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2021

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UNIVERISTY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERISTY, SAN MARCOS

And How Are the Children? Exploring the Lived Experience of Black Youth Participating

in Restorative Community Conferencing

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of

Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Felicia Singleton

Committee in charge:

    California State University, San Marcos

        Manuel Vargas, Chair
        Joni Kolman

    University of California San Diego

        Carolyn Hofstetter

2022

The dissertation of Felicia Singleton is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

University of California San Diego

California State University, San Marcos

2022

DEDICATION

To the underestimated, the overlooked and the outcast; trust your power.

~Colin Kaepernick

I dedicate this dissertation to my paternal and maternal grandparents Ozell and A.D. Cooper and Sarah and Abraham Singleton, Sr. As Black Americans, you lived, persevered, and realized many dreams against countless odds. Although you are no longer physically with me your determined and resilient spirit lives in me. When my days are dark your light shines in me and continues to illuminate my path and fuel my spirit. I will be forever grateful to God for your examples of faith, strength, endurance, love and directive to always trust my power.

Until the Lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero.

~African Proverb

I express my deepest appreciation to the brilliant and beautiful voices who so willingly shared their restorative community conference journey. Because of your courage the potential to change policies, practices and lives will live through your sacred words. Each of you are the very definition of what it means to counter someone's else's story. Your strength, brilliance and very being is inspiring.

EPIGRAPH

Through the darkest of night, and the heat of day,
A ship sails with haste from the African Bay.
This ship carried cargo, more precious than gold,
Carried human beings who were meant to be sold.
Robbed of their culture, to their history blind,
Knowledge is essential to a strong black mind
Let us be historically, and culturally immersed.
Let us feed our own hunger and quench our own thirst.
Now we realize what we need most, we possess deep inside
It's a feeling of spirit and we call it,
Black Pride.

Winifred "Freddy" Brooks
A Different World
Season 4, Ep.2 "How Bittersweet it Is."

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places with confidence, light, love, and pride exuding *Black Girl Magic* because of you! Thank you for consistently praying for me and making sure I had a good meal on fish fry Fridays!

To my big brother, Tony: siblings have a special bond, and our relationship has proven to be unbreakable. You have always wanted to make sure I was okay and, thanks to you, I am. I appreciate you.

Dad, thank you for the daily phone calls of love and encouragement and, Eloise, thank you for reminding me that I am a brilliant Black girl.

Despite unexpected health challenges I was able to maintain my regular writing practice and complete this because of the continual prayers and support from my church family, the Greater Antioch COGIC.

I would like to acknowledge my committee, Dr. Manuel Vargas, Dr. Carolyn Hostetter, and Dr. Joni Kolman. I had the unique opportunity to have each of you as a professor and as part of my committee. Thank you for the lessons, advice, and mentorship. Dr. Vargas, I deeply appreciate you taking the time to help me clearly articulate and align what was in my head and heart. From our first meeting I told you how important it was for me to create a space for authentic storytelling, and, with your guidance, I was able to do so. Thank you for your leadership.

Thank you to my doctoral village and extended family: Troy Roland, Tameka McGlawn, Richard Lawrence, Vernon Moore, Justine Darling, Theresa Ambo, Theresa Meyerott, Gabriela Delgado, Julie Goldman, Michanne Hoctor Thompson, Leilah Kirkendoll, and Rhonda Beasley. Thank you for generously sharing your guidance, listening ear, knowledge, and expertise.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge the amazing JDP 15! From day one there was something special about us. We invested in our relationship, and I am better to have

known each of you. I have learned from each of you what it means when your friends become

your family. We are forever connected by our collective and individual journey.

VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

And How Are the Children? Exploring the Lived Experience of Black Youth Participating in
Restorative Community Conferencing

by

Felicia Singleton

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2022
California State University, San Marcos, 2022

Professor Manuel Vargas, Chair

For over four decades, restorative justice has gained momentum as a viable alternative to
punitive discipline in U.S. K-12 schools. Although school-based restorative practices research is
still emerging, studies have shown promise in school systems (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Likewise,
restorative approaches, namely the use of restorative community conferencing in the U.S.
juvenile justice system (Bazemore & Schiff, 2015; Rodriguez, 2007), is showing promising
results in decreasing the criminalization of youth. Propelled by the school-to-prison pipeline,
restorative community conferencing offers a paradigmatic shift in how justice is viewed,

understood, and pursued. The restorative philosophy requires a belief that justice should be healing, which is achieved by attending to the relationship between the person responsible for the harm, the person harmed, and the community relationships (Van Ness & Strong, 2010; Zehr, 2015). Despite the emergence of restorative justice studies with a focus on recidivism rates, experiences of racially minoritized youth have not yet been explored. Black youth are historically underserved yet overrepresented in exclusionary practices, despite an absence of evidence of improved outcomes (Okilwa & Robert, 2017). Through examination of the lived experiences and stories of Black young adults, this phenomenological study will employ critical race theory and ecological system theory as a dual lens to understand what is good and successful about restorative community conferencing.

Children don't belong in jails. However, increasingly, school misbehavior is being dealt with punitive policies, school resource officers, or law enforcement leading to more youth becoming involved with official legal systems (Petrosino, et al., 2012). The educational system has extinguished the spark of learning for many Black children and the justice system has stolen the childhood innocence of countless Black youth. This study sought to show a glimpse of possibility and hope when restorative community conferencing is used to respond to wrongdoing. This study is especially relevant at a time when repeated police violence against unarmed Black civilians was illuminated by the public viewing of the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The tragedy has led a nationwide call to overhaul policing and criminalization, both in schools and society, where mistreatment of Black youth has been consistently documented.

Chapter One: Introduction

And how are the children? —Masai greeting

Among all tribes inhabiting Kenya, the Maasai warriors are regarded as the most fabled,

noble, and fierce. As the Maasai go about their days, traveling on the roads or through the

mountains, the traditional greeting, *casserian engeri*, is still used. *Casserian engeri*, when

translated from the Maa language means *and how are the children?* This way of greeting is not

limited to parents or women of the tribe; rather, it is passed between every member of the Maasai

tribe, including warriors, elders, and those who do not have biological children of their own. In

response to the greeting, the traditional answer is *the children are well*. This response

acknowledges the high value and priority the Maasai place on protecting the most vulnerable:

their children. The Maasai believe their reason for being is to ensure all children are well (Davis,

2017). When learning about the Maasai tribe, we find ourselves thinking of young people in the

United States who live in a system that may not prioritize the wellness of all children.

Context of the Study

In the United States, approximately 5-7% of K-12 public school students received one or

more out-of-school suspensions during the 2015–2016 academic year (U.S. Department of

Education, 2018). From the late 1980s, the use of punitive discipline has increased steadily, in

large part because of policies directing school administrators to respond to both minor and major

behavior infractions in similar fashion, resulting in overuse of out-of-school suspensions,

expulsions, and school-based arrests (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).

Empirical research is abundant showing Black youth being penalized more frequently

and with greater harshness than their White, suburban counterparts for the same offenses

(Gregory et al., 2010; Welch & Payne, 2010). Research has shown Black learners are four times

more likely to be dismissed from learning in the classroom than White students because of exclusionary discipline practices (Balfanz et al., 2015; Losen et al., 2015). One wonders about the possible outcomes if adults in the United States were to embrace the commitment to ensure *all children are well*, regardless of race, ethnicity, ability, religion, gender, or socioeconomic status. Would young people appreciate knowing there was a collective interest in understanding their stories and how their lived experiences have influenced their well-being?

A strong school ethos is an important component in ensuring positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all learners (Solvason, 2005). It is common for school mission statements to encourage student attendance by publicly committing to creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning spaces for every child (Rebell, 2008). The National School Climate Council (2007) described school climate as the quality and character of school life based on patterns all stakeholders experience, reflecting the organization's norms and values on interpersonal relationships, teaching, and learning practices. Researchers have contended school community members describe a positive climate as feeling safe, supported, and welcome (Jones & Shindler, 2016; Malinen & Savolainen, 2016; Voight et al., 2013; Zullig et al., 2010); however, when schools rely on punitive policies and approaches to respond to behavior missteps or policy violations, there is a negative impact on a positive school climate. Furthermore, when schools use these practices, they harm students, rather than help them (Gonzalez, 2012; Morris, 2012; Noguera, 2003). Negative impacts of punitive discipline are further enhanced when students attend schools in underserved communities. In the United States, research has shown public school systems located in inner-city neighborhoods reflect many of the same systemic oppression and social injustices such as poverty, racism, violence, and hopelessness as the larger society (Anderson & Ritter, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). As an example, research has found

school exclusion to be a predictor of increased risk of encountering law enforcement leading to arrest, conviction, and probation (Nance, 2105). This path of criminalization and delinquency is described as the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon (Mallett, 2017) making Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) an framework to highlight the connection between schools and society and how these issues influence students' behaviors impacting their success in school and life course.

To disrupt the overuse of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, school educational leaders have explored relational initiatives designed to build students' decision-making skills, while disrupting the inequitable disciplinary actions learners of color have experienced in schools (Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Furger et al., 2019; Thapa et al., 2013) and government officials continue grappling with ways to divert youth from the juvenile justice system more effectively. Thus, both sectors are turning to restorative approaches—an emerging practice stemming from restorative justice (RJ) to address school discipline.

Schools are finding success with restorative justice, which was introduced in the U.S. justice system in the 1970's (Bazemore & Schiff, 2015; Rodriguez, 2007). Restorative justice, traditionally rooted in indigenous cultures, offers a paradigmatic shift in how justice is viewed, understood, and pursued. While the punitive concept of justice has a focus on violations of laws and the appropriate punishment, restorative justice (RJ) has a focus on how the people involved have been affected and what can be done to make things right. For example, while the traditional justice system looks to punish offenders by asking, *What laws have been broken? Who did it*? or *What do they deserve?* RJ looks at what is needed to heal all impacted by the harmful act by asking, *Who has been harmed? What are their needs? or Whose obligations are these?* (Ryan &

Ruddy, 2017; Zehr, 2015). RJ contends that harm to one member of the community is harm against the whole.

Through a restorative lens, justice is seen as a move toward healing, through the mending of damaged individual and community relationships (Van Ness & Strong, 2010; Zehr, 2015). The central goal of a restorative approach is to make things as right as possible, without causing further harm to all involved. The goal is achieved in part by separating the doer from the deed and by the questions asked (Van Ness & Strong, 2014; Zehr, 2015). In applications with young people, there are a variety of restorative justice models that have shown positive results in not only minimizing school exclusion but decreasing youth contact with the juvenile legal system (Gonzalez, 2012; Schiff, 2013).

Restorative justice is a philosophy of justice utilizing practices rooted in indigenous ways (Zehr, 2002). Restorative justice offers a paradigm shift that places value on the needs of the person harmed, the person responsible, and the community by using non-punitive approaches which emphasize accountability and resolution through dialogue (McCold & Wachtel, 2001, Zehr, 2002). There is a variety of restorative processes that work alongside formal criminal justice systems in the United States (Wilson et al., 2018). These are designed to support youth offenders with community-based resources to address behaviors related to their offense (Wilson et al., 2018). One such program is restorative community conferencing. A restorative community conference (RCC) is a face-to-face problem-solving approach between people who were harmed, the people who caused that harm, and community members. Led by trained and experienced RCC facilitators, participants in the RCC engage in dialogue about the harm caused, the best way to repair the harm as much as possible, and the tools and supports needed to prevent further harm. Further, restorative conferencing is often focused on healing, repair, and reintegration into

society. During the conference, the youth responsible for the harm is held accountable for his or her actions and, together, the RCC members create a goal-oriented action plan for the youth to repair the harm to the person, the community, the family, and themselves. Once the action plan has been completed, charges are dismissed (Baliga et al., 2017). Restorative community conferencing (RCC) provides a safe space for harm to be addressed, for healing to be initiated (Baliga et al. 2017; Braithwaite, 2000; Walgrave, 2012)—an opportunity for youth responsible to shed the stigmatizing offender label—and support reintegration into the community (Morris & Maxwell, 2001).

Even though there is much discussion on the implementation and success of restorative justice in school and community settings, findings on how racially marginalized participants experience the process are scarce. Specifically, there is a void in the literature exploring the lived experience of Black participants responsible for harm and how the process has influenced their life choices after participation in an RCC (Giles, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

As a result of education and justice system failures, research continues unveiling trends of overrepresentation of marginalized communities in the criminal justice system pushing justice reform activists to continue advocating for nontraditional approaches in responding to crime. Restorative justice has grown in popularity as a viable alternative, capable of improving victims' feelings of satisfaction, while simultaneously supporting the needs of people responsible for the harm. Restorative justice is anchored in principles that create space for responsibility, restoration, and re-entry into the community. In practice with youth, studies have shown restorative approaches can decrease school exclusion and contacts with the legal system, thus

diverting them from the school-to-prison pipeline (Davis, 2019; Hass-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Zehr, 2015).

Legal publications describe *justice* as the "ethical, philosophical idea that people are to be treated impartially, fairly, properly, and reasonably by the law and by arbiters of the law, that laws are to ensure that no harm befalls another, and that, where harm is alleged, both the accuser and the accused receive a morally right consequence merited by their actions" (Legal Information Institute, 2020, p, 1). Since the 16th century, the statue of Lady Justice has been used as a symbol to represent balanced justice being administered blindly, regardless of one's gender, race, ethnicity, or social class; yet research has consistently shown the existence of racial disparities in the U.S. justice system (Alexander, 2020; Clemons, 2014; Fabri & Langbroek, 2000).

Although U.S. crime rates have decreased, over the past 40 years, the U.S. incarceration rate has seen an exponential growth, earning the United States the dubious distinction of having the world's largest prison population. Approximately 2.2 million people are currently behind bars in the United States, compared to 0.3 million in 1972—an increase of 1.9 million (Robles-Ramamurthy & Watson, 2019). Alexander (2020) brought attention to the expansion of mass incarceration—also known as the *new Jim Crow*—and provided awareness about racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Decades of data show pervasive racial disparities exist due to the systemic and unjust profiling, unlawful detainment, and arrests of marginalized communities, specifically Black Americans, adults and youth alike (Scott, et al., 2017). Studies from the 1980s and 1990s, reveal Black juveniles were detained, arrested, and jailed at higher rates than White youth (Robles-Ramamurthy & Watson, 2019). Additionally, studies have shown when Black and White youth are confined, Black youth are more likely to be sent to correctional

facilities, while White youth are more likely to be sent to psychiatric hospitals (Robles-Ramamurthy & Watson, 2019).

While the central focus of the U.S. criminal justice system is for the rehabilitation of those responsible for harm, reduction in preventing other crimes, and providing support to impacted parties, the system has failed in meeting those outcomes (Karp, 2000; Zehr, 2015). For example, education programs in prisons often lack needed resources for successful sustainability and rehabilitation (Coley & Barton, 2006), and victims of crimes have expressed frustration and disappointment with the justice process, including the fact that it does not address their needs, even after a guilty verdict and sentencing have been handed down (Herman, 2010; Spalek, 2016).

Research findings can no longer be ignored and serve as a call to action for professionals in every sector to address the normalization of criminalizing Black youth. The conversation must move beyond discussing the deleterious effects of punitive practices and move to understanding how promising practices and programs, anchored in restorative justice (RJ) principles, may disrupt the flow of racially marginalized youth into the school-to-prison pipeline and negative influences in their lives. This researcher, an educator and RJ practitioner working with Black participants, sought to contribute further to the literature of how RJ approaches influence life choices and outcomes for Black young adults.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The goal of this study was to understand how Black participants experienced an RJ program known as a Restorative Community Conference (RCC), and the effectiveness of the process. Furthermore, this qualitative study was used to understand how, if at all, participation in an RCC has shaped the lives of Black young adults. The researcher sought to learn how

participants were selected to participate in the RCC, the support they received, and how the experience supported their re-entry into their communities. To this end, the following research questions were investigated:

1. In what ways do Black young adults describe how they became involved in a Restorative Community Conference (RCC)?

2. How does a restorative approach compare to a punitive response?

3. In what ways does the lived experience of Restorative Community Conference (RCC) participation influence the lives of Black young adults?

To capture the voice and essence of the lived experiences and outcomes, the researcher identified four Black young adults willing to share their experiences in an RCC. In-depth interviews were used as the main qualitative tool to gather data on participants' lived experiences and to explore the extent participation in a restorative conference shaped their lives.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the go-along research method was adapted to a virtual format. The *go-along method* is the blending of the researcher as a participant-observer and interviewer, allowing for a focused and systematic approach to *hanging out* (Kusenbach, 2003). The go-along technique allows the researcher to capture the interviewees' lived experiences in their local environments, also known as *in situ.* This blending of people and place offers the potential to access deep knowledge and add layers of understanding (Anderson, 2004; Casey, 2000; Kusenbach, 2003). To that end, participants chose a location that connected them to their RCC experience, thus serving as virtual community walk, as both, the interviewer and interviewee, engaged in dialogue.

Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes and was audio recorded. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed. On completion of the interview transcription, the

researcher wrote analytical memos to record themes and generate questions, as well as areas for further exploration. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, after each interview was transcribed, the transcription was offered to each participant for member checking (Candela, 2018; Johnson, 1997; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

This study was anchored in tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ecological Systems Theory that align with principles of restorative justice (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Zehr, 1970). CRT argues that the permanence of racism is the foundation of America's history, society, and ecosystems. Further, CRT declares that equity can only be achieved when dominion over historically silenced voices is heard and acknowledged as necessary to bring balance to the dominant ideology prominently centered in America's ecosystem (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As indicated by Figure 1 below, Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides the opportunity to insert non-dominant ideologies into Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (EST) which are often anchored in dominant ideology. Furthermore, these theories provide a dual lens to examine the lived experiences of Black young adults who went through the Restorative Community Conference process.
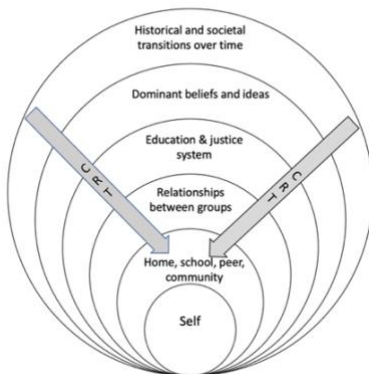
Figure 1.

Critical Race Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Methodology

This study utilized the phenomenological research approach which is the act of uncovering and describing the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon; it requires the researcher to go directly to the subjects (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Mertler, 2018; Van Manen, 2014). The phenomenologist researcher is concerned with describing what emerges through stories of direct personal experiences to understand the phenomenon and the meanings attributed to those experiences. The focus of phenomenology is completely and continuously aimed at understanding human experiences, without evaluative assumptions, established criteria, causal explanations, or drawn-interpretative generalizations. To learn about RCC from perspectives of Black youth, this phenomenological research helped to uncover and elevate those voices (Mertler, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

As both a theoretical framework and methodological instrument, Critical Race Theory provides a conceptual toolbox to legitimize and understand the voices, worth, and experience of racialized communities (Delgado & Stefanic, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1997). One tool central to CRT is the use of storytelling and counter storytelling, approaches used by many minoritized cultures to challenge mainstream assumptions and dominant narratives. Counter stories offered the researcher a view into the reality of those closest to the margins (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). Therefore, personal stories elevated the voices of Black participants, making space for them to describe their realities and experiences during their RCC. Through an analysis of Black youth stories, the researcher examined the systemic structures of exclusion from the educational system leading to the juvenile justice system, and restorative approaches which promise to disrupt the inequities in both systems.

Significance of the Study

Restorative justice research in PK-12 settings has been focused on school-wide implementation to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Quantitative research has supported the claim that RJ practices have a positive impact on school discipline with decreases in suspensions and expulsions (Porter, 2007; Schiff, 2013). This phenomenological study expands the conversation by illuminating how Black participants experienced RCC, as well as determining if the experience delivered on RJ's promise and ideals.

Definition of Terms

A challenge in writing about RJ is the exclusivity of the language used among RJ practitioners and researchers. Therefore, for the sake of clarity in this study, it is important to provide a glossary of definitions, terms, and questions unique to RJ. Key terms used in RJ are designed to replace legal terminology, typically applied, and used in K-12 education and juvenile justice settings.

Facilitator: The RCC facilitator serves as the key point of contact throughout the conference process. In addition to coordinating the process and facilitating the dialogue, the facilitator acts as a mentor to the youth responsible and often the relationship lasts beyond the completion of the RCC.

Juvenile diversion: Juvenile diversion is an intervention strategy that redirects youth away from formal processing in the juvenile justice system, while still holding them accountable for their actions. Needs are addressed in community-based programs.

Person harmed: Person harmed is the term used to describe the *victim* in traditional education and legal settings. This is the person or people most directly impacted by the crime.

Responsible youth: Responsible youth are young people responsible for harm. In the legal setting, the term *offender* is used.

Restorative community conferencing (RCC): Restorative community conferencing is a process that brings community members together to support healing by addressing the harms, needs, and obligations resulting from an offense to one or more members of the community.

Restorative justice (RJ): Restorative justice practices come from an indigenous based philosophy, or way of being, that encourages individuals to come together to strengthen and heal communities. Restorative justice practices in schools cultivate positive school cultures through community building. In the justice system, RJ practices have a focus on reconciliation through dialogue among the person responsible (offender), the person harmed (victims), and the community at large. RJ offers many restorative models and approaches.

School-to-prison pipeline: The school-to-prison pipeline is an expression frequently used to articulate how school exclusionary practices have been linked to students' increased risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One offers a background on disproportionality in K-12 school discipline in U.S. schools; describes how discipline policies have contributed to funneling Black PK-12 learners into the school-to-prison pipeline; presents an overview of RJ principles, history, and how the philosophy is situated in the juvenile justice system; includes definitions of terms; describes the conceptual framework and methodology used to conduct the study. The literature review presented in Chapter Two has a focus on school discipline studies and the juvenile justice system, including unique factors that contribute to Black youth's consistent overrepresentation and disproportionality in both systems. Additionally, Chapter Two offers an overview of

indigenous influences and traditions shaping restorative justice, as well as an introduction and description of a restorative community conference as a paradigmatic shift in addressing conflict. Chapter Two also provides an overview of the conceptual framework underpinning the study; namely, Critical Race Theory and Ecological Systems Theory. Chapter Three provides a description of the qualitative phenomenological study conducted, including research design, participant recruitment criteria, and data collection. Chapter Four presents the participants' stories and salient themes emerging from the research. Chapter Five concludes with a summary of the study, discussion of the findings, and opportunities for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

A child not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth. – African Proverb

The focus of this study was to understand the process of a Restorative Community Conference (RCC) through the lived experiences and perspectives of Black youth. It was important to explore the literature related to the structural oppressive systems and factors in these systems as they affect Black youth. As a foundation, the literature review begins with a historical overview of U.S. public schools, noting decisions made over the years and the implications for Black students; specifically, how school discipline decisions have led to discipline disparities for PK-12 Black students, leading to their funneling into the school-to-prison pipeline. The literature review includes a general description of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST), an overview of RJ and its connection to indigenous communities, key theories connected to the RJ philosophy, and a review of RCC as a viable approach to reclaiming youth from the school-to-prison pipeline. The chapter concludes with a brief description of CRT and EST, and their alignment with RJ's principles.

Exploring the Learning Landscape for Black Students in the United States

As a launching point, this section addresses historical events contributing to the development of the current inequitable educational system still in existence in the United States. While the public education system was founded on ambitious ideals that schooling would be funded by the government, with free and equally accessible to all, the "access to all" was a code for elite, White men (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed a two-track educational system: one for the laboring and one for the learned. Scholarship would allow a very few members of the laboring class to advance by raking a few geniuses from the rubbish (Kaul & Guiden 2018). However, this

educational system was an opportunity for White Americans, as opposed to Black, enslaved Americans, who at that time were not considered humans. Between 1865 and 1877, newly freed Black people organized to establish a public education system in the southern United States. This goal was accomplished with the power of White politicians, who advocated for the necessary policy changes, such as revisions to the state constitution, to allow for free, public education. In theory the goal was for Black children to be allowed to learn to read and write, absent of punishment. However, in practice the mobilization efforts were of greater benefit for White children more than for Black children (Anderson, 1988).

DuBois (1903) authored the book *The Souls of Black Folk* to explain how racism in the United States impacted Black identity. DuBois sought to show how the laws in post slavery United States separated Whites and Blacks by a color line, contributing to the continued denial of equal access for Black people in the United States. This is underscored by the first sentence in the chapter entitled, *Of Our Spiritual Strivings*, where he opened with the question, *How does it feel to be a problem? The Souls of Black Folk* book was written as a response to literary works by White authors who described Black Americans as problems throughout all regions of the United States (Howard, 2013).

Moving forward to 1954, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court delivered the unanimous ruling that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was unconstitutional (Klugar, 2011). Despite the thought-provoking question included in *The Souls of Black Folk* and the *Brown vs. Board of Education* verdict, this same belief that Black people are a problem is still evident in public education, as decades of data have revealed historically marginalized students and White students do not experience education equally (Howard, 2013; Welton, 2013; White, 1994).

The assumed purpose of public education is to provide high-level instruction for all students. Despite the best intentions and attempts to reform education with new policies, initiatives, high-stakes testing, vouchers, and innovative charter schools; the promise continues to be an illusion for racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse learners who find themselves on the margins of academia (Darling-Hammond, 2006, 2010; Howard, 2010, Okilwa et al., 2017). A growing body of research confirms positive, safe, and welcoming schools foster healthy social, emotional, and academic development of students (Malinen & Savolainen, 2016). Positive school climate is linked to decreases in exclusionary practices, such as office discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Horner, 2009).

Although punitive school discipline practices have become the tools most used by educators to ensure safe schools, punitive school policies do not make schools safer. Instead, data continue to disprove the effectiveness punitive discipline has on cultivating a welcoming and safe school where all learners thrive (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba & Reynolds, 2006; Teske, 2011). These reactive strategies generally do not prevent or control a student's behavior (Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Bosworth & Judkins, 2014); instead, they disrupt learning and are disproportionately given to historically underserved students continually overrepresented in corrective-discipline systems (Skiba et al., 1997, 2002). Research has shown associations between school discipline disparities and the imbalance of educational opportunities afforded to racially minoritized students, resulting in unsuccessful experiences, harmful outcomes, and adverse effect on students' cognitive abilities, level of school engagement, and increased likelihood of impacting a student's mental health (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Welsh & Little, 2018).

To disrupt this harmful pattern, California policymakers have instituted reforms and legislation geared toward improving school climate to address disparities in school discipline data. For example, California's AB 420 (2014) was written and passed to guarantee public school leaders could no longer expel learners for willful defiance. Based on AB 420 and similar laws, site administrators must find ways of responding beyond punitive discipline to address student behaviors in supportive ways, while holding students accountable and keeping them engaged in schools. While these reforms are likely to be responsible for decreases in suspension rates, lowering numbers alone does not address all barriers preventing Black children from accessing and succeeding in their educational pursuits (Young, 2019; Wood et al., 2018).

Historically, Black students attending schools in urban neighborhoods have an increased likelihood of being impacted by trauma caused by poverty, crime, racism, and violence (Walden & Losen, 2003). The outcomes from these factors carry over into schools and reflect the conditions of the community from which they come, contributing to the discipline disparity present between Black and White students (Howard, 2010; Polite & Davis, 1999). Menendian et. al. (2008) argued the racial discrimination Black students face in schools is reflective of the structural discrimination they experience in terms of housing and healthcare services, which have a tolling effect on their academics. The integration of these societal and academic challenges is an example of the reality Black students face in their journeys from the schoolhouse as learners into society as young adults. When students experience these types of challenges and trauma in their neighborhoods, they may present disruptive or defiant behaviors, resulting in exclusion from the learning environment (Anderson, 2008; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Riddler and Sinclair (2019) claimed when Black students behave outside of school norms, they are likely to receive harsher punishments than White students, thus increasing the

likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2016, Blacks children made 15% of the United States population; however, they represented 65% of youth delinquency cases compared to White youth who made 51% of the United Stated population and represented 21.5% of youth involved in the juvenile justice system (Center, 2019; Puzzanchera, et. al, 2020).

Zero-Tolerance Policies

Students exhibiting behavior difficulties is a reality educational leader can expect to face in their school, regardless of grade level or school type. In the late 1980s, U.S. schools began implementing zero-tolerance policies (ZTP) to address problems such as drug related activities, weapon possession, and violence (Martinez, 2009). ZTP policies are nonnegotiable punitive consequences predetermined by school board policies that script uniform, swift punishment for offenses.

When administrators are faced with determining the fate of a student based on a ZTP, there is no space for the individual narrative or circumstance; instead, there is a mandate for immediate removal from the learning environment (Harold & Corcoran, 2013). These policies may or may not align with a school leader's values and may send the message as being neutral in terms of race (Harold & Corcoran, 2013). Although ZTPs were intended to keep schools safe, the policies have unfairly targeted racially marginalized students, due in large part to administrator subjectivity (Harold & Corcoran, 2013). For example, such policies criminalize language, posture, mannerisms, and communication styles of racially diverse students (Hemphill, et al., 2006). When ZTPs include behavior infractions, such as disorderly conduct, willful defiance, dress code violations, and truancy, exclusionary measures increase, leading to discipline disparities (Aldridge, 2018).

School Discipline Disparity in U.S. Public Schools

Disproportionality in school discipline is a problem U.S. schools have faced for many years (Skiba et al., 2011). School policies that rely on exclusionary measures to establish order have tremendous impacts on students, particularly students of color, who miss out on valuable classroom learning time (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Though the goals of discipline policies may appear to be theoretically sound, research has shown Black students continue to be overrepresented in school discipline data (Fowler, 2011). In California schools, Black students lost 43 days of learning due to school discipline per 100 days enrolled, compared to 11 days lost per 100 days enrolled for White students, revealing Black students lost an average of 32 more days than White students (Losen & Whitaker, 2017).

The ideal and promise of a free, public education in the United States is a dream unrealized for historically underserved learners as educational institutions in the United States have relied on office discipline referrals, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions from school as methods to improve student behavior. Further, studies continue to validate exclusionary discipline is applied disproportionately to students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Black, Latinx, and Native American children are four times more likely to be excluded from the classroom than White students, by way of office discipline referrals or through in-school and out-of-school suspensions (Balfanz et al., 2015; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 1997, 2002). Moreover, Losen and Gillespie (2012) found students experienced school suspension rates differently, including 17% for Black students, 8% for Native American students, 7% for Latinx students, and 5% for White students respectively. Fabelo et al. (2012) evaluated nearly one million suspensions and expulsions of Texas students in Grades 7-12 over six years. From this study almost 6% of students who experienced suspension or expulsion, at

least once, had an increased chance of meeting the juvenile justice system, underscoring the harmful impact exclusion has on school-age youth (Fabelo et al, 2012).

Black students spend less time in the classroom due to discipline, which interrupts their learning (Darensbourg et al., 2010). Black students are nearly twice as likely to be suspended without support or access to educational services as White students. Further, Black students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as White students are, and 2.3 times more likely to receive referrals to law enforcement or face a school-related arrest compared to their White peers (Rhim et al., 2015). Black students are punished for misinterpreted behaviors, in what is known as *subjective interpretation of violations*, while their White peers are punished more objectively for measurable misconducts, such as smoking and vandalism (Martin et al., 2016).

Disparities in school discipline are also represented in early childhood education settings. Black preschoolers represent 19% of the nation's preschool population; yet 47% of these emerging learners, are given more than one out-of-preschool suspension (Gilliam, 2016). Comparatively, White children represent 41% of enrollment in early childhood education setting, and 28% are given more than one out-of-school suspension (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Skiba et al. (2011) reviewed office discipline referrals from 364 elementary and middle schools and found Black elementary students were twice as likely to be referred to the principal's office for behavior problems. Black students in middle school were four times more likely to be referred for behavior problems. According to Skiba et al., even when problem behaviors were similar, Black students were more likely to be suspended or expelled unlike their White counterparts. Surprisingly, the Civil Rights Project (2017) found that despite a recent decline in the use of suspension in California schools, students are still losing a great deal of instruction time due to

school discipline. The impact on lost instruction was most significant in alternative schools run by county offices of education. In these schools, Black students lost 92 days of instruction per 100 days enrolled, compared to 18 days of lost instruction for White students.

When academic, social-emotional, or behavioral challenges arise for students, and their traditional school is not equipped to meet its students' needs, referrals to discipline-focused, alternative schools are often the next step (Maillet, 2017). According to Tajalli and Garba (2014), an abundance of research has found that in discipline-focused alternative schools, there is also an overrepresentation of marginalized students excluded from the learning environment because of punitive policies. For example, the same authors found that a study of Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs in Texas determined underlying factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Black students in alternative education schools resulted from the school district systemic bias and colorblind discipline policies. These authors concluded that the aforementioned contributing factors found in predominantly White school districts, were without regard of district wealth, type, or size; and were more likely than diverse districts to exercise their discretionary authority to subject minority students to disciplinary actions.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

In addition to relying on ZTP for infractions, when administrators turn to school resource officers—law-enforcement personnel assigned to schools—as a resolution to misbehaviors, the student is injected into the criminal justice system, resulting in the school-aged youth becoming saddled with a criminal record, and creating a path to a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Okilwa et al., 2017). Data show these practices do not improve behavior and serve as gateways to the juvenile justice system (Hemphill et al., 2006). The revolving door of classroom discipline referrals, courtroom appearances, and incarceration are examples of the

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school-to-prison pipeline. Research has shown when students are suspended, academic success is compromised, and potential involvement with the juvenile justice system is increased (Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014).

The school-to-prison pipeline is a term used to describe the pattern of youth being pushed out of schools into classroom discipline referrals, courtroom appearances, and incarceration (Advancement Project, 2005; Children's Defense Fund, 2007; NAACP, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). The school-to-prison pipeline is defined as the channeling of students out of school system, pushing them into the streets and the juvenile justice system, which results in decreased access to a meaningful education, job opportunities, and the ability to fully participate in the democratic process (Legal Defense Fund, 2018). Further, the school-to-prison pipeline is the link between student exclusion from school, juvenile criminalization, and negative life outcomes (Wilson, 2014) and has contributed to generations of disadvantaged families (Aizer & Doyle, 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011).

