is where restorative practices come into play. Although several studies indicate that

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a positive attitude towards RP is found in school philosophy, there is limited understanding regarding this practice in educational context in Vietnam.

1.1. Definition of Restorative Practices

Restorative practice (RP) is a familiar term in the field of criminal justice, which is often employed as a substitute for traditional punitive methods of coping with crime and misconduct. According to Wachtel and McCold (2004), by incorporating all parties in a process of communication, comprehension, and accountability, RP aims to mend the harm caused by crime. A mutually agreed-upon strategy for mending the harm caused by the offense may be reached throughout this process, which may involve face-to-face sessions between victims and offenders supervised by qualified specialists.

They also state that the underlying theoretical basis of RP revolves around the fundamental proposition that individuals' well-being, cooperation, and capacity for constructive behavioural transformations are greatly enhanced when authorities opt to interact and collaborate with them, rather than imposing their will or making decisions on their behalf. Therefore, this framework emphasizes the importance of cultivating social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making. By valuing inclusive and collaborative approaches, RP aims to foster an environment conducive to personal growth, positive relationships, and responsible behaviour.

To further illustrate how RP emphasizes collaboration and support, the attention is not turned to the Social Discipline Window, as depicted in Figure 1. To illustrate these concepts, Figure 1 provides a valuable framework that categorizes approaches to managing social norms and boundaries. This model delineates four distinct quadrants based on the interplay of control and support:

1. Punitive (high control, low support) – characterized by authoritarian measures (Lodi et al., 2021).

2. Restorative (high control, high support) – which emphasizes collaboration and mutual respect (Wachtel & McCold, 2004)

3. Permissive (low control, high support) – often seen as paternalistic (Goold, 2024).

4. Neglectful (low control, low support) – where irresponsibility prevails (Breedlove et al., 2021).

Notably, the restorative domain stands out as it combines high levels of both control and support, underscoring the importance of collaborative endeavors undertaken with individuals, rather than actions imposed upon them or carried out on their behalf. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of enhancing conflict management in group work, as it aligns with the perceptions of university students regarding the effectiveness of restorative practices.
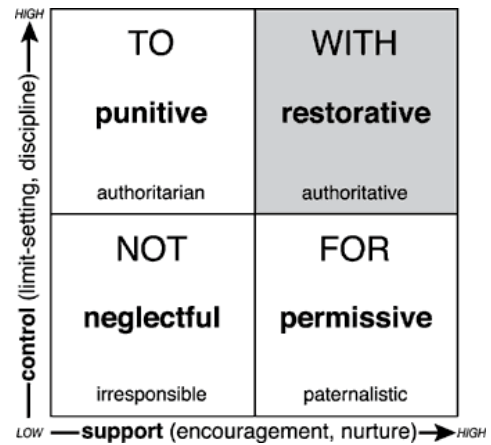

Figure 1. Social discipline window (Wachtel & McCold, 2004).

1.2. Framework of Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices (RP) integrate a diverse range of approaches that encompass both informal and formal processes (Wachtel & McCold, 2004). As illustrated in the accompanying figure, these practices can be categorized along a spectrum from informal to formal, allowing for flexibility based on the context and needs of the individuals involved.

The first practice is Affective Statements and Questions, which enable individuals to informally communicate their feelings (Katic et al., 2020). By openly expressing their emotions, participants in restorative processes gain a deeper understanding of how their actions impact others. This practice fosters empathy and strengthens connections between individuals.

Secondly, Impromptu Restorative Conferences provide a structured yet spontaneous opportunity for individuals to convene, address conflicts, exchange viewpoints, and actively pursue resolution within a collaborative atmosphere (Daly, 2024). These conferences exemplify the informal side of the spectrum, allowing for meaningful engagement without the need for extensive prior arrangements.

Finally, Structured Circles represent a more formalized practice within RP, where participants gather in a circular arrangement to facilitate open communication, active listening, and collective decision-making (Evanovich et al., 2020). These circles can be implemented in various contexts to promote meaningful dialogue, foster relationships, and resolve conflicts constructively.

