

# Restorative Justice Practices in Social Work Focus on Repairing Harm and Restoring Relationships Rather than Just Punishing Offenders

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**Abstract:-** This study investigates the role of restorative circles in promoting a positive school climate, fostering student and parent engagement, and building trust and empathy within school communities. Employing a descriptive research design, the research explores correlations between restorative justice practices and student behavior in schools, using a sample size of 185 participants drawn from students, teachers, and parents. Non-probability sampling methods and random selection ensured representation, while ethical standards were upheld throughout the study. The findings indicate a broadly positive perception of restorative circles. For promoting a positive school climate and resolving conflicts, the overall mean score was 4.30 with a standard deviation of 0.78, reflecting favorable and consistent views on the circles' contributions to improving school environments and reducing disciplinary incidents. In fostering student and parent engagement, the mean score was 4.22 with a standard deviation of 0.80, indicating strong agreement that restorative circles foster respect among students and strengthen community ties, though parental involvement was rated more neutrally. The impact of restorative circles on building trust and empathy yielded a mean of 4.15 with a standard deviation of 0.80, with strong agreement on the role of these practices in fostering empathy among students and creating a supportive school environment.

The study concludes that restorative circles are viewed as effective in promoting positive school climates, improving conflict resolution, and enhancing relationships within the school community. However, areas for improvement include increasing parental involvement and deepening students' understanding of others' perspectives. Overall, the consistency of responses, as evidenced by the relatively low standard deviations, suggests strong support for restorative circles in school settings.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### ➤ *Background of Study:*

Restorative justice is an alternative paradigm for dealing with the effects of crime and wrongdoing that seeks to bring healing to victims, offenders, and the community. Although a key element of social work is ethical code is the obligation to work toward social justice, this has been viewed primarily

as efforts to ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. (Edward J. Gumz, Cynthia L. Grant, 2019).

The practice of restorative justice offers victims, offenders, and communities an alternative approach for dealing with the harm caused by crime. In contrast to the aforementioned orientation, restorative justice allows a three-dimensional approach that includes the victim, offender, and community (Bazemore, 2019)

Restorative justice is often used as an umbrella term for a wide variety of practice approaches (Tschudi & Reichelt, 2004). Though practices are often used in a mutually exclusive manner, distinctions across categories have begun to blur (Umbreit, Vos, & Coates, 2004).

Based on this systematic review of the restorative justice literature, social work educators have written little about restorative justice as it relates to social work education. Only two articles specifically addressed educating social workers on the topic

In the context of schools in Somaliland, the implementation of restorative justice presents a significant gap in the current educational disciplinary practices. While traditional Somali culture emphasizes reconciliation and community-based conflict resolution, formal mechanisms for restorative justice have not been fully integrated into the school system. The absence of structured restorative justice programs means that students, teachers, and the school community often miss opportunities for meaningful dialogue and healing. Moreover, the disciplinary focus remains primarily on punitive measures, which can perpetuate cycles of retribution and fail to address the underlying issues that lead to behavioral problems. Bridging this gap requires concerted efforts to develop and institutionalize restorative justice practices that are culturally relevant and aligned with Somaliland's unique educational and social landscape. Integrating these practices could enhance social cohesion, provide more effective resolutions to conflicts, and support the broader goals of social justice within schools in the region.

### ➤ *Problem Statement:*

In contemporary educational environments, addressing behavioral issues traditionally involves punitive measures, which often fail to address the underlying causes of

misconduct and neglect the restoration of relationships. Ideally, schools should foster a supportive and inclusive environment where conflicts are resolved through understanding and cooperation.

However, the prevailing approach in many schools focuses on punishment rather than rehabilitation, leading to recurring behavioral problems and strained relationships. The consequence of this punitive approach is that it often alienates students, exacerbating behavioral issues and contributing to a negative school climate.

The gap in current practices highlights the need for implementing restorative justice practices in schools to effectively repair harm, restore relationships, and cultivate a positive and inclusive educational environment.