In examinations of punitive school discipline practices, correlations between high school suspensions and graduation rates have emerged (Balfanz & Fox, 2014). Balfanz (2014) revealed how a ninth-grade student being suspended only one-time doubles—from 16% to 32%—the likelihood of dropping out of school altogether. Given national U.S. data showing over two million secondary students being suspended at least one time, the effects of exclusionary practices can have lifelong impacts on the lives of Black youth (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Schools are microcosms of the larger society, and when the school system excludes students from school, they uphold the pathway to incarceration (Wald & Losen, 2003). This practice of exclusion is complex and should be of great concern to adults in the school and the juvenile justice systems, as they presume to be committed to educate and protect young people.

The two systems mirror one another; therefore, the exclusion issue must be addressed collectively (Losen et al., 2015) and viewed as a complex challenge, requiring the involvement of cross-sector leaders and community members to disrupt it (Losen, et al., 2015).

The Intersection of Gender and School Discipline

An abundance of research on unconscious bias has shown how the intersection of Black learners' race and gender increases the likelihood of experiencing exclusionary discipline (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2003). Specifically, Black boys and men are over-criminalized in society including school experiences where they are singled out for punishment, over-regulated for minor and innocuous actions, or misidentified when no wrongdoing has occurred (Essien, & Blevins, 2017; Howard, 2008). Comparatively, when Black girls are seen as less innocent and viewed as *ghetto*, educators tend to respond harshly to negative behaviors for acting *unladylike* (Morris, 2007).

For many years, Black boys have been in the limelight of discussions related to school discipline and misconduct (Annamma et al., 2019). Though attention to issues impacting boys of color is essential, scholarly research on Black girls' experiences has been limited. Black girls have been absent in discussions of criminalization, though they are also overrepresented in school discipline data (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2016). In U.S. public schools, Black school-age girls often face exclusionary discipline results at rates higher than their boy counterparts (Morris, 2016). Suspensions of Black girls in urban schools has increased in recent years, with data revealing they experience school discipline six times higher than their non-Black girl counterparts and 67% more than their White boy counterparts. Studies have revealed when Black girls are accused of the same offenses as other girls of color, they are punished more harshly (Annamma et al. 2016). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015-2016),

Black girls represented 8% of girls enrolled in K-12 public schools in the United States but represented 14% of student discipline cases. Over the last decade, girls of color have had the fastest rising suspension rates, when compared to the suspension rates of all other students (Annamma et al., 2016).

Morris (2012) referred to schools as structures of dominance and explained how these structures reinforce disruptive conditions that expose Black girls to exclusionary practices, resulting in 42% of them receiving harsh punishment; 42% excluded from the learning environment, with or without educational support services; 45% with at least one out-of-school suspension; 31% referred to law enforcement; and 34% arrested on campus. Morris described how Black girls are not more deserving of harsh school discipline than others; they are simply victims of a discipline culture.

School administrators' overuse of punitive discipline as a response to undesired behaviors, coupled with increased video coverage of how Black girls are treated, has accelerated the conversation about Black girls' criminalization among educators, scholars, policymakers, and community members (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2020). Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown Black girls are the recipients of exclusionary discipline for minor behaviors and labeled as disruptive or defiant, especially if they ask questions or otherwise engage in activities adults consider affronts to their authority (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Despite educational reform efforts and initiatives, Black boys continue to fall behind in accessing high quality and meaningful learning opportunities, leading to their continued academic and social marginalization (Anderson, 2008; Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2008). The harsh academic environment created for Black boys undermines their abilities to achieve academic success and interferes with their abilities to take full advantage of educational

opportunities and programs in place to help them succeed (Duncan, 2002; Howard, 2008; Solorzano, 1998). Historically, Black boys and men in the United States have been viewed as threatening and violent (Howard, 2013). This is especially applicable to White women, whose views extend to the classroom and influence how Black boys are perceived (Harry & Anderson, 1994). In a study on teacher-student matching efforts, it was found Black males were deemed as problematic by White and Black classroom teachers (Kozlowski, 2015). Classroom teachers consistently labeled Black boys as argumentative, angry, and violent and perceived them to be inattentive and to lack eagerness to learn (Downey & Pribesh, 2004). Additional studies have indicated Black boys are perceived to be less innocent than their White male counterparts, contributing to teachers' swift responses when addressing Black boys' misbehavior (Goff, et al., 2014).

In California, the highest suspension disparity by grade level occurs in Grades K-3, where Black boys, on average, are 5.6 times more likely to be suspended (Wood et al., 2018). In 2018, Black boys accounted for 5.8% of the enrollment in California Public Schools, yet 17.8% of students experiencing suspension were Black boys (Wood, et al, 2018). Of the students expelled, 14.1% were Black boys (Wood et al., 2018). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2013) indicate Black males comprised 7% of the total number of children in the United States under the age of 18; however, they were 40% of all school children arrested, 43% of the cases in the juvenile justice system, 45% of youth being detained in the juvenile justice system, and 60% of cases forwarded to criminal court.

While there have been numerous studies on Black boys, Black girls' stories have been absent from the narrative. This may falsely suggest Black girls are not experiencing learning loss caused by school exclusion at the same rate as Black boys. Focusing on boys or girls singularly

is not meant to imply one gender is more important or more oppressed than the other. Rather, it is meant to shine a light on the harsh reality dehumanizing school discipline practices have had on the lives of Black students, regardless of gender (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Howard, 2013).

Considering the abundance of data revealing the continued overuse of punishment as the response for discipline, favorable school experiences and positive life outcomes will continue to evade Black youth, unless educators, policymakers, and justice professionals work collectively to disrupt the systems of power and privilege that impact students' lives in and out of school (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Gregory et al., 2010; Howard, 2013).

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice (RJ) has been defined in a variety of ways. Due to an abundance of definitions, aspiring to offer a singular comprehensive description of RJ in the small space of this literature review might distract from the focus of the study. Therefore, as stated in Chapter One, to ensure clarity, the working definition most closely aligning with the focus of this study will be used throughout this dissertation as follows: Restorative justice is defined as the shared power and voice of all impacted parties closest to the harm and situating them in the center of dialogue-based efforts and decision making (Dundas, 2018). Restorative approaches involve the person responsible for the harm, the person or persons harmed, and respected elders of the community serving as peace facilitators, coming together in dialogue with a focus on restoring harmony and balance to the community, rather than placing the focus on the actor who caused the harm (Hand et al., 2012).

Although RJ has grown in popularity in recent times, what has become known as RJ in the United States comes from indigenous communities across the globe (Zehr & Toews, 2004). Traits of RJ can be found in the Navajo Nation Peacemaking Courts, Maori traditions in New

Zealand, First Nations in North America, and African communities across the continent (Davis, 2019; Haas-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Zehr, 2015) with the latter example providing the anchor for the study's central inquiry, *and how are the children?*

The rehabilitative and reconciliatory approaches connected to RJ emerged in the United States in the 1970s and are a part of a continuum, ranging from informal processes that are a part of everyday life to formal processes used to respond to crime (McCold & Wachtel, 2001). For a visual representation, see Figure 2 below.
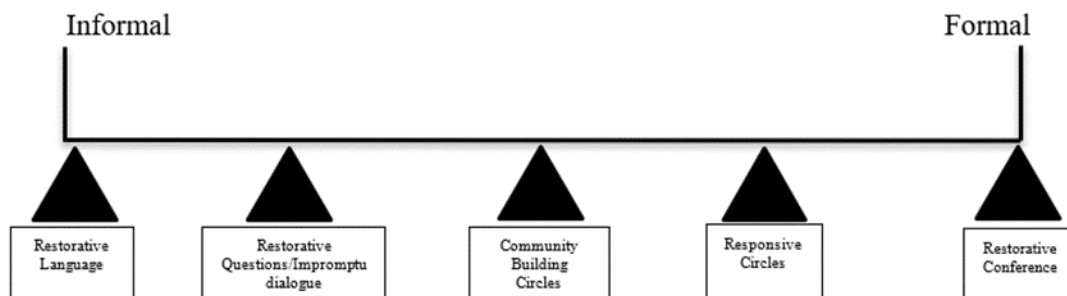
Figure 2.

Restorative Justice Continuum

The indigenous underpinnings in RJ can be found in principles described by leading restorative justice scholars, such as Zehr (1970), Braithwaite (2000), and Christie (1977). Those principles include (a) crime is an injury, and RJ is used to heal; (b) RJ processes encourage accountability; and (c) RJ processes involve dialogue among three voices: the person responsible, the person(s) impacted, and the community.

A hallmark characteristic of RJ is the community's obligation to take responsibility in healing the affected individual and the person responsible. As a key partner in a RJ process, the community's voice is essential to repair the harm and bring resolution to the community (Haas-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Zehr, 2015). Further borrowing from indigenous cultures, restorative

approaches sees close knit relationships and strong communities essential to sustaining social order (Haas-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018). For example, in indigenous communities, misbehaviors are viewed as disruptive to the victim and the community; thus, it is the responsibility of the community to restore balance and peace, while ensuring each person's worth is not sacrificed for the good of the whole (Haas-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Senge, 2006).

An example of the belief that one exists only in relationship to the collective is seen through the Zulu tribes' communal recognition concept of *sawubona* (Power-Carter, et al., 2019). Sawubona is the Zulu's most common greeting which means, "I see you. You are important to me, and I value you." The greeting makes people fully visible with their flaws, shortcomings, and nuances. Sawubona conveys there is value, worth, and dignity in each member of the community; each person is seen, regardless of success and challenges, and will be supported in the present and in the future (Davis, 2019; Senge, 2006).

In response to *sawubona*, *shiboka* is offered, which means, "I exist for you." Senge (2006) connected the Zulu tribe's approach to addressing problems with principles of RJ. When a harmful act occurs in the Zulu tribe, the person responsible must stand in the center of the village, surrounded by a circle of community members. For two days the person in the center is greeted with *sapubon*, which translates to "we see your goodness, virtues, and good qualities." These meetings serve to remind people of their importance and value to the community and to help them re-enter, fully supported, on a path of harmony and joy (Senge, 2006). The Zulu tribe's response to harm is akin to restorative approaches, involving voices from the impacted community in processes known as Restorative Community Conference (RCC). This process is designed to address harms in a variety of settings, such as schools, workplaces, college campuses, and communities (Morris & Maxwell, 2001).

Restorative Justice (RJ) has grown in popularity inviting a shift in how crime is addressed. RJ is an alternative method, capable of simultaneously supporting youth responsible for offenses and harmed parties, bringing both parties together into dialogue, which includes community and law enforcement (Zehr, 2015). Research has connected the outcomes of RJ to a reduction in juvenile recidivism, incarceration, increasing community involvement, and improving victim satisfaction (Strang et al., 2013). The criminal legal system seeks justice by asking the following: (a) What law was broken? (b) Who broke it? And (c) What punishment is warranted? On the other hand, RJ offers a paradigm shift in how crime is addressed by asking (a) Who was harmed? (b) What do they need? and (c) Whose obligation is it to meet those needs? RJ differs from the divisive and punitive traditional juvenile justice process by prioritizing relationships and concurrently focusing on the actions of the youth responsible, the person or persons harmed, and the safety of the community (Zehr, 2015). When youth responsible and persons harmed come in contact with the justice system, both parties have an increased likelihood of experiencing an emotionally exhausting, time-consuming traumatic event in isolation of one another (Zehr, 2005; Orth, 2002). By contrast, RJ brings all parties together, including the impacted community, where wrongdoings are addressed through dialogue. This process can be used to repair harm and rebuild relationships through face-to-face dialogue and an agreed-upon action plan, developed with input from all participants (Strang et al., 2013; Zehr, 2005). When inserting this process into the juvenile justice system, it is known as a restorative community conference.

Restorative Community Conference (RCC)

Evidence pointing to the effectiveness of RJ have led to the development of conflict resolution programs across multiple sectors and contexts, including nonprofits, public education,

and legal sectors (Sherman & Strang, 2007). Program examples include victim-offender mediation, family and community circles of support, healing and peacemaking circles, and restorative community conferencing. Implementing restorative community conferencing with minors in response to low-level non-violent crimes has shown promise at being effective in reducing recidivism and gaining skills supporting a successful transition to adulthood (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Modeled after New Zealand's Family Group Conferencing, a central program in the country's juvenile justice system (Zehr, 2002), RCC is community-centered justice that shifts power from the juvenile justice system to the community, with the goal of addressing harms and needs of the person responsible for harm (offender) and the impacted person (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001). RCC holds space for young people to meet and hear the harmed party in an environment meant to resolve and repair the harm caused by the offense through community and family support (Baliga et al. 2017). Like RJ, the concept of community justice entails three core principles: (a) repair harm, requiring that the victim, offender, and the communities be healed of the crime wound; (b) risk reduction, preventing future occurrence of crime; and (c) community empowerment, as the community actively participates in the restoration process. The RCC focus is on ensuring those who are affected by crime become involved in and committ to the restoration process with the hope that a safer community will be developed at the macro-level through this process (O'Brien, 2007).

Restorative community conferencing is a process to repair the harm and rebuild relationships through face-to-face dialogue and an agreed-upon action plan, developed with input from all participants in the conference (Strang et al., 2013; Zehr, 2005). For example, when a youth is arrested for committing a crime, the referring agency (law enforcement, probation, or

district attorney) contacts a nonprofit or community-based organization trained in the RCC

approach, instead of sending the case through traditional juvenile justice processes. The

community-based organization reviews the file, and on acceptance of the case, the referring

agency places the case on hold until the RCC process is finalized (Baliga et al., 2017) For a

visual representation of this process, see Figure 3 below.
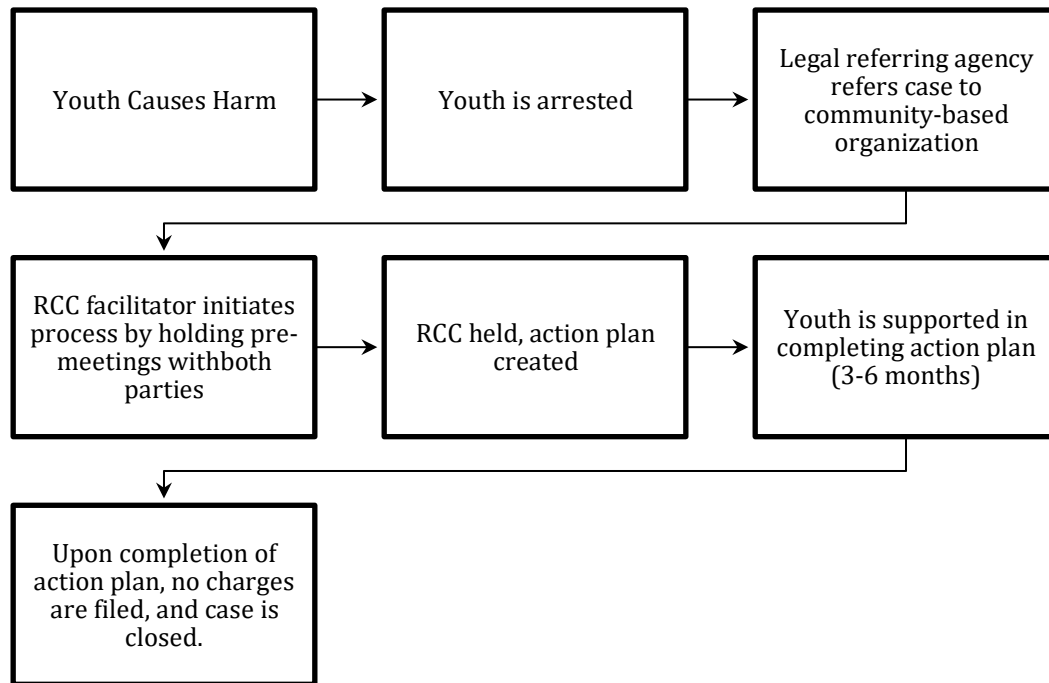
Figure 3.

Restorative Community Conference Process

The approach involves the impacted party, the person responsible, and the community.

The goal of the RCC is to honor and hear from the harmed party, restore societal trust, and

ensure that the person responsible is supported in successfully re-entering the community (Baliga

et al., 2017; NCRC, 2018). Restorative community conferencing emphasizes corrective measures

instead of punishment and ensures the person responsible (offender) is reconnected to the victim

(person harmed) and repairs the harms with input from all conference participants, most notably

the impacted party.

Restorative community conferencing programs have been more effective in reducing recidivism rates than the traditional juvenile justice processes (Baliga et al., 2017). For example, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD, 2013) reported that only 26% of youth who completed the program were re-arrested, compared to 45% of youth who went through the juvenile justice system. Remarkably, only 11.8% of the RCC youth were later determined by the court to have committed another offense compared with 31.4% of the matched sample of youth whose cases were processed through the juvenile justice system (NCCD, 2013).