By incorporating a combination of informal and formal processes, as depicted in the figure, RP offers a flexible and effective framework for addressing harm and fostering relationships. It is important to note that these practices can also be implemented independently, tailored to the unique dynamics and characteristics of different contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these practices can also be implemented independently, depending on the unique dynamics and characteristics of different contexts.

Figure 2. The continuum of restorative practices (Wachtel & McCold, 2004).

1.3. Main Principles of Restorative Practices

As a result, RP certainly operates on a set of core principles listed by Wachtel and McCold (2004). The initial principle revolves around the objective of repairing the harm caused by crime or wrongdoing, addressing the needs of the victim, offender, and affected community. Active involvement of all parties, including voluntary participation, is essential. Dialogue and empathy - building between the victim and offender, facilitated by a trained professional, are crucial elements. Holding the offender accountable and assuming responsibility for repairing the harm are emphasized, often through restitution plans or community service. Community engagement is also recognized as significant in the healing process. These principles should be carefully considered as essential factors when carrying out RP in different contexts.

1.4. Empirical Studies Related to Restorative Practices in Education

In addition to the increasing use of RP in different fields such as family counselling (Williams, 2019), the application of RP in educational settings has gained more and more significant recognition. According to Gregory et al. (2016), RP encompass two distinct domains: prevention and intervention. The prevention domain is dedicated to establishing positive connections and fostering a nurturing school environment that minimizes the occurrence of rule violations. Through proactive circles, affective statements, and the implementation of restorative questions, prevention strategies address negative behaviours before they escalate, emphasizing the cultivation of healthy relationships. On the other hand, the intervention domain focuses on repairing harm and reinstating relationships subsequent to a rule infraction. Responsive circles, restorative conferences, and the management of shame are among the intervention strategies employed. These practices aim to address the impact of the infraction, encourage accountability, and ultimately restore the connections between all parties involved. By combining prevention and intervention, restorative practices offer a comprehensive approach to maintaining a harmonious and supportive school community.

Table 1. Composition of restorative practices (Gregory et al., 2016).

Domain	Elements	Description
Prevention (establishing connections and nurturing a sense of community)	1.Affective statements (Costello et al., 2019)	Respond to both positive and negative circumstances in the classroom and school.
	2.Proactive circles	Conducted regularly, either on a daily or weekly basis, participants gather in a circle to engage in conversations centred around a chosen topic that fosters the development of a cohesive community.
	3.Fair process	Involve students in the decision-making process and provide them with a clear explanation of the underlying reasoning.
	4-5. Restorative Community Staff/ Restorative Approach with Families	Demonstrate and employ restorative practices as examples for school staff and in interactions with families of students.
	6. Fundamental Hypothesis Understandings	Offers a framework to guide everyday interactions with the right balance of control and support.
Intervention (Repairing damage and rebuilding community)	7. Restorative Questions (Mirsky, 2011)	Deal with negative behaviours by utilizing questioning techniques.
	8. Responsive Circles	Following a moderately serious incident, students gather in a circle to identify individuals who have been affected and collaboratively determine appropriate actions to rectify the situation.
	9. Small Impromptu Circles	Tackle negative behaviours by facilitating a dialogue where the wrongdoer and those who have been harmed respond to restorative questions in each other's presence.
	10. Restorative Conference Circles (Braithwaite, 2001)	In the event of a serious incident, employ a predetermined script or framework to effectively promote accountability and facilitate the necessary steps for repairing the harm caused.
	11. Reintegrative Management of Shame	Recognize and validate the emotions experienced by both the wrongdoers and those affected by their actions (Wachtel et al., 2010).

By implementing these elements, educational institutions can create an environment that encourages positive relationships, prevents rule infractions, addresses negative behaviours, and promotes responsibility. The use of RP in schools holds great potential for nurturing a respectful and inclusive educational community. Therefore, numerous schools have implemented RP and derived significant benefits from its application.