#### ➤ *General Objectives:*

Restorative justice practices in social work focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than just punishing offenders.

#### ➤ *Specific Objectives:*

- To examine Role of Restorative Circles in Promoting a Positive School Climate and Resolving Conflicts.
- To identify the Role of Restorative Circles in Student and Parent Engagement
- To assess the Impact of Restorative Circles on Building Trust and Empathy Within the School Community

#### ➤ *Research Questions:*

- What is the role of restorative circles in promoting a positive school climate and resolving conflicts?
- What is the role of restorative circles in student and parent engagement?
- What is the impact of restorative circles on building trust and empathy within the school community?

## II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive research design to investigate the correlation between restorative justice practices and student behavior in schools. Non-probability sampling methods were employed for participant selection, with simple random sampling ensuring unbiased representation.

The sample size of 185 individuals was determined using the Solvents Formula to ensure statistical significance. Ethical considerations were prioritized, including obtaining informed consent and safeguarding confidentiality. The target population consisted of students, teachers and parents in schools where restorative justice practices are being implemented.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

### ➤ *Origin of Restorative Justice*

Restorative justice and its related practices do not comprise a new phenomenon. (McFaul, 2017) Suggested that, in varying degrees, the use of restorative justice practices has a long history in human culture. Part of the history of restorative justice (RJ) can be drawn from the use of conferencing circles by the indigenous Maori tribe of New Zealand and their subsequent implementation as a behavior modification strategy in Australian schools in the early- to mid-1990s (Payne & Welch, 2015) . (Vaandering, 2014) and (Wachtel, 2016) each noted numerous authors who traced restorative justice to ancient roots in cultures as varied as Native American, African, Hebrew, and Arabic. Wearmouth, McKinney, and Glynn (Golson, A paradigm shift to restorative leadership practices (Doctoral dissertation), 2018) reported that the Maori tribe in New Zealand practiced the use of conferencing circles between the offender and the victim to help the victim realize how their actions impacted others. These restorative circles were then introduced into Australia's juvenile justice system and later adapted for use by the country's school systems (Biffis, A., & Lockhart, A., 2008)

In schools, the use of RJ turned toward educating students about their behavior to help address discipline issues. (McFaul H. , 2017). According to Zuckerman et al. (2015) acknowledged that RJ in the school setting is difficult to define but synthesized four features of RJ common among its use within an educational environment: (a) repairing harm over punishing the offender, (b) including the student perspective within the process of restitution, (c) implementing a whole-school approach to RJ, and (d) building students' social-emotional capacity through defined practices and strategies.

### ➤ *Restorative Justice Theory*

Restorative justice often encapsulates a variety of terms cited by education practitioners that include restorative practices, restorative approaches, and restorative discipline (Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., Persson, H., Fronius, T., & Petrosino, A., 2015) Each term draws from a philosophy of conflict resolution, i.e., restorative theory, in which the traditional criminal justice practices of Western civilization are often supplemented, and, in many cases, replaced by the development and maintenance of productive community relationships (Drewery, 2016) . according to (Lustick, 2016) identified that within the traditional practices of criminal justice systems, a crime is viewed as an attack on the state and punishments are levied in accordance to the severity of the crime. Through the threat of punishments, citizens within a community are compelled to follow rules out of fear. Practitioners of restorative theory, however, view crimes not as the breaking of rules but as offenses against the community that can be resolved through conflict resolution practices derived from indigenous cultures around the world and through the practices similar to the mediation-reconciliation processes observed within Mennonite communities in Canada in the 1970s . Restorative justice theory comes with the idea that the consequences to a perpetrator of a crime

should include an opportunity for that perpetrator to repair the harm done to individual relationships and the community. While levers of rewards and punishment are motivating elements in traditional behavior control systems, restorative justice relies on relational interactions between the members of a community, or “relational ecologies” as defined by (Morrison, B., & Vaandering, ., 2012)