Further, an evaluative study on the quality and consistency of RJ practices in the U.S. justice system, by Bazemore and Schiff (2005), identified 773 programs across the country. Of these, the most common programs focused on restorative dialogue, offender mediation, and restorative community conferencing. In particular, the latter was identified as the most effective approach considering the value placed on community voices to repair harm (Bazemore & Schiff, 2005). During the time since Bazemore and Schiff's study, other studies about cross-sector collaboration, planning and coordination between the education and juvenile justice have increased (Jain-Aghi et al., 2017). This has been in part due to each system's dual connection and common concern on how each system contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline with the overuse of punitive practices (Jain-Aghi et al., 2017; Losen, 2014; Schiff, 2013).

The promising results of a RCC are not limited to the youth responsible for the harm. Bazemore and Umbreit (2001) concluded when there are activities holding persons responsible for some type of restitution after the conference, 99% of victims reported their willingness to participate in future RCCs because of the support they received until restitution had been fulfilled thus terminating the legal process (NCCD, 2013). According to the same research findings, the use of agreed-upon action plans points to the program's significance in the already

established judicial system. While evidence shows promise, there is a void in the literature on how youth responsible for the offense experienced this process. Therefore, this study, grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (EST) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), with specific inclusion of storytelling and counter storytelling, was conducted to understand restorative community conferencing through the lived experiences and perspectives of Black youth (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002).

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST) guided the inquiry for this study as seen in Figure 4 below.
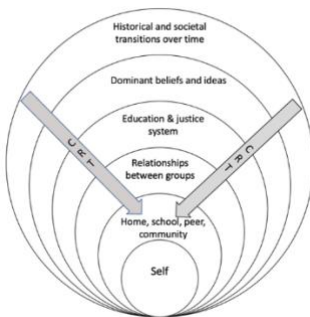
Figure 4.

Critical Race Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory Dual Lens

Through this dual lens, dominant systems and ideologies directly and indirectly impacting the development of Black children were explored. CRT is an academic concept dating back more than 40 years (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2017). It initially emerged as a critique to legal studies, race, and society (Jennings & Hughes, 2013). CRT is a scholarly tradition birthed from Ladson-Billings and Tate's call for education scholars to increase the use of race-centered theories in education research (Ladson-Billings, 2010). In CRT, race is the central focus, and racism is immoveable. It carries the presumption that racism has contributed to contemporary

manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage. The core ideology of CRT is that race is a social construct, and racism is embedded in legal systems, structures, and policies. CRT is a tool that can be used to a challenge economic, political, governmental, and societal structures such as those found in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, that impact the lives and experiences of Black youth. CRT includes an acknowledgement that racism and White supremacy are threads interwoven in the fabric of U.S. society and manifest themselves in inequitable systems (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Critical Race Theory can be used to understand race and racism in policies and practices (Tomas & Ono, 2016). In giving voice to marginalized people, CRT highlights oppression issues, privilege, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Delgado (2017) asserts that not every scholar will subscribe to every tenet of CRT but believes many would at least agree on what he calls its basic tenets. Delgado names them as (a) racism is ordinary; (b) interest convergence; (c) the social construction of race; (d) consequences of differential racialization; (e) storytelling and counter storytelling; and (f) intersectionality.

 Critical Race Theory exposes and confronts colorblind racism and suggests creative ways of tackling racial issues in culturally diverse communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, through storytelling and counter stories, CRT provides space for racially marginalized groups to share their stories and lived experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). CRT can be used to work toward social justice by involving scholars in addressing racism in education, religion, government, and media (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Using stories in teaching history and relating them to modern-day social issues extends CRT to dominant communities who might be unaware of, or unconcerned with, current and continued marginalization and segregation (Manglitz et al., 2006).

Power positions of Whiteness accrue unearned advantages to White people as a form of privilege and a presumed norm and CRT provides opportunities for oppressed and less privileged people to critique racism by offering strategies that challenge White domination (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). For example, conscious awareness of racism is created through personal stories to educate those who might think racial issues are no longer present societal problems (Zamudio et al., 2011). Racism shapes everyday life experiences in churches, schools, businesses, media, and the government and in many ways have a profound impact on the development of an individual (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Young people do not develop in isolation or without influences of their communities or the greater society. A child's development is influenced by a myriad of factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), including their home relationships, extended family and community affiliations, and schools and policies that govern society. Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to these influences as interconnected ecological systems shaping the behavior and development of a child. The Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides a lens for examining a child's relationship within five environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner created EST as a method to explain how systems interact with one another, the role they play in children's environment, and how they impact children's growth and development. EST is composed of five organized subsystems and are often visualized as concentric circles. He argued that such influence does not decrease as the circles move in an outward direction from the child, but that each system directly or indirectly influences the child's development. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner claimed that to understand how humans develop, the ecological system in its entirety should be considered, regardless of the distance from the child. Thus, to understand fully the behavior of children, it is important to consider not only the influences stemming from their home, but also influences coming from

their classroom and school. Schools are microcosms of the greater society and when they interact with sectors within the ecological systems they have a direct impact on how children develop, grow, and show up in the world (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Darling, 2007; Ryan, 2001).

Summary

This literature review included a discussion of school discipline disparities affecting Black youth attending K-12 schools in the United States. As a result of the inequitable practices and historical unfair treatment of this marginalized population, Black youth experience negative academic and social outcomes, including an increased likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system. Due to the harmful criminatory school practices and their extension of pushing Black youth into the school-to-prison pipeline, this research was conducted to understand the restorative community conference (RCC) process through Black youth's experiences and perspectives. Finally, this chapter described theoretical principles which guided this research. Those principles were taken from Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Specifically, CRT highlights the legitimacy of Black youth voices through storytelling and counter storytelling, a commitment to social justice, ways to challenge to dominant ideology, and the permanence of racism. With the addition of Ecological Systems Theory, together the two theories serve as a dual lens to broaden the scope of the study's phenomenological approach in the context of the larger community.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Until the lion tells the story, the hunter will always be the hero - African Proverb

This chapter identifies the methods used to explore how Black youth experienced a restorative community conference (RCC) and, to what extent, if at all, has the experience influenced the outcomes and life trajectory. The first section includes a review of the purpose of the study and research questions guiding the study. The second section describes the research design including how participants were recruited, selected, and protected from any potential risks while participating in the study. Next, the chapter addresses data collection methods and analysis, issues of validity, positionality, and study limitations and trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a research summary.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and understand how Black school-age youth experience RCC and how, if at all, the principles of RJ have shaped their lives. Critical race theory and Ecological Systems Theory, along with the alignment to RJ principles provided the theoretical lens for data analysis, thus allowing voices of Black youth to be heard. Specifically, the researcher wanted to understand the following:

1. In what ways do Black young adults describe how they became involved in a Restorative Community Conference (RCC)?

2. How does a restorative approach compare to a punitive response?

3. In what ways does the lived experience of Restorative Community Conference (RCC) participation influence the lives of Black young adults?

Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological research design, a qualitative methodology, to explore how Black youth interpreted their experiences with Restorative Community Conference (RCC). Husserl and Schutz (1913, as cited in Patton, 2015) define *phenomenology* as a method of qualitative research used to gain an understanding of a particular phenomenon based on participants' interpretations of lived experiences. A key element in phenomenological research focuses on how the subject makes meaning, as opposed to the phenomenon itself (Creswell, 2013; Frankel et al., 2012; Ledy & Ormond, 2013; Mertler, 2018). Phenomenological research is the act of uncovering and describing the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, requiring the researcher to go directly to the subjects (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Mertler, 2018; Van Manen, 2014). The phenomenologist researcher is concerned with describing what emerges through stories of direct personal experiences to understand the phenomenon and the meanings attributed to those experiences. The focus of phenomenology is completely and continuously aimed at understanding human experiences, without evaluative assumptions, established criteria, causal explanations, or interpretative generalizations (Mertler, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

Researchers of color studying subjects from their own racially marginalized community is an often-overlooked tenet of CRT; but when race-based methodologies are employed by researchers of color, traditional research methodologies are disrupted (Chapman, 2007; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado, Bernal, & Villalpando, 2002). This is important because as Pillow (2003) asserts, race-based methodology shifts the locus of control in the research process by situating the participants as the knowers. By researching from this unique stance, race-based methodology provides a way for the *raced* academic to think about the dual roles as both

researcher and member of the marginalized group. By utilizing reflective and culturally relevant research methods, researchers are given a distinct vantage point to see and hear the stories from a group they are uniquely linked to (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Phenomenologists' interest in lived experiences requires researchers to go directly to the source to gain understanding from individual perspectives. While this is generally captured through individual sit-down interviews, the sit-down interview separates the subject from the natural environment, limiting the researcher's ability to observe the subject in the natural setting. To gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience, researchers have used the go-along technique to place the interviewee *in situ* (Harris, 2016; Kusenback, 2003). In situ captures the participants lived experiences in an environment familiar to them such as their local community or neighborhood offering the potential to access deeper knowledge and added layers of understanding (Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Harris, 2016; Casey, 2000; Kusenbach, 2003) making this method a well-aligned approach to uncovering the essence of the RCC and its influence on Black lives. The go-along method is the blending of the researcher as a participant-observer in the interview, allowing for a focused and systematic approach to *hanging out* (Kusenbach, 2003). Go-along interviews serve as an in-depth, qualitative method taking place in environments familiar to the participant, such as their neighborhood (Carpiano, 2009; Harris, 2016). However, because of COVID-19 restrictions, the researcher was unable to utilize the method in its traditional format and therefore replaced the go-along technique with a photo elicitation. To uncover and understand RCC from the perspectives of Black voices—school-age youth in their most natural setting—this study had a virtually adapted method of go-along phenomenological methodology which included photos of key locations of the community selected by the subjects (Mertler, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1997).

Data Collection

The data collection for this study occurred amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020. While the journey was emotionally taxing and at times paralyzing, it was important that the names of those murdered are not forgotten. With that in mind, the pseudonyms given to the participants for this study are of four lives taken during the height of what has become known as the summer of George Floyd. Although this study is small in nature, the intention for using Breonna, Ahmaud, George, and Floyd is so they are not forgotten. The use of these names serves as a reminder to stay vigilant and committed to the great work yet to be done—to disrupt oppressive systems, patterns and acts of and violence. Moreover, the use of these specific pseudonyms is an audacious declaration that even the smallest of studies can create momentum which refuses to die and, perhaps, may lead to systemic meaningful and impactful change.

To recruit participants for this phenomenological study, the researcher used purposeful sampling, also known as criterion-based selection. The researcher established the selection criteria to choose participants who would best help the research study topic (Chien, 1981; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). The researcher recruited participants who met the following criteria: (a) identified as Black, (b) age 18 or older, (c) had been referred by a juvenile justice agency to a community-based organization for participation in RCC, and (d) had experience in a punitive process through school-based discipline or the juvenile justice system.

The researcher then met with staff from the RCC authorized agency to provide an overview of the study and participant selection criteria. After the initial meeting, a follow-up meeting occurred with the RCC program director of the organization to discuss possible candidates and recruitment methods. With the use of recruitment letters, emails and phone calls, participants were recruited from a community-based organization approved to partner with justice agencies to facilitate youth centered RCC (see Appendix A). The recruitment tools included the email endorsement for the study by the community-based organization authorized official to facilitate RCC program. This organization utilized the recruitment email and invited potential candidates to call or send an email to the researcher for additional information if interested in being a participant. All recruitment correspondence included information about how candidates were identified to participate in the study, participant's involvement, and an overview of risks and potential benefits. The letter included information about the researcher and reasons for the study (Appendix A).

As stated in Chapter One, the researcher sought voices of Black youth responsible for harm who had been referred to participate in RCC. The researcher initially sought 10 individuals who self-identified as Black, who were referred by a juvenile law-enforcement agency, and who had successfully completed the RCC. Because the study was focused on the juvenile justice system, participants who met the selection criteria could have included youth under the age of 18, requiring parental/guardian consent (see Appendix C) and adolescent assent (see Appendix D) to participate in this study. Participants who provided consent agreed to share, retrospectively, their involvement in RCC using storytelling. Semi-structured interviews supported the researcher in gaining an in-depth description, essential to understanding of the essence of the RCC process.

The researcher selected participants who had been involved in RCC between the calendar years of 2015 and 2021. Those selected to be interviewed received follow-up instructions and an informed participant consent form consistent with a detailed explanation of the study, participant expectations, and rights as a research participant. Once participants agreed to be a part of the study and submitted a signed consent form, the researcher contacted them to coordinate an interview time and obtain photos of the location of their choice within their community. The researcher scheduled a 90-minute virtual interview for each participant at a time convenient for each of them.

Four participants were interviewed for this study: one young woman and three young men. All participants identified themselves as Black Americans, with two also self-identifying as a Somalian immigrant. All participants are young adults ranging in ages between 18 and 22 with the average age of 19 years. A summary is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1.

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Interview Age	Incident Age	Location of incident	Charges
Breonna	F	19	15	Community	Assault
Ahmaud	M	18	15	Community	Resisting Arrest
George	M	21	15	School	Assault on an officer, resisting arrest
Floyd	M	18	16	Home	Assault

At the time of the semi-structured interviews, three of the four young adults were full-time students, and all four were employed. They all had been high school students at the time of their involvement with RCC and resided within the same county. All participants were referred by juvenile law enforcement officials to the same agency which facilitated the RCC.

This study relied on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with Black young adults, speaking retrospectively about their experiences and outcomes of having participated in RCC. Each participant was scheduled for a 90-minute, semi-structured, audio-recorded interview. Prior to the interview, each participant received a copy of the interview protocol (see Appendix G) that the researcher used to guide each interview (see Appendix E). To create a sense of comfort and safety for the study participant, the researcher opened each interview with questions from an information sheet (see Appendix F).

Because of rapidly evolving and changing COVID-19 restrictions, the go-along interview research method was adapted to a virtual format. With the use of a virtual web-based application, the semi-structured interviews included the naming of community locations chosen by the study participant which served as backdrops to the virtual community walk. Further, identifying a location during the interview allowed the researcher to gain rich, detailed description of their RCC experience.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis is used to unearth the essence of a phenomenon, as the researcher collects data (Creswell, 2008). In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the data-collection instrument (Seidman, 2013). Further, in qualitative research, interpretation and theme are sifted through the researcher's point of view (Lichtman, 2006). The researcher must isolate biases and suspend judgement through a specific technique known as *epoche* to remain open to participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 2014). The data for analysis were generated through semi-structured interviews, analytical memos, observational notes, and interview audio transcriptions produced by rev.com—an online transcription service (Emerson et al., 1995; Maxwell, 2013). Data analysis for this study was achieved by completing multiple rounds of

coding that included in-vivo coding, concept coding, and code weaving coupled with analysis

memo-writing after each round to uncover emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Richards,

2015; Saldana, 2016). The researcher closely examined the notes taken during the interview and

the analytical memos written after the interview to unearth emotions and perspectives useful in

identifying themes and further ideas for exploration and analysis. To ensure an authentic

narrative from participants, the researcher utilized the technique of, figuratively, *passing the mic*.

The notion of *passing the mic* illustrates voices telling their own story and being heard. There is

always something qualitative researchers can do to simulate *pass the mi*c metaphor. In this case,

this approach was applied to access participants' own words, as they told their story and

described their respective restorative experiences.

Utilizing the described data sources and the "passing-the-mic" method, the researcher

identified codes such as accepting responsibility, building a trusting relationship with the RCC

facilitator, the RCC leading to personal transformation, the RCC showing potential, the RCC

having a positive influence, co-creating the action plan with the conference participants, and the

RCC stimulating their minds. The latter resulted in renewed adolescent thinking, feelings of

affirmation, being seen as an intellectual, the experience lighting a fire inside, not being labeled,

and feelings of pride for completing the process. Overall, through the participants' stories, 98

codes were collapsed into categories resulting in the emergence of six salient themes:

accountability, empowering, positive self-perception, the power of relationships, transformation,

and validation.

As noted in Chapter Two, the development of children is based on factors from

interconnected systems shaping their lived experience in various systems. During the coding

process it was important to consider the CRT and EST dual lens when analyzing responses and

how they associated with interconnected systems shaping the participant's experience. Specifically, as Bronfenbrenner contends, although circles representing systems move further away from the child, each system influences the individual child with their own policies, laws, and ideologies. Therefore, to understand the behavior of a child at school, it is important to not only consider the home and school environment, but how those environments interact with each other and with larger community in which they grow and develop and how such environments are impacted by cultural norms and historical events. Evidence of this notion can be found in responses generated from the participants' stories. Each participant shared examples of how a disciplinary response at school aligned with their interaction with law enforcement, on campus, in the community, and in juvenile hall. Specifically, not having the opportunity to tell their story, not being known by their poor decision, and not feeling seen are examples of in-vivo codes. Furthermore, codes such as being encouraged to be their authentic self, being held accountable, and learning skills supporting a successful transition to adulthood are examples of codes leading to the themes of empowerment and validation. Each set of codes aligned with what it means to be able to be one's authentic self despite the label being placed on by cross-sector systems such as education and the juvenile justice systems. Consequently, participants found the experience of schooling and being under the jurisdiction of probation, or in juvenile hall, equally dehumanizing as opposed to the RCC experience leaving them feeling transformed.

Risks and Vulnerability

Because study participants were asked to recount potentially emotionally charged experiences from their past, the researcher took steps to minimize risks, including providing the interview protocol (see Appendix G) prior to their scheduled interviews to allow participants ample time to reflect on their experience and consider their responses to the questions (Gubrium

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et al., 2014). The opportunity to review the questions ahead of time contributed to rich dialogues during the interview. All interviews were conducted over a web-based virtual platform—Zoom—readily accessible to participants.