Multiple research studies, including the work of Ingraham et al. (2016), emphasize the positive attitude towards RP in primary and secondary schools by exploring numerous benefits of RP implementation. RP fosters a sense of community and addresses emotional harm through collaborative consultation. Ingraham et al. (2016) highlight the importance of various stakeholders, such as school psychologists, teachers, students, families, university students, and community members, in implementing RP and creating a positive school climate. The study shows that RP benefits students by improving communication skills, empathy, and relationships through activities like classroom circles, conflict mediation, and restorative justice. Teachers, parents, and university partners also experience positive outcomes, including enhanced conflict resolution skills, increased empathy, and an improved school culture. The implementation of RP leads to reductions in behavioural referrals, alleviated parental concerns, and increased engagement from parents and the community. Furthermore, despite encountering minor obstacles in organization, the general attitudes of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders towards the utilization of RP remain optimistic.

In some instances, the implementation of RP may not require the incorporation of all its components to yield positive feedback. An empirical investigation conducted by Garnett et al. (2022) focuses on the implementation of RP proactive community building circles within elementary school environments. The study highlights that RP community building circles are a pivotal element of a primary approach, resembling the traditional classroom or morning gathering structure, thereby facilitating the development of social and emotional skills. Structurally, a classroom-based restorative community building circle typically encompasses several essential elements, including a central focal point, a designated speaking item, a circle leader or facilitator, prompts or rounds for discussion, and an introductory and concluding ceremony (Garnett et al., 2022). Despite the challenges associated with RP implementation, such as communication skills and student engagement, the research illustrates that teachers hold a favourable viewpoint regarding the implementation of RP thanks to its evident benefits, including improved social-emotional learning, enhanced peer relationships, and the creation of a conducive environment for meaningful dialogue.

Although RP was introduced in schools relatively early, it has only recently been implemented in the university setting. For example, Victoria University of Wellington has not only embraced restorative justice as a disciplinary strategy but has also made efforts to create a Restorative University atmosphere that fosters positive relationships based on mutual care, respect, responsibility, and open communication at all levels (Pointer, 2017). This objective is accomplished through the incorporation of both reactive measures, which address conflicts and breaches of rules, and proactive measures that aim to cultivate a favorable cultural environment. While this study produces comparable outcomes, a noteworthy discovery lies within the students' perspective, shifting from a mindset of "identifying who deserves punishment" to a mindset of "how can we rectify this and promote justice" by using affective questions (Pointer, 2017).

Although RP has been employed in different universities, RP is still in the early stages of implementation, and there is a recognized demand for further research in this area. Furthermore, the majority of studies predominantly reflect the opinions of teachers who serve as the primary users of RP, thereby resulting in a complete disregard for the ideas and perspectives of students.

Therefore, the purpose of this research paper is to explore university students' perceptions of using restorative practices to address conflicts in EFL classrooms. By reviewing existing literature and conducting empirical research, this study will provide valuable insights into the implementation of restorative practices in university settings.

2. Method

All procedures adhered to ethical standards set by the national research committee, and followed the principles of WAME. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and they had the opportunity to ask questions before providing their consent.

2.1. Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology because the examination of transcribed words derived from participants' voices in a qualitative research paradigm occurs within a natural setting that closely resembles their everyday environments or lives. Although qualitative data is open to multiple interpretations and thus subjective, this potential concern can be addressed through thorough analysis that is firmly rooted in the data.

2.2. Participants and Procedures

45 university students, all belonging to the same EFL class, is purposefully selected for this research. Despite being

freshmen, they have already completed a semester at the university, thereby familiarizing themselves with the academic environment and establishing a level of comfort with the researcher.