#### ➤ *Restorative Justice of School*

In response to growing student suspension rates and the disproportional application of exclusionary discipline to students of color, school leaders were challenged by both federal and state agencies to identify and implement alternative forms of discipline within their schools and to reduce schools’ reliance on suspensions in response to student misbehavior (Manassah, T., Roderick, T., & Gregory, A., 2018). R. J. according to (Skiba, R. J., Arrendondo, M. I., & Williams, N. T, 2014) reported that since the 1970s, secondary school students have been increasingly suspended, a claim supported by research from Losen and Skiba (2010) who reported an increase in student suspensions and expulsions from 3.7% to 6.9% from the 1970s to the early 2000s. While White students experienced an increase of less than 2% in suspension rates between 1973 and 2006, Black students experienced a nine-point increase (Losen & Skiba,

2010). According to the Office of Civil Rights Data (2018), there were 3.45 million out-of-school suspensions in the 2015-16 school year.

(Hinson, 2020) Reported that student suspensions have increased despite their lack of correlation to violent behavior.

(Guckenburg, 2015) summarized the views of multiple researchers and practitioners of restorative justice who confirmed the failure of exclusionary discipline approaches and the disparity in disciplinary actions among minority populations that fueled the school-to-prison phenomena. (Jones, 2018) Also noted the detrimental impact of suspension and expulsion on black males in addition to the negative impact on student achievement and the erosion of trust critical for school improvement and increased student performance. In a review of current research on restorative justice, (Darling-Hammond, 2020)cited researchers who determined that suspensions from school accounted for 20% of the achievement gap between White and Black students. McFaul (2017) (McFaul, H., 2017) wrote of the “notoriously retributive” (p. 83) administrative responses to student misbehavior by determining whom to blame and how severe a punishment to levy.

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1 Demographic Information

Question	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What is your role in the school?	Student	75	40.5%
	Teacher	56	30.3%
	Parent	33	17.8%
	Administrator	21	11.4%
How long have you been involved with restorative circles in this school?	Less than 6 months	28	15.1%
	6 months to 1 year	47	25.4%
	1 to 2 years	57	30.8%
	More than 2 years	53	28.7%
How frequently do you participate in restorative circles?	Weekly	38	20.5%
	Monthly	57	30.8%
	A few times a year	47	25.4%
	Rarely	28	15.1%
	Never	15	8.1%

#### ➤ *Interpretations:*

In the sample of 185 participants, the majority are students (75, or 40.5%), followed by teachers (56, or 30.3%). Parents make up 17.8% (33 participants), and administrators are the least represented group with 11.4% (21 participants). Regarding involvement with restorative circles, 15.1% (28 participants) have been involved for less than 6 months, while 25.4% (47 participants) have been involved for 6 months to 1 year. The largest group, comprising 30.8% (57 participants), has been involved for 1 to 2 years, and 28.7% (53

participants) have been engaged for more than 2 years. In terms of participation frequency, 20.5% (38 participants) engage weekly, and the most common frequency is monthly, with 30.8% (57 participants) participating at this rate. A few times a year is the frequency for 25.4% (47 participants), while 15.1% (28 participants) participate rarely, and 8.1% (15 participants) have never participated in restorative circles. This distribution highlights that while many participants have significant experience and regular involvement, there is also a notable proportion of less frequent and non-participants.