The researcher reminded study participants about the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw from the study at any time, including during the interview, without any repercussions (Kirsch, 1999). Further, each participant was reminded at the beginning of each interview that at any point they could request a list of local support resources should the experience of telling their story cause them discomfort or emotional distress (Patton, 2015; Seidmen, 2019). The researcher provided each participant with a copy of interview transcription and reminded them of the right to have their interview material withheld from data analysis. Lastly, the researcher began each session focused on building rapport and establishing trust which are important to extract rich meaningful data (Youell & Youell, 2011).

Confidentiality

Participants had a right to privacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and were provided assurances of confidentiality. The identities of participants and all identifying information remained password protected on the researcher's laptop (Seidmen, 2019). The researcher completed a thorough audit of all consent forms before inviting participants to interview. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure all data reported would not become identifiable.

All forms, documents, interview responses, transcriptions, and recordings will remain on the researcher's password-protected laptop. Any paper copies accumulated from the study will remain in a locked cabinet. Research records will be kept up to three years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

Validity

Validity of the study findings represents an essential component in qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), establishing validity may be done using a variety of methods including memos, triangulation, and member checks. Using triangulation, qualitative researchers intentionally promote and use a variety of strategies to address issues of trustworthiness of the research and to show that the researcher prioritized ethics and credibility when collecting, analyzing, and reporting data (Bogdin & Biklen, 2007; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Mertler, 2016). Because qualitative researchers themselves are the data-collection instrument, there is an increased responsibility placed on the researcher to use techniques essential to demonstrate the worthiness of the study process and validity of the findings (Carlson, 2010; Creswell, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To enhance the validity of the study (Glesne, 2006; Strauss, 1987), this researcher wrote memos and conducted member checks.

After each interview, the researcher wrote an analytical memo. Analytic memos allowed the researcher to reflect and capture her thoughts throughout the research and coding process. Writing memos created a space for critical thinking and challenging the researcher's preconceived notions thus liberating the researcher to write freely what comes to mind (Charmaz, 2014). Although memos were informal in nature, they were vital to the analysis as they became sources of data that helped the researcher recall important aspects of the interview and capture patterns which ultimately led to the identification of categories and emerging themes (Saldaña, 2016). Further, to ensure the accuracy of the semi-structured interview, each interview transcription was offered to each participant to check for accuracy through the *member-checking* process. Within member checking, the researcher offered each participant the transcripts of the

interview to ensure each participant's thoughts and voice were accurately captured and represented (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Candela, 2018; Merriam & Tisdale, 2016).

Researcher Positionality

Six years ago, this researcher was introduced to RJ practices and shortly thereafter was appointed to lead a large urban school district's student discipline department. Months later, the researcher led the dismantling of all zero tolerance policies and procedures and offered a restorative conference in lieu of expulsion to students facing long-term exclusion from their comprehensive school site. The revision of student discipline policies, a robust awareness and training campaign, and the use of RJ practices had a significant impact on the district's student expulsion data. In the 2013-2014 school year, there were 131 expulsions. In the 2014-2015 school year, following the implementation of the restorative work, there were only 78 student expulsions. Over the course of three years, the restorative work lead grew from a small pilot project to the researcher being appointed a program manager tasked with developing a RJ department and creating an implementation plan, thus launching a district-wide effort of becoming a restorative district.

Despite this researcher's identity mirroring those of the participants, her professional experience, and certification as a RJ practitioner, trainer, and presenter, before any interviews took place, the researcher bracketed personal viewpoints, assumptions, and knowledge through *epoche*. In this way, the researcher addressed issues that could alter her full understanding of the essence of RCC, as she examined the lived experiences of Black youth (Van Manen, 2014). Further, listening to Black youth responsible for harm make meaning of their lived experience in RCC required the researcher to set aside personal biases and ways of knowing to understand the essence of the phenomenon being observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

While small qualitative research may place limitations on a study (Creswell, 2012), it is the goal of a phenomenological study to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and contribute the findings to research and practice. The limitations of this study are identified as the narrow geographical area from which the participants were recruited, the small size, and specificity of the study participants. Because of the above-mentioned limitations, the results will not be generalizable and should not be viewed as representative of all Black young adults who have participated in a restorative community conference. However, this study aimed to provide relevant insights and considerations which can be used to strengthen and grow restorative programming. Lastly, it is important to note the impact and limitations COVID-19 placed on this study. Because of the sudden onset of the pandemic and restrictions set forth by public health officials, the researcher was required to employ innovation in the research design and data collection. Consequently, all in-person interviews were conducted utilizing virtual methods.

Summary

Guided by a Critical Race Theory and Ecological System Theory conceptual frameworks, this qualitative phenomenological study offers an exercise in listening to youth voices, knowledge gathering, and understanding a marginalized population. Study participants described their involvement with Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) and how this process compared with punitive experiences, as well as how the RCC influenced their life course.

Chapter Four: Findings

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men. -Frederick Douglas

In 2019, law enforcement agencies arrested an estimated 10 million in the U.S. While an arrest does not automatically equal incarceration, it does mean each person each person interacted with the criminal justice system with law enforcement contact as their entry point. Getting arrested can have a lasting impact on a person's life course. It can impact their ability to be educated, employed, gain housing or vote. Entering the criminal justice system because of an arrest can be exceptionally disruptive to a young person's development, especially so when an arrest leads to confinement in a juvenile detention center or being under the supervision of probation. Young people are policed and arrested in their communities, their schools and their places of recreation urging criminal justice reform advocates to push for a move from traditional juvenile justice system operations to an approach rooted in humanity, dignity, and community. A process that allows for voice, agency, healing, and supported community re-entry; concepts found in a variety of restorative justice models, such as restorative community conferencing (RCC). An RCC is a restorative justice model where the victim of a crime makes the choice to participate in a dialogue with the youth responsible and a trained RCC facilitator. During the facilitated dialogue, the youth hear the impact of their action, accepts responsibility for their action, and works with the person harmed to create an actionable plan designed to right their wrongdoing as much as possible. When an RCC is done in partnership with law enforcement and justice officials, and the youth successfully completes the process, charges are not filed leaving them with a clean record, skills to support their re-integration to the community with their dignity, humanity, and future opportunities intact.

While previous quantitative restorative research focused on statistical analysis, this qualitative study relied on the individual experience told by each participant to understand the essence of RJ and how it differs from traditional justice responses to wrongdoing. For instance, punitive approaches generally include punishment, according to the crime committed and laws broken. In contrast, RJ aims to clarify who was harmed and identifies the needs of involved parties. Additionally, and as previously noted in Chapter Two, children do not develop in isolation; rather, they are influenced by the multi-layered, intersecting ecosystems.

Throughout the study the researcher not only centered the voice of each participant, but honored each story as valid, true, and worthy of academic research. In seeking to understand how Black young adults experienced the restorative justice approach (RCC), three research questions guided data gathering and analysis:

1. In what ways do Black young adults describe how they became involved in a Restorative Community Conference (RCC)?

2. How does a restorative approach compare to a punitive response?

3. In what ways does the lived experience of Restorative Community Conference (RCC) participation influence the lives of Black young adults?

Further, this study shifted the focus from Black youth being negatively labeled, because of their interaction with the juvenile justice system, to an exercise in curiosity, knowledge gathering, and understanding. For example, in response to research question number one participants described how, prompted by a law-enforcement incident, they were introduced to restorative justice. Then, addressing questions two and three, participants shared how the restorative process compared to a punitive experience, as well as how the restorative process

diverted them from the school-to-prison pipeline, thereby influencing their life choices. From this vantage point, RJ is seen as promising practice to keep youth in schools and out of jails.

Chapter Structure

To gain a holistic view of the RCC lived experience, it is important to appreciate each participant's journey from beginning to end. By using the narrative approach of re-storying, the reader will be introduced to each participant (Creswell, 2012). Thus, this chapter begins by introducing the reader to Breonna, Ahmaud, George, and Floyd—all pseudonyms chosen to honor and remember Black lives lost in 2020 to racial violence and injustice. The four young adults, all audaciously courageous, viewed the opportunity to interview as a meaningful contribution to this study. While it is the goal of the researcher to breathe life into each participant's unique story, it is not the intent to inject her thoughts or opinions. Therefore, recognizing the researcher's own epistemology and positionality, she figuratively *passed the mic*. The notion of *passing the mic* is a metaphor used to allow voices to tell their own story and being heard. In this case, the *passing-the-mic* approach was applied to access participants' own words, as they spoke their truth and described their respective restorative experiences leading to six emerging findings: accountability, empowering, positive self-perception, relationships, transformation, and validation.

At the beginning of each virtual interview, the researcher confirmed the participant's identity, age, and willingness to be a part of the study. She then reminded each participant that the study was focused on exploring and understanding the essence of restorative community conferencing, the interview process, and protections associated with participating in the study, reassuring each of them about their right to withdraw at any point during the project. Finally, the researcher asked each participant if there were any questions or apprehensions about continuing

with the interview. To set the stage for a comfortable and successful interview, the researcher began each session with a focus on building rapport and establishing trust which are important components in yielding rich meaningful data (Youell & Youell, 2011). Hence, the researcher employed actions anchored in connection and mutual respect such as checking in and engaging in small talk to increase the level of comfortability. As rapport was being built, the researcher and participant gained a better understanding which resulted in an in-depth conversation further benefitting the study. Moreover, to maintain rapport the researcher exhibited verbal and non-verbal encouragers such as active listening skills ("I see; tell me more; right") and non-verbal cues such as eye-contact and head nods throughout the interview (Hull, 2007). Lastly, it is worth noting that when a researcher and participants acknowledge being from the same racially marginalized community, a natural bond occurs thus deepening their connection. With the noted strategies in place, an atmosphere was created for each participant to tell willingly tell their story (DeCuir, et al; 2018).

The Storytellers

Breonna

Breonna, an exuberant and vibrant 19-year-old woman, expressed excitement for the opportunity to share her RCC experience. At the time of the interview, she was one-year post-high school graduate. When invited to tell her story, she described herself as an avid reader and lover of the ocean. She shared that she loves swimming and considers the ocean her ideal place of peace and solitude. She was born in Hawaii, but because her father was in the Navy, she moved to San Diego during her early school years. Although most of her family was in Hawaii, and she traveled back and forth for extended periods of time, she considered her southern California city her home. She worked at a local dessert shop and rented a room from a friend.

She decided to take time to work and establish a home for herself before enrolling in a

community college. She was very intentional about her word choice, sometimes pausing when

she spoke. She shared her story with depth, toggling between confidence and vulnerability.

When asked how she was introduced to the RCC, she paused, took a deep sigh, and jumped right

in. As she spoke each word, and she appeared to grow prouder of her growth and less ashamed of

her actions.

Her story, and law-enforcement incident which prompted it, began on a Friday evening.

Breonna was an active 15-year-old sophomore at a local high school. Her grades had been up

and down, mostly due to her inconsistent study habits. On the day of the judicial system

incident, she went to her friend's house to hang out over the weekend. Her friend lived on the

other side of town and across the street from a popular coffee shop. Despite Breonna not living in

the neighborhood, she went there often and, as a result, knew several of the neighborhood

teenagers. On this day, they were out in front of the coffee shop. It was a popular place. In her

words, there were a lot of young people hanging out, laughing, and talking. Some she knew,

some she didn't.

> We were just hanging out. Me and my friend knew a lot of people from a bunch
> of different schools because we were always hanging out, meeting new people. I
> was always talking to someone. I'm still not sure why it happened, but at some
> point, things got out of hand. Words were exchanged and I got into a fight, a
> physical altercation. After the fight me and my friend left and went about our
> way.

As she recalled her involvement in the fight that led to her being involved in an RCC, she

was transported back to that fateful night; a sign that the impact of her decisions was still very

present. Breonna and her friend left without any repercussions—or so she thought. As it turns

out, the video was recorded, and thanks to social media, made its way to campus before she did.

By the next school day, the video had been shared repeatedly by students, staff, and, eventually,

the school principal. This was the beginning of her learning a lifelong lesson: the difference

between punishment and accountability. Even though the fight occurred after-school hours and

the person she fought did not attend her school, the administrators believed they had the

authority to reprimand her.

> I got in really big trouble. A girl on the homecoming court showed it to campus
> security and told her, I shouldn't be running. I guess the principal agreed. I lost
> my nomination to run for homecoming princess. I was bummed about that. I was,
> like, wow, I lost homecoming over something so stupid. I couldn't believe I did
> that. I also got suspended for 5 days. I was confused though because I knew
> several times that people had fought off campus and didn't get suspended because
> it wasn't on school property. So, I didn't know I could get suspended for a fight
> that didn't happen on school property. It happened after school, way, way, way,
> way from campus. But I guess it was because I was really, really aggressive.

The fight was reported to law enforcement and Breonna and her mother were eventually

contacted by probation officers. They told her she had the option to participate in an alternative

program, thus removing her from the punitive process. Probation had determined she would be

better served by a restorative community conference (RCC) and if both parties agreed, Breonna's

case would be referred to the International Conflict Mediation Program (ICMP). "We agreed I

would do the restorative justice. That idea was better," she stated.

Ahmaud

Ahmaud is a humble and determined 18-year-old male, who identifies as Black American

with familial roots in Somalia. At the time of his interview, he was a full-time student attending a

local community college and working a part-time job as a security guard. As Ahmaud started

telling his story, it became clear his family was central in his life. The researcher could visualize

during the interview his mother preparing food in the background and could see other family

members joyfully interacting with one another. This is one of the main reasons—his family—he

decided to accept the opportunity to participate in a restorative community conference despite his

harrowing and dehumanizing experience with police. His story began on a weekday evening after a game of basketball with his friends at the local youth center. He was just 15 years old at the time of his incident.

> We just got done hooping, me and a couple of my friends, right? So, after we went out to go get pizza. They ordered chicken pizza. I'm allergic to chicken, so I watched my friends eat, and I didn't really have nothing to eat. We went to the 24-7 to get a couple of drinks, but I shared with them, so I didn't even get a drink to myself. I asked if anyone could buy me something from the burger spot across the street. When they said no, I got mad. I mean I was hungry. I still had their drink, and I decided to throw it up in the air in the middle of the parking lot of the store. It was a dumb decision. We walked away, and as I was walking down the sidewalk, I saw lights flashing... and I didn't think twice. I ran. Running was my first instinct, and as it turns out, it would be my first encounter with the police.

Ahmaud described in detail the fear he felt and how it disrupted his ability to think clearly. He continued to run as if his life depended on it. "When I turned down the alley, the whole alley lit up right behind me and in my head said, 'Yep, they're coming after me.'" He stated. Still deep in the flight phase of fight-or-flight, he kept running, somehow hoping he would escape. He continued stating, "I tried running away. I tried making a turn, but I fell, and the police came right behind me. They were very aggressive. I never really saw their faces, just bright lights, their bodysuit, and their hand on their gun."

Ahmaud shared how he was emotionally and physically dehumanized by the police officers who chased him down the alley. He described it in the following manner:

> So, I stayed down on my knees, and put my hands up. I had a black beanie in my hand. It was night. It was dark, so I don't know, they might have thought it as a weapon or something. Who knows? After I fell on my knees, I put my hands up and everything. I told them I'm not resisting. But it did not stop them. They came; they did what they did. They beat me. They dropped me to the floor. They started beating me on my sides and my ribs, punching me very, very aggressively. They pushed my head to the ground. They picked up my head, smashed it to the ground. That's why I have this cut right here. They left me bleeding with a cut under my chin. I still have a scar under my chin, where I can't grow hair anywhere around here. They roughed me up. Really roughed me up badly.

At this moment in the interview, Ahmaud leant into the researcher's webcam, lifted his head up and showed his chin. He continued to describe the moment in vivid detail. "There were a bunch of them (police officers). I was asked a bunch of unnecessary questions like, 'Are you in a gang?' 'Do you use drugs?'" The officers scoured the alley. "They were looking around on the ground where I was on my knees, trying to see if they could come up with something." Ahmaud stayed on his knees for what he said felt like hours. He was confused by the officers' laissez-faire attitudes. He said, "The cops were in a group laughing and talking as if it was a big win for them or something." He couldn't understand why throwing a can of soda in the air would warrant this type of police presence—seven police cars and (at least) 13 officers. He continued, "And here's the twist to the story: I thought I was in trouble for throwing the soda, but they told me that me and my friends were seen jumping a homeless Mexican man. In my head, I knew it was a bunch of BS."

Ahmaud denied having anything to do with an assault. He frantically advocated for himself. He was desperate. He did not want to cause worry or disappoint his father, a rideshare driver, and his mother, who was back in her home country. The thought of going to jail was overwhelming. He repeatedly requested to be taken to the scene of the alleged assault, to at least see the victim's statement; all fell on deaf ears. He was told by one officer that he was going to jail and was going to be charged. He was told by another officer, if he admitted to crime, he would make the situation easier. Ahmaud identified this tactic as the "good cop/bad cop thing." Stating, "but I didn't fold," Thus, Ahmaud was arrested and taken to juvenile hall, as his father was notified of his arrest. Once his father arrived at juvenile hall, law enforcement officials told him that Ahmaud was being charged with resisting arrest and assault. He was eventually released with a date to return to juvenile court. He noted, "I showed up to court, and I talked to a lawyer.