The selected students are then divided into 6 teams and assigned collaborative presentation projects throughout the course, following the designation of team leaders with the agreement of all members in the groups. Subsequently, all participants receive two introductory sessions, including theoretical and practice ones, that guides them to the utilization of RP as a means of resolving conflicts within teams. The practice session is conducted to ensure that participants use RP appropriately and approach conflict resolution with an unbiased mindset. In addition to that, the leaders receive an additional training session specifically tailored to their primary utilization of RP before collaborative work. During the time of working in groups, the leaders were required to submit the reports of meeting agendas and any cases of RP use. After several weeks of doing projects together, all students are invited to participate in the interview phase of the study, having provided their informed consent. Furthermore, the team leaders are specifically requested to partake in the focus group component of the research in order to gain more insights into the RP use.
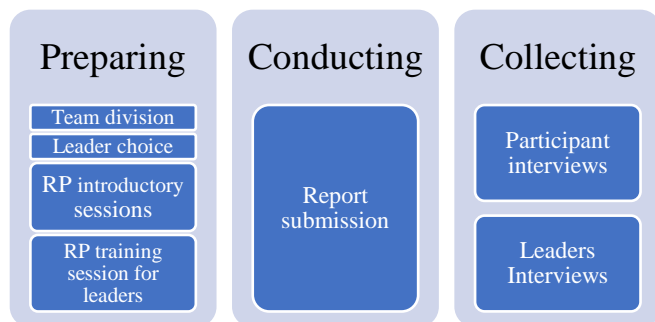

Figure 3: The brief description of the research procedure.

2.3. Data Collection Method

The primary methods of data collection in the current study were semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

In this research project, the objective of conducting semi-structured interviews with students is to delve into their personal experiences while being attentive to the potential need for confidential conversations. Consequently, semi-structured interviews are utilized on account of their characterization as a variant of social interaction transpiring within an environment that facilitates individuals' uninhibited and assured expression of their viewpoints and opinions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). The interview with university students focuses on what they think about the use of RP and the impact the use of RP has on their groupmates and themselves. The interview is carried out in a one-on-one format with the aim of mitigating any potential influence from external factors after a pilot interview is conducted to see whether the questions obtained intended

information.

In focus group interviews, the questions are usually less structured, allowing for more flexibility, and the discussions revolve around specific topics of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of the current study, this aspect held significant importance as it created a less intimidating environment for students, enabling them to draw upon each other's remarks to foster additional discussions. It is believed that this research tool can offer additional insights into students' perspectives on the use of RP when assuming the role of a leader, serving as a mediator, in a secure and effective manner.

Every student and focus group interviews were captured electronically and transcribed into different themes. Analysis of the data began during and after the student interviews and focus group interviews, where valuable insights and observations were recorded as field notes, allowing for the initial identification of key themes. This approach to data analysis entails handling, structuring, and categorizing the data into manageable components, while actively seeking out patterns within it. When interpreting the data, the goal is to explain and present the ideas in a way that relates to existing theories and makes them easier to grasp. The key concepts and main themes are then linked by meaning.

2.4. Data Analysis

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3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the themes, including Harmony, Empathy and Social skills, that surfaced from the interpretation of student and focus group interviews conducted with the six teams participating in the study will be showcased, which is followed by the implications of these findings.

Table 2. The frequency of the qualitative data.

Theme	Description	Frequency
Harmony	Positive reactions to RP fostering a peaceful atmosphere and trust.	14
Empathy	Expressions of understanding others' perspectives and feelings.	19
Social skills	Improvement in collaboration, communication, and conflict resolution.	12

3.1. Harmony

Both student members and team leaders expressed positive reaction to the adoption of RP, especially when it equipped them with skills that fostered a more peaceful atmosphere. Team leaders conveyed how the implementation of the RP framework provided them with the abilities to handle members' behaviour in a more composed and tranquil manner.

Team leader 1 said, *'At last, I have discovered a means to communicate with teammates who were unwilling to contribute their fair share. This newfound approach facilitates effective communication within the team, leading to favourable outcomes.'*.

Team leader 2 also shared the same idea and explained, *'I don't have to raise voices to any violations when working together despite being a hot-tempered person. It is a very warm feeling when I only asked restorative questions suggested in the training and better understood my teammate's situation when he missed the deadline.'*

Furthermore, the members are happy to have a composed leader, which contributed to their sense of safety.

One member of team 4 expressed her joy, 'the leader is approachable and genuinely nice, making me feel safe to raise questions.'.

Establishing an atmosphere of trust and security is crucial for promoting development and nurturing interpersonal connections. This enables students to openly convey their emotions and release any suppressed feelings they may have (Schumacher, 2014).