Table 2 Role of Restorative Circles in Student and Parent Engagement

Description	N	Mean	Std deviation	Interpretation
1. Students feel more respected and valued after participating in restorative circles.	185	4.6137	0.68804	Strongly Agree
2. Students are more likely to resolve conflicts peacefully after participating in restorative circles.	185	4.4186	0.76490	Agree
3. Parents feel more involved in the school community since the introduction of restorative circles.	185	3.4796	0.85984	Neutral
4. Restorative circles have improved communication between parents and the school.	185	4.3653	0.81822	Agree
5. Parents feel that their concerns are addressed more effectively through restorative circles.	185	4.3061	0.78959	Agree
6. Parents feel that their concerns are addressed more effectively through restorative circles.	185	3.72168	0.84376	Neutral

➤ *Interpretation*

The overall mean of 4.22 and a standard deviation of 0.80 indicate a generally positive perception of restorative circles in promoting student and parent engagement. Respondents strongly agree that restorative circles help students feel more respected and valued (mean of 4.61) and believe that these practices have strengthened the sense of community within the school (mean of 4.52). Parents also tend to agree that their concerns are addressed more

effectively and that communication with the school has improved, with means of 4.31 and 4.37, respectively. However, perceptions regarding parental involvement and the resolution of concerns are more neutral, as reflected in mean values of 3.48 and 3.72. The relatively low standard deviations suggest consistent views among respondents, reinforcing the positive impact of restorative circles, while also highlighting areas where perceptions are more varied.

Table 3 Role of Restorative Circles in Promoting a Positive School Climate and Resolving Conflicts

Descriptive Statistics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1. Restorative circles have contributed to a more positive school climate.	185	4.7137	0.58804	Strongly Agree
2. Restorative circles are effective in resolving conflicts among students.	185	4.5184	0.73801	Agree
3. Participation in restorative circles has led to a decrease in disciplinary incidents.	185	4.4000	0.81535	Agree
4. Students feel safer in school since the implementation of restorative circles.	185	3.3245	0.97962	Neutral
5. Restorative circles have improved communication between students and teachers.	185	4.5082	0.78270	Agree
6. Teachers find restorative circles helpful in managing classroom conflicts.	185	4.29696	0.70074	Agree
7. Restorative circles have strengthened the sense of community within the school.	185	4.5187	0.67854	Agree

➤ *Interpretation:-*

The overall mean of 4.30 and a standard deviation of 0.78 reflect a broadly positive perception of restorative circles, indicating that, on average, respondents view them favorably and consistently. The highest agreement is seen in the impact of restorative circles on creating a more positive school climate (mean of 4.71) and their effectiveness in resolving conflicts (mean of 4.52). These findings suggest that restorative circles are seen as highly beneficial in improving school environment and conflict management. A notable positive impact is also observed in reducing

disciplinary incidents (mean of 4.40) and enhancing communication between students and teachers (mean of 4.51). However, perceptions of student safety have a neutral stance (mean of 3.32), showing that while some respondents are positive about safety improvements, others remain uncertain. The overall consistency in responses, as indicated by the relatively low standard deviations, highlights that the positive effects of restorative circles are widely recognized, though there are areas where opinions are more varied.



Table 4 Impact of Restorative Circles on Building Trust and Empathy Within the School Community

Descriptive Statistics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Overall	185	4.1547	0.80234	Positive
1. Participation in restorative circles has increased trust among students.	185	4.4187	0.73843	Agree
2. Restorative circles have fostered a greater sense of empathy among students.	185	4.5137	0.68819	Strongly Agree
3. Students who participate in restorative circles are more understanding of others' perspectives.	185	3.5796	0.85984	Neutral
4. Restorative circles have improved the relationships between students and teachers.	185	4.36122	0.73019	Agree
5. Teachers feel more connected to their students since participating in restorative circles.	185	3.9878	0.76889	Neutral
6. Restorative circles have led to a more empathetic and supportive school environment.	185	4.48164	0.70891	Strongly Agree
7. Trust between students and teachers has increased due to restorative circles.	185	4.4187	0.73854	Agree

#### ➤ Interpretation

The overall mean of 4.15 and a standard deviation of 0.80 indicate a positive view of the impact of restorative circles on building trust and empathy within the school community. Respondents strongly agree that restorative circles have fostered a greater sense of empathy among students and led to a more empathetic and supportive school environment, as reflected in the high means of 4.51 and 4.48, respectively. Trust between students and teachers, as well as relationships between students and teachers, have also shown improvement, with mean values of 4.42 and 4.36, respectively. However, the perception of students understanding others' perspectives and teachers feeling more connected to their students is more neutral, with means of 3.58 and 3.99. The consistency in responses, shown by the relatively low standard deviations, supports the overall positive impact of restorative circles while highlighting areas where opinions are more varied.