He asked me a few questions, and I guess that was all he needed. We left within five minutes of meeting of this lawyer." Weeks later, International Conflict Mediation Program (ICMP) officials communicated with Ahmaud's parents about the opportunity to participate in the RCC program in lieu of being charged. However, part of the deal was for Ahmaud to accept responsibility for the charges. Although he still maintains his innocence, Ahmaud accepted the invitation despite the arrest having been made without any proof that he had committed a crime. He said, "So, realistically I had to. Realistically, I had to admit to what I did, which I didn't do... if I wanted to clear my name."

Floyd

Floyd is described as a confident, intellectual, and focused 18-year-old male of Somali descent, who was a full-time, second-year community college student at the time of this interview. Floyd's story was unique in that he was the only participant who knew about restorative justice program prior to his law-enforcement incident. When asked how he became involved with the RCC, he shared that in high school he served as a student leader who helped coordinate a school-based restorative justice training at a local university. During that training, Floyd met cross-sector juvenile justice professionals and advocates who were raising awareness about RJ and its potential in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. Floyd shared how his experience led to his interest in becoming an attorney. He exhibited a captivating presence and began the interview vividly recalling how he came to experience a restorative community conference at age16. He stated, "I got into a fight with my mom, and then I spit...so she called the cops. The cops... they were being assholes and arrested me. I never got any charges filed against me, but they arrested me, and I went to juvenile hall for four days. They did that to get just to get me out to the house."

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Floyd went on to describe his time in juvenile hall and his interactions with juvenile

probation officers in the following manner:

> You can see how jail is so dehumanizing. It's not a good experience. You're
> locked in a room for four to five hours a day. And it's just not a nice place to be. If
> you need the bathroom, someone has to come buzz you out. They call it juvie, but
> the infrastructure basically looks the same as a jail. Basically, it's a good diversion
> for never doing anything again. I mean, I personally would never want to ever go
> back there again. Fortunately for me, when I went to juvie, a probation officer
> recognized me from a program I was involved in during high school. It was really
> to my advantage because the probation department runs the juvenile hall. He was
> like, 'I don't think this is a good place for you because you're a smart kid. Look at
> this program and I'm going to talk to your parents and try and get you referred
> there.

The "there" word Floyd was referring to was the RCC program facilitated by the ICMP.

George

At time of the interview George was a 21-year-old Black male, who described himself as

someone who is still trying to figure things out. He resides with his mother, works full-time as a

security guard and is a full-time student at a local barber college. Even at 21, the researcher

could see something pure and innocent about George. He was on the quiet side, but incredibly

authentic. He gently shared in rich detail his experience with law-enforcement which prompted

his RCC participation. He was 15 years old when the law-enforcement incident occurred. He

described it as follows:

> So, me and some friends, we ditched school. It was Halloween and homecoming,
> and we were just trying to have a good time. Later in the day, I went back to
> campus, and we were under the influence. We got back just in time for the
> homecoming pep rally... sixth period. The whole school was there. I was falling
> asleep on and off. This girl let me use her phone, and her phone came up missing
> after I fell asleep... and she made a scene.

George shared that, because it was homecoming, there was a heavy police presence on

campus to help with crowd control. He stated, "So, school police came, and they searched me.

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They found a lighter, but they didn't find a phone. And me being under the influence, I fought to keep them from taking the lighter. It just escalated from there and placed me in the police car."

George described how an officer drove him from the football field to the school administration office so the officer could complete his report. He continued.

They put me in the car right there, and we drove all the way around to the front of the school. I stumbled when I got out of the car, and that's how they were able to tell I was intoxicated. Before then, they didn't ask me if I was under the influence or give me a sobriety test. Yet, I was charged with assault on an officer. I didn't even know what I was doing.

After the officers completed the report, they called George's mom and told her they were transporting him to juvenile hall. He recalled the following.

That time, I was only in the hall for a couple of hours and placed on probation. But, a year later, I was walking home after school and, as I approached my house, I saw that the police were there looking for a relative. As it turns out, I guess I had missed some court dates. I didn't get the mail because it went to my cousin's address, so I didn't know I had a court date and a warrant out for my arrest. Yeah, so I got caught because my cousin was on the run, and he lived with us at the time.

After that arrest, George was detained in juvenile hall for three days, and he was charged with obstruction in addition to assault on an officer. It was his mother who told him about the option to participate in the RCC program facilitated by the International Conflict Mediation Program.

The stories above are vivid displays of the individual incidents which automatically placed each respondent into the school-to-prison pipeline. Although each of the interviews yielded unique perspectives, data from the interviews revealed six findings. Respondents re-told their introduction to the RCC; how it compared to a punitive process; and how the experience shaped their lives. The findings from their stories are relationships, accountability, validation, empowerment, transformation, and positive self-perception.

Significant Findings

This study, using the dual lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST) examined the lived experiences of Black young adults involved in a restorative community conference. For this study, CRT provided a lens for interrogating the role of race and racism in American ecosystems and how those systems directly and indirectly influence the development of a child. Additionally, CRT argues that equity can only be achieved by embracing the lived experiences of communities of color and keeping their stories alive through the storytelling tenet (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This led to six significant findings which emerged from data analysis and will be discussed in the following order: power of relationships, accountability, validation, empowerment, transformation, and positive self-perception.

Finding # 1: Power of Relationships

In agreement with African communities, restorative community conferencing is relational in nature and grounded in bringing together all parties impacted by the wrongdoing (Davis, 2017). This gathering is intended to heal the relationship with the person(s) harmed, the community, and oneself. Achievement of this type of healing can only take place when a trusting relationship has been established between the RCC participant and the RCC facilitator (Baliga et al., 2017). Across the interviews participants consistently noted the intentionality and investment the facilitator made in getting to know each of them as humans separate from the person described in the case referral. This power of relationship finding was connected to what each participant found to be lacking in the punitive process. Specifically, research question two asked how the RCC process compared to a punitive process. It was repeatedly shared that there was no interaction or previous relationship with the administrator who issued the disciplinary action, such as suspension. Based on their lived experiences, participants shared a common belief that

the act of being suspended lacked genuine care and concern for the youth as noted by their inability to tell their side of the story or express what they needed at the time of the incident or upon return to school.

Comparatively, participants expressed appreciation for the individualized support and care they received from their RCC facilitator during the preparation and follow-up phases of the process. Across the interviews, participants expressed the high level of support and help they received from their facilitator. Further, participants described the initial contact about the RCC from probation to be in stark contrast to how they'd been treated by law enforcement or school officials discipline response. They described the feeling as the first time someone seemed to care for their most basic needs. "The more I would spend time with my facilitator, the more she understood me. In a way I was being seeing as a new person before I saw it for myself. You know what I mean?" Another participant stated, "She was checking in with me constantly to see how I was doing, making sure I had food and just showing me she cared." Another interviewee added, "My facilitator to this day checks in on me. He supports my ideas and the many turns my life has taken. Any idea I take to him, he tries to make it happen. I have never been to the snow and before COVID hit he was planning a trip for us to go to the mountains to go snowboarding."

While a trusting relationship is important for the youth to feel supported, it also increases the youth's desire to accept accountability and hear input from the harmed party and the community on what should be included in the action plan. When there is a strong and trusting relationship between the RCC facilitator and responsible youth, there is an increased likelihood of completing the RCC process and action plan; consequently, this often results in confident and capable human beings prepared to re-enter their communities with the skills to navigate dominant systems, institutions, and society (Davis, 2017; Baliga, et. al; 2018).

Finding # 2: Accountability

Accountability is posited by advocates of restorative justice as the way in which those responsible for harm actively engage in righting their wrongdoing to those who experienced the harm. Zehr (1990) defines accountability as "an intrinsic link between the act and the consequences" (1990, p. 40). Zehr further argues, "this, perhaps, is the difference between serving a prison term and completing a restorative outcome plan: while prison is imposed upon an offender, and potentially endured passively by him/her, restorative consequences demand the active engagement and participation of the offender" (p. 40).

Restorative justice processes require more than the presence of persons responsible for harm; the process requires their inclusion and active engagement (Richards, 2011). They are expected to participate in the process, to speak about their offense, interact with the harmed person, express their remorse for their actions, and apologize for what they have done. Further, the youth must be willing to hear the needs of the harmed person. Plainly, it is the hope of restorative justice for persons responsible for the harm to understand the reach, depth, and impact of their actions, and commit to making amends with those harmed (Zehr, 2015; Davis, 2017). Facing the person violated is a vital step in a restorative process. The opportunity to face harmed persons and hear how the actions of the youth responsible impacted them allows for the youth to not only understand how far reaching their actions were, but also empathize with the harmed person and feel their pain (Wallis, 2014). Participants expressed how, initially, there was a fear of facing the harmed party. However, once they accepted responsibility, the accountability made space for humanity and liberation from the negative label of offender. There was a feeling of being separated from the action and being seen as a person relieving them of feeling ashamed.

This was achieved by a formal apology made to the harmed party as well as a commitment to a behavior change and the completion of the agreed-upon action plan

Finding # 3: Validation

Validation is described as a way of communicating the importance of relationships along with honoring other's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (McCold & Wachtel, 2001; Zehr, 2002). Participants shared feelings of validation based on their interaction and relationship with their facilitator throughout the RCC process. For generations, dominant interpretations of the Black experience have contributed to mainstream society's suspicion of the Black experience when told by Black people themselves. bell hooks (1990) shed light on how dominant-created narratives of the Black experience are valued more than the Black narrative itself. Therefore, CRT's storytelling tenet was utilized to shed light on Black youth voices who participated in an RCC— voices that are often questioned, silenced, or spoken for. Therefore, voices of those closest to the experience, in this case the RCC participants, must be centered for them to feel validated (Sleeter & Bernal; 2003).

RCC participants expressed getting their experiences validated from the moment they met with the facilitator. During both formal and informal RCC activities, participants felt heard, seen, and supported. Moreover, participants expressed that the empathy the facilitators showed strengthened their connection further validating them as humans rather than the harm done. Through an intentional, non-judgmental, and purposeful effort to build trusting relationships with the youth, engage in authentic dialogue, and separate the student from the action, the case managers responded to and anticipated the students' most basic needs. Although the youth were held responsible for their actions, they felt supported and nurtured by their case manager. For example, this is supported with Floyd's description when he addressed his emotional state, he

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began addressing harm through a restorative community conference, a face-to-face problem-solving process between the person(s) harmed, the youth who caused that harm, and the community members. His description follows.

> I was going through a lot, personally, I was not who I am today. When I first started, I was in my first semester of college. I had graduated early from high school. So, I was younger than all my college classmates. So, I was struggling already. That's difficult. I didn't know a lot of people there. I was just already having a tough time. I didn't have a job. And when this happened, I really got really depressed, I stopped going to my classes. I was just... I kind of tapped out from life but going to lunch with my mentor or participating in anything with RCC, it was just a nice escape and helped me realize like I have more potential in my life. And over time, I started trusting them more. I started doing better in school. I got a job. A lot of stuff that I was not doing before changed because I had realized that I was bottling up so much stuff because I don't want to talk to nobody about this kind of stuff. It seems trivial, but it was just nice to be able to get that stuff off my chest, get out of the house and go do something, and it was also not on my dime, it wasn't financially burdening me to pay for these things.

Connecting further, George explained how the "facilitators actually talked to us, made us do a self-reflection on ourselves and basically voice what we did wrong." Similarly, Ahmaud shared how the mentors encouraged students to be themselves, as evidenced by the following.

> They actually allow you to be yourself. And it's okay to feel how you're feeling, to express the way you are, and they'll understand, because they're here to help you at the end of the day. So, they gave me a reason to believe that this is actually going to work, and hopefully they'll get it done for me. So, I really believed in that, and they did. It kind of gave me another reason to be alive. Knowing that, that situation... it could have ended in a very, very bad way. Kind of gave me another purpose to look out for myself because I want to live longer, and not have people know a tragic story about me, that I ended up going out like that.

Through organized outings, scheduled visits, and informal check-ins, the case managers took time to listen to and get to know the youth they were supporting. During these times the case managers and youth engaged in meaningful discussions and community building leading to a strong and unguarded relationship. George stated: "We always talked. Always talked. Even in the middle of the activities, my mentor would step aside with an individual youth and be like,

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'Yeah, what's up? How's it going? Do you like the activity?' He actually got to know each one of us individually, even though we had different mentors."

This appeared to cultivate a safe and trusting space where youth could openly talk about the incident that led them to the RCC, as well as their hopes and dreams for their lives. These conversations were held during low-risk, informal activities, and experiences, such as trips to the Alexander Aquarium, walks at the beach, or rock climbing. This trusting connection and authentic dialogue, between the case manager and the Black youth, underscored the restorative nature of the RCC process. Breonna described how, on one of these outings, she reflected on her core identity. She stated: "I was introduced to what I didn't want to be, and who I didn't want to be, and what I didn't want to do, and what I didn't want to be affiliated with." This points to the efforts of case managers to hold space for students to reflect deeply, acknowledge that they may have made a mistake, and accept responsibility for that misstep in a way that preserved their dignity, thus avoiding shame. For example, Floyd shared his interpretation of a judgment-free zone: "I'm not saying there's no accountability, there's definitely accountability. But it's like a judgment-free zone in the sense that you don't feel shame...and sometimes you do need to feel ashamed...but it doesn't need to be constant; it doesn't need to be never ending."

The data suggest validation as a significant factor in each interview when participants described the affirming and validating role of the case manager. While the validation finding was clearly evidenced by the participant stories, the empowering theme was equally compelling.

Finding # 4: Empowerment

How Black youth are recognized and treated by society impacts how they recognize themselves (Apena, 2007). Research suggests that when CRT is centered throughout all levels of interconnected systems, such as the education or legal sectors, and cultural diversity is valued,

there are increasing positive behavior choices and feelings of empowerment for marginalized

youth. This in turn creates a reciprocal effect where a well community creates well individuals

(Becker & Vanclay, 2003). Restorative justice promotes participatory activities and processes

that create opportunities for youth to increase their confidence and skills leading to participants

feeling an increased sense of agency and empowerment (Richards, 2011).

Each student shared how the relationship with the case manager was akin to that of a

mentor, a component that supported the feeling of empowerment. Through intentional,

purposeful interactions, and open dialogue, the case manager focused on equipping each youth

with tools and skills necessary to navigate life in a society that continues to marginalize Black

lives. As a result of consistently investing in building a trusting relationship with Black youth,

empowered young voices were nurtured. These characteristics, components of a culturally

restorative ecosystem, are essential to supporting youth transitioning into adulthood and

becoming empowered members of their community. For example, Breonna recounted how her

mentor cultivated her voice and increased her confidence:

> The RCC provided me with stability and gave me confidence. It made me love
> helping others and sharing my story. They gave me love and made me love
> helping others, talking to people and sharing my story. They brought in an author
> to do a writing workshop, and he told me my writing was good. And that got me
> to thinking and my mind started taking all those little things and showed me I can
> do more. So over time, that enthusiasm literally grew. But not just for the RCC,
> but with life. I grew to love that intellectual stimulation. I love talking to people
> now; but before the RCC, I wouldn't have conversations with people because I
> didn't think I had anything worth being heard because I was just doing the wrong
> things.

Conversations between the facilitators and the youth coupled with focused role-playing

activities, the RCC mentor built the students' capacities, skills, and "coping strategies" to address

situations where conflict might occur. Ahmaud described the dialogues as opportunities to act

out possible situations and scenarios. He explained: "They were eye-opening. It was just really a

helpful tool that they provided for me, where I can make better decisions for myself, and where I don't have to be in the system." Floyd also explained in the same vein: "It [the process] makes you grow, and it makes you accountable for your actions. But it also doesn't make you feel bad as a person. You don't feel like crap for what you did. It doesn't let one mistake define you, whereas suspension or expulsion or incarceration. That's what it does."

These quotes represent the intersection of CRT and Ecological Systems Theory, at the individual and societal level, by showing the need to equip youth with the skills necessary to navigate citizenship and transition to adulthood within a dominant centered society. Ahmaud described how his mentor taught him how to navigate the harsh reality of racism and how to be more cautious. He stated:

> After being in the RCC, it kind of made me look at my life differently and how I respond around police. I'm being more cautious about what I do, or where I am. The RCC gave me alternatives and ways to act accordingly when I am out with a group of friends or by myself. I just have a different view of myself and what I can do. I did have trauma for a little bit, when the police were around. I believe the RCC supported me in dealing with my anxiety and trauma being around the police. Before in my community, I was more careless of what I was doing, because it was more of, I'm in my community and I can just do whatever I want to do at any given time. Just being careless before. I'd never been in that situation, and I'd never thought of it like how I think now. Now, I'm more cautious when I'm outside, making more better decisions as a young man and in general. And moving around... How do I say this? I move strategically. If I get pulled over, I try to act cool. I'm not going to be aggressive to cops. I'm just going to agree with them, but just being on the right side of the police at all times, knowing that this could be my last day. That was one of the many benefits of listening to my mentor. Sometimes you just have to toughen up, swallow it down, and just go about your day at the end of the day. It is what it is.

