



Restorative Practices at Martin Middle School

Students' Perspectives

Purpose

Seven 6th grade Tier II students (i.e., students identified as in need of additional academic and behavioral support) at Martin Middle School were selected to participate in a focus group addressing restorative practices. Students responded to questions about circling (a technique used to implement restorative practices) and how circling helped them address conflict with teachers, peers, or family. This report summarizes students' feedback.

What is restorative practice?

According to the [International Institute for Restorative Practices \(IIRP\)](#), restorative practices teach students how to respond proactively to conflict, foster positive relationships with adults and peers, and learn how to prevent misbehaviors. According to IIRP, "The use of restorative practices has been shown to reliably reduce misbehavior, bullying, violence and crime among students and improve the overall climate for learning." To help high-risk students improve their conflict resolution skills, relationships with others, increase student attendance, and decrease truancy, Martin Middle School partnered with [Life Anew Restorative Justice](#).

Circling is a technique used in restorative practice classrooms. Students sit in a circle and discuss conflicts with peers, teachers, or family in order to resolve the conflict. Students are also encouraged to circle one-on-one with the student (or teacher) directly involved in the conflict. Participating in circles teaches students to communicate concerns, respectfully discuss conflict, actively listen to others' concerns, and work together to formulate a solution. At Martin Middle School, circling is integral to restorative practice implementation. For example, students in the restorative practice program participate in circles daily during their restorative practice classroom to learn how to better address areas of conflict. For more information on circling, visit IIRP's [website](#).

Positive Experiences

All seven students spoke highly of their experiences with circling, particularly as it pertained to improved relationships with teachers and managing conflicts with peers. Specifically, students reported that circling helped restorative practice teachers

"In a circle, [teachers and peers] show you different ways... to solve problems."

“understand you and where you are coming from,” which increased the level of trust students had with teachers. Others reported circling improved the way they mentally processed disagreements. For example, students described how circling taught them to take another person’s perspective and listen without interruption. As one student stated, “You get your turn to talk and explain why you were right or wrong and [the other person in the circle] can’t interrupt you or scream at you.” Others commented on how circling helped students make friends, bond, solve problems, and get things off their mind. Through circling, one student stated, “You learn about what is going on in other people’s lives,” making it easier to resolve conflict because they know where each other are coming from. Some students also indicated circling taught them to communicate with others in a “more humane way.”

Most of the seven students also valued the sense of community circling created in their

“[In a circle,] you get your own turn to explain why you think you're right, then [others] don't just [say], ‘No you're wrong.’ You get to take turns to talk if you're right or you're not.”

restorative practices class. One reported circling made it easy to share personal problems because there was “no pressure on what you can and cannot say,” and because “you can say whatever you want without somebody judging you for what you’ve already done.” Other students agreed and indicated the restorative classroom was a “safe place to talk” about issues that would otherwise build up have a negative impact on relationships

with peers, family, and school. One student explained that the positive community built through circling helped her regulate her emotions because “it’s hard to keep [emotions] in... so you just need to talk [about them],” and circling is a safe place to share these emotions without feeling judged.

A few students described experiences using circles outside their restorative practices classroom. One reported a positive experience she had using circling to “talk out” a conflict with her mother and said, “It’s a good thing to talk, because without that, [the conflict] would be much worse.” Another student explained that she used circling in a non-restorative practice class to “solve problems with peers... or [with] homework.”

Challenges With Circling

Although all seven students reported benefitting from circling, several described instances in which circling was difficult. For example, some suggested circling was challenging for shy students who have difficulty sharing. One explained that some “people don’t feel comfortable sharing [in a classroom circle] and don’t want other people to know their problems.” Students also described situations in which circling with a disrespectful peer was difficult. One stated, “You don’t really feel safe saying

Who participates in restorative practices?

In 2014–2015 students at Martin Middle School participated in restorative practices. Initially, only 6th-grade staff were trained in the process of circling because a majority of 6th grade students were identified as Tier II students. Regardless of Tier II status, all 6th-grade students participated in restorative practices classes together. Only 7th- and 8th-grade, students identified with social, truancy, or other teacher-related issues received more individualized restorative justice training.



Tier II students are those who need additional academic and behavioral supports. Austin Independent School District’s (AISD) Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²) [website](#) contains more detailed information concerning the identification of Tier II students.

Of all 6th-grade Tier II students, **nine were invited** to participate in the focus group. On the day of the focus group, **seven students were in attendance.**

Five of the participants were **boys** and **two** were **girls.**

what you're going to say because you're afraid they're going to judge [you]." Some students did not think they should share during class circles if they did not feel comfortable doing so. For this reason, they reported circling with the entire class was less effective in solving problems than was circling one-on-one with another student or teacher.

"Maybe you're shy, and when you're shy, it just puts pressure on you [to share]. I'm too shy to [share in circles] ...It's like a talent show and you have to be on stage. It's hard."



Although some students described using the circling technique outside of the restorative practice class, others did not feel comfortable circling with peers who had not learned circling. For example, one student was concerned that circling with peers who had not been trained in the technique might introduce some challenges. This student did not want to share with other students who had not learned about circling because that student did not "want people to feel sorry for me or laugh at me" because of the personal conflicts that had occurred.

"Class circles don't help you or give you advice. One-on-one circles are more helpful."

Conclusions

Students in the focus group reported enjoying the process of circling and benefitting from the experience. They described how circling helped them respond productively to conflict and explained how they used circling with peers, teachers, and family members. They also described appreciation for the increased level of trust and respect fostered through circling. Although most comments regarding circling were positive, students were concerned that some peers were judgmental during circles. For this reason, many students were not confident about circling with teachers or peers outside the restorative practice classroom. Students also indicated it was unfair to make shy students participate in the classroom circles. If the goal of the restorative practices program at Martin Middle School is to reduce disciplinary infractions and improve school climate, the use of circles should spread outside the restorative practice classroom. As the IIRP suggests, students attending schools where all students and staff are trained in circling received the most positive benefits of the program.



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