### V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the role of restorative circles in Somaliland schools, focusing on their impact on school climate, conflict resolution, student and parent engagement, and trust-building within the school community. The research findings show positive outcomes across these areas, with generally consistent views among participants, as evidenced by low standard deviations.

#### ➤ Objective 1: Role of Restorative Circles in Promoting a Positive School Climate and Resolving Conflicts

Restorative circles significantly contributed to a more positive school climate. The overall mean score was 4.30 with a standard deviation of 0.78, reflecting a broadly favorable perception of these practices. Respondents strongly agreed that restorative circles were effective in resolving conflicts (mean = 4.52, SD = 0.74), reducing disciplinary incidents (mean = 4.40, SD = 0.82), and improving communication between students and teachers (mean = 4.51, SD = 0.78). However, perceptions of student safety remained more

neutral (mean = 3.32, SD = 0.98), suggesting a need for targeted improvements in this area.

#### ➤ Objective 2: Role of Restorative Circles in Student and Parent Engagement

The study also examined how restorative circles impact student and parent engagement. The overall mean score for this objective was 4.22, with a standard deviation of 0.80. Participants strongly agreed that restorative circles helped students feel more respected and valued (mean = 4.61, SD = 0.69). They also acknowledged improvements in communication between parents and the school (mean = 4.37, SD = 0.82). Nonetheless, perceptions of parental involvement were more neutral (mean = 3.48, SD = 0.86), indicating that while communication has improved, deeper engagement from parents could be further encouraged.

#### ➤ Objective 3: Impact of Restorative Circles on Building Trust and Empathy Within the School Community

Restorative circles were found to be effective in fostering trust and empathy, with an overall mean score of 4.15 and a standard deviation of 0.80. Respondents strongly agreed that these circles increased empathy among students (mean = 4.51, SD = 0.69) and contributed to a more empathetic and supportive school environment (mean = 4.48, SD = 0.71). Trust between students and teachers also showed improvement (mean = 4.42, SD = 0.74). However, perceptions of students' understanding of others' perspectives (mean = 3.58, SD = 0.86) and teachers' connection to students (mean = 3.99, SD = 0.77) were more neutral, suggesting opportunities for deepening these relational aspects.

#### ➤ Conclusion

The findings indicate that restorative circles have been effective in enhancing school climate, resolving conflicts, and fostering trust and empathy within the school community. However, areas such as student safety, parental involvement, and the depth of connections between students and teachers require further attention to maximize the potential of restorative circles.

➤ *Recommendations*• *Enhancing Student Safety*

Schools should integrate specific safety measures into restorative practices to address the neutral perceptions of student safety. This could include protocols for ensuring physical and emotional safety during and after restorative circles.

• *Increasing Parental Involvement*

Structured opportunities for parents to participate in restorative circles and other school activities should be created. Encouraging a more active role for parents in the school community could enhance engagement and support for students.

• *Building Stronger Connections between Students and Teacher*

Professional development for teachers in restorative practices can help strengthen relationships with students, addressing the neutral perceptions of connection and understanding.

• *Tailoring Restorative Practices to Cultural Contexts:*

Restorative practices should be culturally relevant, integrating traditional Somali conflict resolution methods to ensure alignment with local customs and values. This approach can enhance the effectiveness of these practices in Somaliland schools.

• *Sustaining and Expanding Restorative Circles*

Restorative circles should be institutionalized as a core component of schools' disciplinary and community-building efforts. This includes ongoing training, support for staff, and regular evaluation to sustain and expand the positive impact of these practices.

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