Building on the themes of validation and empowering, the following stories are an invitation to learn how the RCC experience contributed to each participant's transformation.

Finding # 5: Transforming

EST and CRT underpinnings remind us how children do not develop in isolation from formal and informal systems' influence. This is underscored by participants naming the liberating outcome of RCC as a key factor in realizing their own self-actualization. They described how their facilitators validated them by addressing the behaviors without sacrificing their self-esteem, value, and self-worth. Black youth expressed how they felt embraced by the process, developing empowering coping skills which gave them the tools to respond differently, learn about themselves, and realize their own potential. They each shared some version of how they shed the shame and negative labels. For example, Floyd explained his own road to self-acceptance.

> I value life way more. Before, if my goals were deterred in any single way, I would feel like my life was over. Now I just breathe, I just enjoy every day as it comes. Life is not infinite, you can die any day, or you don't know when your time is going to come to an end, but I feel like I've matured so much because I just take life day by day now.

Similarly, George explained that this transformative aspect gave him the confidence to share his own story. He stated:

> I volunteer with other community circles actually. I did a couple of circles where I was the mentor instead of the person involved. It helps with youth a lot because instead of a person trying to help the youth who has not been through something, what I went through is relatable to their situation and they are able to connect with that.

In Ahmaud's words, "the RCC helped transform me as a person." He described how he loves helping others by sharing his RCC experience. He continued, "I enjoy now how I can meet others just like me, and how I can share my story with them, they can relate, and have a relationship with them. Just bringing that type of positive energy in that type of environment and that community feels good."

Uplifting the storytelling tenet of CRT (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017), Breonna also shared the emancipatory power of telling her own story in the following:

> They brought in this one author, and he did a little writing workshop, and he told me, 'dude, you know your writing is good.' And then my mind started taking all those little things, and, like, 'Okay, I want to do more and more. I can do more.' So, over time, that enthusiasm literally grew...but not just for the RCC, but with life. I grew to love that intellectual stimulation. I love talking to people now. But, before the RCC, I wouldn't have conversations with people because I was just doing the wrong things. Before the RCC I felt so like disconnected from people, I'm not going to lie, literally feeling dissociated from reality. And now I feel so acknowledged. I don't mean that in an ego kind of way, but there was a time when I didn't even acknowledge my own presence. It feels weird even saying that, but it's something I learned from the RCC, and I try and practice it every single day.

Because racially targeted punitive practices do not include a process for counter storytelling, many youths may feel emotionally disconnected and dehumanized by the educational and legal systems. Thus, a system embedded with self-respect, culture, and restorative values, as the foundation for development and growth of individuals, becomes an ensuring, meaningful, and positive life course.

The reflective bond that took place outside the pressures of daily life, during the duration of the RCC process, became another transformative thread across the interviews. As noted in the power of relationships and validation themes, the youth did not have to worry about transportation, food, or financial resources which are examples of how interconnected systems can directly or indirectly impact youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This afforded them the opportunity to be present, reflect, and grow. This was described as a powerful contributor to the quality of the experience, and sometimes even transformative in assisting the participant with developing an understanding of their individual needs and how to communicate those needs in preparation of community re-entry.

In contrast, when participants were asked to compare their school suspension experience, they described how dismissive and dehumanizing the process was and how it did not include any type of personal follow-up. In fact, the disciplinary action was viewed by Floyd, for example, as a two-day vacation which resulted in students questioning if any adult at the school even cared about their well-being. He stated the following:

> Honestly, when I first started the program (RCC), I was skeptical of its effectiveness. And then I reluctantly grew to appreciate it. So, I definitely would think that it's more effective than a punitive approach. Even if someone doesn't want to admit it early on, it (the process) forces you to grow. And I think punitive measures—incarceration and suspension, expulsion, all these different measures that we have in school that are reflective of the criminal justice system—I don't think those help you grow, like being suspended. I was suspended quite a bit and I got in trouble with my parents, because my parents were fairly on my case. But if you don't have parents involved in your life that heavily, you just get sent home for a two-day vacation. It further messes up your education, same with suspension, it doesn't help you get to a better place or even address the causes.

Similarly, Breonna shared that talking to school staff did not feel genuine. She described this fact in the following:

> There were times when I wondered if people cared. It felt like people only talk to you or ask you questions because I got in trouble and they are literally just following the protocol, but at the end of that, it feels like they could not care less. Of course, teachers care. They are there for you. But it's in that principal's office I felt I was just purely getting the consequence, just getting in trouble. You can feel the judgment on every level. You feel their impatience so much. They literally only talk to you when you're in trouble. They're not going to check in on you after.

As previously discussed, children do not develop in isolation, but rather they are influenced by informal and formal relationships and structures. When culturally restorative beliefs and values are absent, deleterious effects on an individual's growth and life are almost guaranteed. This means that one part, or more, of the ecosystem is not well. On the other hand, when society includes racial and ethnic diversity of its members as an asset, the well-being of all individuals across the sectors of society becomes a priority.

Finding # 6: Positive Self-Perception

      With its growing research and evidence base, the restorative justice movement provides an opportune place to start thinking about reintegrating youth responsible back into the community (Walker & Davidson, 2018). While there are multiple factors that contribute to persons' successfully re-entering into the community (Walker & Davidson, 2018), a factor of significance includes the persons' view of themselves as worthy of returning to their community. Successful community re-entry is a principle of RJ, which contributes to a positive self-perception, as well as the RCC experience. Study participants shared and appeared to have had a positive influence on their self-perceptions and successful reintegration. To generate verbal discussion and a deeper level of detail, the researcher utilized community photographs of locations, selected by participants, symbolizing their individual positive self-perception (Thomas, 2009). This may have resulted from the trusting relationships, coping skills, and lessons learned during the process. The health and well-being of an ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) are dependent on the well-being of its members; therefore, when individuals' reintegration to the community is supported across sectors, they can learn from their past in an environment that sees them as humans, separate from negative incidents allowing them to move forward as contributing members of society. By shedding negative stereotypes, each participant expressed having positive self-perceptions and ultimate transformation because of their RCC experience.

      Although the in-depth interviews revealed rich descriptions and powerful understandings of lived experience of Black youth in RCC, participants were additionally invited to identify a location in their community representing a turning point; this meant a place where they could positively see themselves in their community after participating in the RCC. Had the researcher been able to conduct interviews in person, this portion of data collection would have been

captured utilizing walking interviews. Thus, to accommodate for public health restrictions

stemming from COVID-19, the researcher used photos of key locations selected by participants.

To protect the anonymity of participants, the researcher did not reveal the exact locations of

chosen places.

Breonna's Photo Location

Breonna stated the following:

I guess I would have to say my high school. I want to go on record and say that not in any way do I identify with who I was back in high school now. But we're talking about that person in the past. Even though the staff may not see me as different, I see myself differently. I have so much peace. Before, I was very close-minded sort of like how the campus looks with the big gates and fences all around. Now, I see it as place that I could go back and be proud of who I am, who I have grown to be. It is a place I could return to and tell my story to help others. The RCC allowed me to create a new version of myself.

Ahmaud's Location

Ahmaud described the turning-point place as follows:

The place where everything happened, both with my case and with the RCC and what I really enjoyed about it. I enjoy now how I can meet others just like me, and

how I can share my story with them, they can relate, and have a relationship with them. Just bringing that type of positive energy in that type of environment and that community. This location symbolizes how strong mentally I was to go through that situation, and understanding that sometimes, even though you're in the right, you're going to be seen as wrong at some point of time. This location reminds me that I am free with limits.

Floyd's Location
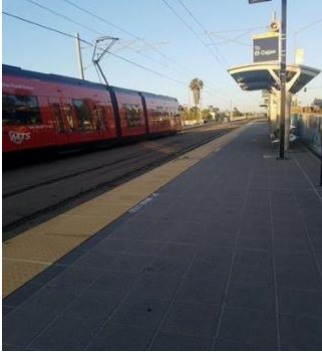
Floyd's unique turning-point place follows.

My life was centered around that one trolley stop. I would get citations from the cops over there. Me and my friends on the weekends would hang out and go ride the trolley. The trolley was everything, school, work, having fun. It was a method of transportation for everything. Now, I don't take the trolley anymore because every time I drive now. I have a car because it was a goal, I set for myself during the RCC, so this location represents me setting goals for myself and reaching them.

George's location

Finally, George described an ordinary intersection as a significant location:

"I'm not going to lie, the four corners. I remember standing at that intersection nervous sometimes and being seen as a gang member or wondering if I would be stopped by the police. Now I see myself as a proud black man standing there now. Like the community is mine, like I belong there."

Summary

The study findings have come at a significant time in American history—when there is great need of creating a space for Black stories to be told, heard, and valued. Using the dual lens of CRT and Ecological Systems Theory, the researcher learned from study participants how dominant systems, directly and indirectly, shape their development and how the RCC lived experience shaped their life course leading to the findings of validation, empowerment, transformation, positive self-perception, relationships, and accountability; this represents potential evidence to identify and disrupt harmful systems of oppression that have been detrimental to the development and life course of Black youth.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The children are well. –Masai Greeting

This study explored the lived experiences of four Black young adults who participated in a Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) program. Participants willingly and courageously recalled their experience during a 90-minute, individual, and in-depth semi-structured interview which provided a view into the essence of restorative community conferencing, as well as into the process which shaped the lives of these Black youth. This concluding chapter reiterates the problem, reasserts the purpose of the study, research methodology, and conceptual framework theories which guided the study. The chapter will review key findings related to the literature review, and will discuss the study's limitations, implications, considerations, and recommendations for future research. As a reminder, Chapter One opened with the traditional Maasai greeting asking, *and how are the children,* and it is in this chapter the findings and discussion will endeavor to answer the question by demonstrating the children are well.

An abundance of a data (National Research Council, 2014; Orrock & Clark, 2018; Wilbur et al., 2007) show how racial, educational, and confinement disparities affect generations of Black Americans (Bush & Bush, 2013; Philpart & Bell, 2015). Therefore, as cross sector agencies and legislators respond to pleas to improve outcomes for Blacks, it is important to consider employing a racialized ecological lens when studying the lives of Black youth to allow for a thorough understanding of how these interconnected spheres of influence can shape their life course of future generations (Bush & Bush, 2013; Elder, 1998).

The Problem: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Throughout this study and the literature review, the reader was presented with a growing body of research confirming an increased use of punitive disciplinary actions in schools and the

juvenile justice system. The increase of punitive measures can be traced to the enactment of inflexible policies, which direct school and law-enforcement officials to respond to behavior infractions with a one-size-fits-all approach, thus resulting in exclusion from places of learning, detainment, and arrests (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018). In response to these negative consequences, and over four decades, restorative justice has gained momentum as a viable alternative to punitive disciplinary measures in U.S. K-12 schools. School-based restorative practices research studies have shown promise (Ashley & Burke, 2009), leading to an increase in legal systems situating restorative programming within the U.S. juvenile justice system (Bazemore & Schiff, 2015; Rodriguez, 2007). As introduced and defined in previous chapters, one such approach showing success is a process known as Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Propelled by the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, RCC offers a paradigmatic shift in how justice is viewed, understood, and pursued. The restorative philosophy requires a belief that justice should be healing, which is achieved by attending to the relationship between the person responsible for the harm, the person harmed, and the community relationships (Van Ness & Strong, 2010; Zehr, 2015). As a result of the inequitable school practices and mistreatment of marginalized populations, Black youth experience negative academic and social outcomes leading to an increased likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system (Skiba & Mediratta, 2017). To disrupt the overuse of punitive practices, in both the educational and justice systems, educators, lawmakers, and justice advocates have begun to explore the use of restorative-based initiatives as an alternative to disrupting inequitable discipline disparities in the school-to-prison pipeline (Banks & Obiakor, 2015; Bazemore & Schiff, 2015; Furger et al., 2019; Rodriguez, 2007; Thapa et al., 2013).

Significance of the Study

As noted in previous chapters, Black voices have been silenced for generations by policies, beliefs, and ideologies designed to uphold the systemic racism embedded in the many layers of the American ecosystem. These intentional efforts have had limiting and detrimental effects on the self-worth and needs of Black people. On the other hand, this phenomenological study has centered those marginalized voices to allow an intimate view and vivid understanding of how Black youth experienced restorative community conferencing and how it continues to influence their lives.

Purpose

Despite a shift towards restorative-based programs, in both the educational and criminal justice systems showing a decrease in out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, youth incarceration and recidivism (Schiff, 2018), there has been a scant amount of research on how Black youth, one of the most marginalized group of people, have experienced restorative-based programs. Because of this study's focus on factors leading to Black youth's experience with restorative community conferencing, Critical Race Theory's storytelling tenet allowed participant's marginalized voices to come to light in cross sector systems. It also highlighted study participants' values which have shaped their development, thus making CRT and EST ideal theories to understand lived RCC experiences, how the RCC process compares to a punitive response, and how the RCC process supported successful transition into adulthood. To this end, the following overarching questions were asked during a 90-minute semi-structured interviews:

1. In what ways do Black young adults describe how they became involved in a Restorative Community Conference (RCC)?

2. How does a restorative approach compare to a punitive response?

3. In what ways does the lived experience of Restorative Community Conference (RCC) participation influence the lives of Black young adults?

Research Question One

The data collected from this phenomenological study produced a vibrant and vivid view of the lived experiences of four Black young adults who participated in a restorative community conference, thus describing how each participant was introduced to restorative community conferencing. The stories provide an individually rich description of a personal incident involving law enforcement. Through this experience all participants found value in holding themselves accountable for their actions signifying a transformation in their decision making. For instance, Floyd truthfully recounted the incident that introduced him to restorative community conferencing in the following statement: "I got in a fight with my mom and then I spit so she called the cops, and the cops were being assholes and arrested me. They never got any charges filed against me, but they just did that to get me out to the juvenile hall."

Similarly, Breonna described what it was like to not only accept responsibility for the fight that caused her to be charged with assault, but also what it felt like to admit to it in her actual conference. She stated:

> I got into a fight in high school, and it was a really bad fight. Her mom was really mad. Her parents wanted me to write a letter. So, I wrote a letter and read it in the conference. For me writing is already a release, but in this case writing a letter was super impactful. It made me feel like I never want to have to say these words in this way to someone again. I don't want to have to be apologizing for like punching somebody in the face.

These statements are examples of how these young adults were invited to participate in an RCC in lieu of the going through the traditional juvenile justice system. Further, participants described the impact and benefits of being accountable for their actions leading to improved ability to make responsible decisions.

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Research Question Two

Research question two asked participants to compare their experience with punitive discipline, such as a suspension or expulsion, and their participation with the RCC. Because each participant had experienced a suspension at some point in their school career, but not necessarily connected to the incident which placed them in the RCC program, they were able to provide a descriptive comparison. The participants described their interaction with school officials as being absent of authentic care, concern, and respect. All participants felt that in their interactions with educational leaders a relationship was absent, thus limiting such interaction to deal with the behavior-related incident. For example, Breonna stated: "So, with schools, and I felt there were times when I wondered if people cared. The school made me feel like nobody cared. I'm such a bad kid….my school was putting that into my head. I'm such a bad kid because I was in the office."

In comparison, Breonna stated that her mentor disrupted that pattern of negativity. She said: "My mentor would ask me, which office you want to be sitting in? She would talk to me to get me and get me to think about my behavior. She was sincere." Similarly, both George and Ahmaud described their punitive experience as superficial in the way they interacted with school officials. They both reported that nobody there appeared to have any real concern to get to the root cause of the incident. For instance, Ahmaud recalled the school officials saying, "We already know you did it. Just accept what you did so we can move on." Likewise, George described the approach schools took did not allow anytime for self-reflection. He stated: "They wrote a referral and sent you to the office. That's it. But the RCC facilitators actually talked to us, made us do a self-reflection on ourselves and basically voice what we did wrong." Further,

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Floyd offered his perceptions and experience with punitive discipline specifically noting the lack of support and follow up.

> I think punitive measures—incarceration, suspension, and expulsion—, all these different measures that we have in school [that] are reflective of the criminal justice system. I don't think those help you grow, like being suspended. I was suspended quite a bit and I got in trouble by my parents, because my parents are fairly on my case. But if you don't have parents involved in your life that heavily, you just get sent home for a two-day vacation. It further messes up your education, same with suspension, it doesn't help you get to a better place or even address the causes.

Study participants described the punitive school response as dehumanizing, void of authentic care or concern for them as people and absent of a relationship. Comparatively, when entering the RCC, participants concluded feeling supported as people rather than being identified by the mistake they made. Further, with the establishment of trusting relationships, the youth were able to understand the impact of their choices without the burden of feeling incessantly judged. This contributed to being able to accept the skills and tools offered to support improved behavior choices and the ability to navigate systems that do not yet honor their Black lives.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked each participant to describe how their lives as young adults have been influenced by their involvement with the RCC. The participants expressed how they learned skills that led to a positive self-perception which in turn supported their re-entry into society. Multiple participants shared powerful examples of how they were able to use the skills, tools, and lessons learned from their RCC experience in multiple areas of their lives. A powerful example from Ahmaud described that the skills and lessons he learned from the RCC shaped how he views life and his actions.