A similar result can be seen in a study conducted by Kehoe et al. (2018), where the researchers discovered a correlation between the implementation of circle time and broader enhancements within the school community, including a decrease in bullying incidents. Furthermore, McCluskey et al. (2008) found similar constructs, such as being more relaxed and calmer. Describing a more serene school environment, it was noted that students experienced an enhanced sense of physical security within their communities. Additionally, this environment facilitated their willingness to openly express concerns or issues that impacted them, ultimately cultivating a more harmonious atmosphere. Indeed, there is a noticeable rise in harmony when considering how individuals perceive themselves and others, resulting in communities becoming more tranquil and harmonious as a whole. Establishing a community characterized by trust and safety is crucial for nurturing personal development and fostering meaningful relationships.

3.2. Empathy

Empathy emerged as the most frequently mentioned outcome when students were questioned about their opinion about the use of RP.

A member of team 6 explained how a restorative session was used to increase empathy: '*When you listen to the other person's point of view, you have the opportunity to understand what bothered them, and they can also understand what bothered you.*'

Students also provided instances of how they approached thinking about others with empathy, as well as explaining the significance of adopting such a mindset towards others.

One member of team 5 said, '*I feel upset when seeing my teammate exerting a lot of effort without any support from the others. Everyone should be spared from experiencing difficult situations during their time at school. Luckily, my leader organized a group circle session to let me voice my opinion and the team starts to work well again.*'.

Another member of team 4 elucidated his feelings about RP: '*Despite being in the same team, the boys in my group did not want to work with me because I belong to the queer community. They did not show any homosexual discriminatory behaviours; they just devalue my opinion, which turns me into a social loafer…. During the circle sessions, I bared my heart out, and a more positive transformation in their behaviour can be seen then. I am finally heard and seen.*'.

Team leader 4 also expressed his gratitude towards the use of group circle, a technique in RP: '*When we take the time to understand each other's perspectives in a circle, it creates a sense of unity within the team. It's important to listen and empathize with others, as it helps us build stronger relationships.*'

This finding is commonly observed in the investigation of social-emotional learning programs, indicating that this finding is not an isolated occurrence. In particular, Durlak et al. (2011) performed a comprehensive analysis and determined that social-emotional learning programs specifically address affective competencies, including the cultivation of empathy. Restorative schools employ strategies like circle time to foster emotional skills, thereby promoting affective competence within their educational environment. The findings suggest a notable enhancement in accountability, interpersonal abilities, effective communication, and empathy.

3.3. Social Skills

The participants also express their positive viewpoint when the use of RP can foster collaboration and enhance social abilities, such as improved communication and comprehension. In particular, the students understood the importance of acquiring skills to foster positive relationships, including the ability to get along with others, resolve conflicts, and communicate effectively.

One member of team 4 shared her thought, '*I really need to*

know how to get on well with others to achieve the common goal'.

In addition, the leader of team 3 also described some skills he had when using RP, '*my leadership can be reinforced since I do not have a tendency to jump to any conclusions when one of my teammates miss the deadline; instead, I tend to use restorative questions to understand the background of the incident'.*

This approach is beneficial for interpersonal connections and offers a natural method for addressing and resolving issues.

A member of team 2 also mentioned, "*Working collaboratively with others requires compromise, cooperation, and the ability to appreciate diverse perspectives. RP actually helps me achieve common goals and foster a sense of camaraderie within the team.*'

Conflict resolution skills were highlighted as crucial for maintaining positive social dynamics.

Team leader 2 shared, "*Through RP, I learned how to engage in productive discussions, find common ground, and come up with win-win solutions. These skills have been instrumental in resolving conflicts and maintaining a harmonious team environment.*'

This reflects identical results reported by Kehoe et al. (2018) who also examines the influence of RP on student social skills by interviews and focus groups in six schools. The findings uncover five primary themes summarized by the acronym H.E.A.R.T.: Harmony, Empathy, Awareness and accountability, Respectful relationships, and Thinking in a reflective way. Within the context of schools, the H.E.A.R.T. framework serves as a practical instrument for fostering constructive social behaviours and nurturing relationships, emphasizing the importance of social and emotional learning facilitated RP.

3.4. Implications

The positive reactions from both student members and team leaders regarding the adoption of RP underscore a critical distinction in perspectives in other studies where most data were obtained from teachers' views. One notable difference is the revelation that students perceive their leaders' composure as a cornerstone of their safety and well-being. For instance, when Team Leader 2 mentioned the effectiveness of restorative questions, it illustrated a shift from traditional authoritative responses to a more empathetic approach. This finding diverges from teacher perspectives, which may overlook the direct emotional impacts of leadership styles on student engagement and comfort. The students' voices provide a fresh understanding of how trust and safety are cultivated, reinforcing the importance of student agency in creating harmonious environments.

Empathy emerged as a predominant outcome, revealing unique insights that are often absent in teacher-centric analyses. The students' accounts of experiencing and expressing empathy, particularly in the context of discrimination, highlight the transformative potential of RP. For instance, the experience shared by the member of Team 4 regarding discrimination due to sexual orientation illustrates a critical social issue that may not be adequately addressed from a teacher's viewpoint. This distinction carries significant implications. It suggests that students are not merely passive recipients of empathy but active participants in its cultivation. The documented instances of students feeling heard and valued during restorative circles illuminate how RP can be a vital tool for inclusivity, addressing issues that educators may not fully perceive or understand (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Moreover, the findings regarding social skills also highlight the disparity between student and teacher perceptions. While teachers may emphasize their own improvements in communication skills (Garnett et al., 2022), students predominantly report enhancements in their collaboration skills. The implications are clear: students recognize the importance of collaboration in achieving common goals, which reflects a more nuanced understanding of teamwork than what might be conveyed by educators.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this research highlights the beneficial effects of RP implementation university into resolving conflicts in groupwork from university students' viewpoints. RP promotes harmony by enabling effective communication and creating a sense of trust within teams. It fosters empathy by encouraging understanding and support among students. Additionally, RP enhances social skills, including communication and conflict resolution. These findings reveal the importance of implementing RP to create inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Based on the findings presented in this study, several recommendations are proposed to support the successful implementation and sustained impact of RP in educational settings. Educational institutions should consider promoting the adoption of RP to foster a more harmonious, empathetic, and socially-skilled learning environment (Courson, 2021). To ensure the effective implementation of RP, it is crucial to provide comprehensive training for students, especially freshmen, empowering them to serve as role models and facilitators of the RP process.

RP should be integrated into the curriculum and school culture, not limited to addressing specific incidents (Gregory et al., 2022). This act shows that schools will prioritize the development of interpersonal and social-emotional skills, leveraging RP as a means to foster holistic student growth.

To further validate the findings and assess the sustained effects of RP, researchers should consider conducting longitudinal studies that track the long-term outcomes of RP implementation in educational settings. This will provide valuable insights into the lasting impact on student development and school climate.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

All procedures adhered to ethical standards set by the national research committee, and followed the principles of WAME. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were provided with comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and they had the opportunity to ask questions before providing their consent.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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Supplementary Information

Appendix A: Student Interview Guide

- Do you feel safe within your team? What factors contribute to your sense of safety or lack thereof? How does the team leader work to create a safe environment for you?

- Can you share some of the rules that the team follows? What behaviors are expected from team members?

- What happens if someone breaks these rules?

- How do you handle it when a team member is feeling sad or upset? Do you think it's important to understand and consider other people's feelings? Why or why not?

- What do you do to deal with a situation where you have to work with someone who has different thoughts or actions than you? How would you handle it if you were caught in the middle of a disagreement between two team members?

- What knowledge or insights have you gained through your experiences with Restorative Practices?

Appendix B: Leader Interview Guide

- What challenges did you face with your teammates and yourself while leading a group?

- Share some Restorative Practices techniques you employed as a leader. Describe the techniques and explain why you chose to use them. Provide specific information about when, where, and how you implemented them.

- If you did not use any RP techniques, please explain the reasons behind that decision?