> After being in the RCC, it kind of made me look at my life differently and how I respond around police. I'm being more cautious about what I do, or where I am. The RCC gave me alternatives and ways to act accordingly when I am out with a

group of friends or by myself. I just have a different view of myself and what I can do. I did have trauma for a little bit when the police were around. I believe the RCC supported me in dealing with my anxiety and trauma being around the police. Before in my community, I was more careless of what I was doing, because it was more of, in my community, just do whatever you want to do at any given time. You just being careless, because I'd never been in that situation, and I'd never thought of it like how I think now. Now, I'm more cautious when I'm outside, making more better decisions as a young man and in general. And moving around... How do I say this? I move strategically. If I get pulled over, try to act cool. I'm not going to be aggressive to cops. I'm just going to agree with them. Just being on the right side of the police at all times, knowing that this could be my last day.

One of many dark legacies of racism in America is the erasure of Black voices from issues of value. For generations, Black Americans have been on the receiving end of decisions made without their input. While over the recent months the racial reckoning in the United States has contributed to increase the visibility of Blacks folks, such visibility does not mean voice. Seeing is not hearing, and most certainly, not believing. Only when people are truly heard, and their experiences are regarded as valid, will there be opportunities to design and build inclusive and welcoming ecosystems.

Implications

This study has offered a viable option to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline using RCC. Restorative justice is a paradigm shift from violating laws to understanding the role relationships play in addressing harm responsibly and equitably. Thus, RCC offers opportunities outside the juvenile justice system for young people to become accountable for the harm they have caused, thus providing racially marginalized communities a meaningful experience instead of traditional methods which criminalize Black youth. In expanding the offering of RCC throughout juvenile justice systems across this country, the researcher recommends restorative justice awareness and advocates for training to be made available across all sectors and levels of education and legal systems; this is in response to the alarming increment of punitive measures disproportionately

applied to marginalized groups, as data in the study demonstrate. When cross-sector agencies work together and analyze current systems for viable sustainable change, the promise of an inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsible society appears possible. Further, Restorative Justice (RJ) principles align well with the conceptual framework designed for this study. For example, when the principles of restorative justice are valued as essential components, embedded within cross sector systems, and offered as an alternative to the traditional justice system, there is a demonstrated reduced demand on the justice system and law enforcement managed cases (Walgrave, 2013; Wilson et al., 2018). Because many excluded youths end up in the school-to-prison pipeline (Losen, 2014), there has been an increase in concern from leaders in both the education and juvenile justice system (Schiff, 2013). These two systems are well suited to adopt RJ approaches. This is underscored by Bazemore and Schiff (2012) who reported schools with the most effective restorative programs tended to refer youth to juvenile justice settings less frequently. Thus, educators and juvenile justice professionals may benefit from collaborative efforts to coordinate RJ programs aligned across sectors. Such programs can engage students by utilizing RJ practices to build relationships, cultivate growth, and reduce the school-to-prison funneling pipeline, particularly of Black youth (Schiff & Bazemore, 2012).

Children who are pushed out of schools often end up becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. Although there has been an increase of restorative justice related programming as a viable alternative to punitive practices, the focus has only been on either the education or the legal system. While these siloed systems have seen success, there is need for a systemic approach to addressing the complex problem of the school-to-prison pipeline and its harmful effects on historically marginalized populations. Therefore, because the youth pushed out of school are often the same youth involved in the juvenile legal system, this study is an

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invitation for future researchers to study how communities leverage a cross-sector approaches to address the systemic inequities that continue to harm communities. Using the conceptual framework from this study as a lens to interrogate dominant-centered systems, structural inequities can be intentionally disrupted, and programs collectively redesigned to ensure a culturally restorative ecosystem for all members of the community.

Considerations for Future Research

The young adults participating in this research study expressed, in meaningful ways, how restorative justice can be used as an alternative to current mainstream responses to behavior missteps. Thus, restorative justice research deserves more extensive validation using a larger sample across diverse ethnic groups.

Because of the small sample of this study, there is a need to learn more about Black youth and their RCC experience. Specifically, the following question could serve as a guide: How does the intersection of race or gender of mentor and youth factor into a successful completion of the RCC program? Such might be the case, for example, when young people are assigned to a same-race teacher. Furthermore, research could be focused on the cultural alignment between RCC mentors and youth. Research continues to confirm how Black, Latinx, and Native American youth are more negatively impacted by traditional exclusionary practices; thus, conducting more race-based research can (1) reduce the number of racially marginalized youth in the school to prison pipeline; (2) provide personal narratives of historically marginalized communities, a component necessary to redesigning inclusive cross sector systems; (3) provide necessary data for lawmakers, education, and legal leaders to revisit laws that continue to harm communities of color; and (4) offer recommendations that can be leveraged to improve policies, practices, and professional development in both the educational and legal systems.

Limitations

Like any qualitative study, limitations are inevitable; yet it is the responsibility of the researcher to acknowledge any factors which may have limited the study. Although this study revealed valuable findings, due to its limited scope, specific context, and small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized. The phenomenological design of this study was an intentional choice as the goal of this study was not necessarily to determine if restorative community conferencing works, but to explore the Black youth perspective by capturing the essence of the process through the individual stories. This study was guided by CRT's tenets, which place storytelling at the center. Relying heavily on CRT's storytelling tenet provided legitimacy to the unique voices of study participants. Furthermore, the decision to uplift voices of members from the same marginalized group as the researcher, provided the researcher an opportunity to examine her personal biases and continually step back, bracket assumptions, and situate the storytellers as the knowledge keepers (Merriam, 2014, Morris & Parker, 2018).

In addition to the qualitative nature of the study, limitations stemming from the sample size and geographic location should be considered. Candidates in the study were selected to participate in a restorative community conference because of a criminal incident they were involved in. It was the goal of the researcher to recruit participants who met the following criteria: live in the same city at the time of the law-enforcement incident, experienced punitive school discipline, identify as Black and were at least 18 years of age at the time of the interview. Consequently, participants' unique characteristics and criteria contributed to a small sample. However, the recruitment efforts were successful with the assistance from a non-profit organization authorized by the local juvenile justice system to facilitate RCC's for the geographic location where participants reside. A combination of recruiting of a specific

population from one RCC approved agency also narrowed the participant pool, thus further decreasing the researcher's ability to reach the original number of 10 participants as stated in the IRB. Acknowledging the interviewee's story as each their individual RCC lived experiences, the small sample size, specific racial group, and geographic location as limitations; these factors contributed to a reduced generalizability of findings' applicable to a larger population, racial group, or wider community.

Positionality

Considering my identity as a Black woman, educator, and restorative justice practitioner, my decision to conduct research on a topic related to restorative justice was the result of my professional experience. As a district administrator, I was appointed to lead district-wide restorative approaches as alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. I saw first-hand how Black children were subjected to exclusion far more than other demographic groups. I met them on paper before I met them in person and, often, their story often countered what was written about them. Eventually, I led the dismantling of the district zero-tolerance policy and expanded the restorative programming leading to a decrease in exclusionary practices.

Because of my experience, knowledge of restorative justice, and deep commitment to learn from my participants, I was able to establish rapport and cultivate a safe and comfortable atmosphere for each interview. As I collected the data for this study, there were times when the stories were reminders of cases I had encountered. As an educational leader responsible for restorative based initiatives, knowing how my former students fared after leaving the school system was something I often wondered about. To mitigate any potential preconceptions that may taint my study, I leveraged that curiosity to manage my subjectivity (Tufford & Newman, 2010) by stepping aside and centering on participants as knowers. Additionally, I regularly

bracketed my personal viewpoints, assumptions, and prior knowledge throughout data collection and data analysis (Van Manen, 2014).

Conclusion

Collective Responsibility

Children don't belong in jails. However, increasingly, school misbehavior is being met with punitive policies or law enforcement leading to more youth becoming involved with official legal systems. In turn this is contributing to an increased stream of students flowing through the school-to-prison pipeline stream, especially so for Black youth (Petrosino et al., 2012). The educational system has extinguished the spark of learning for many Black children and the justice system has stolen their childhood innocence. This study sought to show a glimpse of possibility and hope when restorative community conferencing is used to respond to wrongdoing. This study is especially relevant at a time when repeated police violence against unarmed Black Americans was thrust center stage when the murder of George Floyd was captured on video in 2020. This, in turn, led to nationwide calls to overhaul policing and criminalization, both in schools and society, where the mistreatment of Black youth has been consistently documented.

The focus of this study illuminated the voices and lived experience and outcomes of Black young adults' involvement in an RCC. Findings indicate the positive influence stemming from their RCC, which, ironically, began with wrongdoings. Furthermore, the findings serve as an invitation to move the conversation beyond the deleterious effects of punitive practices to understanding how restorative justice principles not only disrupt the overuse of harmful and dehumanizing practices, but rather equips young people with life skills and tools to support a successful community re-entry and transition to adulthood.

The results of this study underscore the benefits of creating aligned systemic restorative processes where schools and the juvenile justice system center children's overall well-being. These systems, such as education, healthcare, and criminal justice, were designed from a dominant point of view, adding layers of institutionalized oppression, racial marginalization, and inequitable outcomes for Black Americans in particular (Lynn & Parker, 2006). However, when a system recognizes the value and worth of every human being, despite differences, a community is created where every perspective matter and unites individuals for the common good (Solomon et al., 2019). As previously noted, children are shaped by the multi-faceted ecosystems in which they live, learn, work, and play. One sector is not more responsible than the other; therefore, the proverbial finger-pointing must come to an end. Research findings have reached a point that can no longer be ignored and serve as a clarion call for adults, in every sector, to replace the criminalization of Black youth with a cohesive commitment to prioritize protection and well-being of all, thus creating conditions where the answer will be: *The children are well*.

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APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

California State University
SAN MARCOS

Dear Participant,

My name is Felicia Singleton, and I am a student researcher in the Educational Leadership department of the UCSD/CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program and I am reaching out to you to ask for your assistance with my dissertation study!

I'm interested in understanding how Black youth responsible for harm experience a restorative community conference in lieu of the traditional juvenile justice system. I'm specifically planning to conduct individual semistructured interviews with students who meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Black or African American

2. Are at least 18 years of age

3. Have been referred by a school or justice agency for participation in a restorative community conference

4. Have had a prior punitive experience through school-based discipline or the juvenile justice system

All interview responses are confidential, and no real names will be used in the publication of my dissertation study. If you are interested in participating, please contact me via email or cell phone and I will provide more information and next steps. Please note that this is a private number and regularly monitored email to protect your privacy.

As a token of gratitude, participants who complete the individual interview process via Zoom will be gifted with a $10.00 e-gift card. Thank you in advance for your consideration and support!

Peace,

Felicia Singleton
Doctoral Student - Cohort 15
Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

California State University
SAN MARCOS

A Phenomenological Study of the Restorative Community Conference Experience

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:

Dear Participants:

My name is Felicia Singleton, and I am a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University San Marcos. You are invited to participate in a research study seeking to understand Restorative Community Conferencing through the lived experiences of Black youth. You were selected as a possible participant because you were referred by a school or justice agency to participate in a restorative community conference. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. You must be at least18 years of age to participate in this study.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black youth experience the Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) phenomenon. You will be asked to complete an interview to recall your experience participating in an RCC. I expect that you will be in this research study over a 5-month period between February 2021 - July 2021. The primary risk of participation is boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed. The main indirect benefit is helping the researcher learn more about restorative community conferencing through your lived experience.

STUDY PURPOSE:

The purpose of this project is to explore the Black youth experience as a participant in a restorative conference to uncover what about the process contributes to its effectiveness. Through the use of storytelling this study seeks to learn how Black participants were selected to participate in a restorative community conference, describe any barriers faced, supports received and in what ways, if at all did the experience influence their relationship with their community and life outcomes. To this end, the following research questions will guide the study:

1. In what ways do Black participants responsible for harm (offenders) experience a Restorative Community Conference?

2. How does the RCC compare to the experience with punitive approaches to discipline? In what ways, if any at all, is the RCC different or similar to a punitive process? For example, a school suspension, expulsion, previous arrest, hearing, or trial?

3. How do Black young adults describe their life choices and outcomes after participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of ten (10) participants who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you consent to be in the study, you are agreeing to the following:

- Participate in an individual 90-minute semistructured interview with the researcher via an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom, FaceTime or Google Duo.

- You will receive a list of potential interview questions to review prior to your scheduled interview date so that you may reflect and consider your responses ahead of time.

- You will receive a copy of the written transcript of your individual interview and have the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher on accuracy.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

- A potential to experience boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed.

SAFEGUARDS:

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering during the interview.

- Participants may be directed to counseling or social support services.

- The interview may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your responses and information will be confidential

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name or other personal information will not be used. To maintain confidentiality, no interview responses will become part of this research study until a thorough check of the consent forms has been made and all permissions are present. Data used for the study will not be identifiable to specific participants. All data will be contained on the researcher's password-protected laptop in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data will be contained in a locked cabinet in my home or will be in my immediate possession. Research records will be kept confidential up to 3 years

after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Cal State University San Marcos.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, your child's participation will help the investigator learn more about the RCC process, how the process shapes the lives of Black youth and how the larger community may benefit from this knowledge.

PAYMENT OR INCENTIVE:

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study. Instead of payment the participants who complete an interview will receive a $10 Jamba Juice e-gift card.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions about the study, you are welcome to call me at (619) 784-5472 or e-mail me at singl01@cougars.csusm.edu You may also contact my research advisor, Dr. Manuel Vargas at mvargas@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT:

By signing below, you *indicate that you have read the form and give consent to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of an unsigned consent form for your records. If you wish, you may also obtain a copy of the signed consent form*. Please check the option that applies to you before signing:

☐ I give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

☐ I do not give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

 Name of participant: _____

Signature of signature of participant _____

Date:_____

California State University
SAN MARCOS

A Phenomenological Study of the Restorative Community Conference Experience

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:

Dear Participants:

My name is Felicia Singleton, and I am a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University San Marcos. I am conducting a study seeking to understand Restorative Community Conferencing through the lived experiences of Black youth and I am interested in your child's experience, therefore your child is invited to participate. Your child was selected as a possible participant because they were referred by a law enforcement agency to participate in a restorative community conference. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Because your child is under the age of 18, you will need to give consent for your child to participate.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide if you will consent to your child being a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black youth experience the Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) phenomenon. Your child will be asked to complete an interview to recall their experience participating in an RCC. I anticipate that the study will be conducted over a 5-month period between January 2021 and June 2021. The primary risk of participation is your child experiencing boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed. The main indirect benefit is helping the researcher learn more about restorative community conferencing.

STUDY PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study is to understand the RCC process through the Black youth experience and how their participation shaped their re-entry into the community. To this end, the following two research question will be investigated in this study through the use of semistructured interviews:

1. How do Black school-age youth responsible for harm (offenders) describe their experience of participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

2. How do Black youth describe their outcomes after participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

If you agree to let your child participate, your child will be one of ten participants who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you consent for your child to be in the study, you are agreeing to the following:

- Your child will participate in an individual 90-minute semistructured interview with the researcher via an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom, FaceTime or Google Duo.

- You and your child will receive a list of potential interview questions to review prior to your scheduled interview date so that you may reflect and consider your responses ahead of time.

- You and your child will receive a copy of the written transcript of your individual interview and have the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher on accuracy.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

- A potential to experience boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed.

SAFEGUARDS:

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering during the interview.

- Participants may be directed to counseling or social support services.

- The interview may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your child's responses and information will be confidential.

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your child's name or other personal information will not be used. To maintain confidentiality, no interview responses will become part of this research study until a thorough check of the consent forms has been made and all permissions are present. Data used for the study will not be identifiable to specific participants. All data will be contained on the researcher's password-protected laptop in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data will be contained in a locked cabinet in my home or will be in my immediate possession. Research records will be kept confidential up to 3 years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. Your child may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your child's decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect any current or future relations with Cal State University San Marcos.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, your child's participation will help the investigator learn more about the RCC process, how the process shapes the lives of Black youth and how the larger community may benefit from this knowledge.

PAYMENT OR INCENTIVE:

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study. Instead of payment the participants who complete an interview will receive their choice of a $10 Starbucks egift card or a $10 Jamba Juice e-gift card Amazon gift card.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions about the study, you are welcome to e-mail me at singl01@cougars.csusm.edu. You may also contact my research advisor, Dr. Manuel Vargas at mvargas@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu.

PARENT CONSENT:

By signing below, you *indicate that you have read the form and give consent for your child to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of an unsigned consent form for your records. If you wish, you may also obtain a copy of the signed consent form*. Please check the option that applies to you before signing:

☐ I give permission for my child's interview to be audio taped.

☐ I do not give permission for my child's interview to be audio taped.

Name of parent/guardian: _____

Signature of signature of participant _____

Date:_____

California State University SAN MARCOS

A Phenomenological Study of the Restorative Community Conference Experience

Dear Youth Participant:

My name is Felicia Singleton, and I am a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University San Marcos. Your parent or guardian has given permission for you to participate in a research study seeking to understand Restorative Community Conferencing through the lived experiences of Black youth. You were selected as a possible participant because you were referred by a law enforcement agency to participate in a restorative community conference. But first, I would like to tell you about the study so you can decide if you want to be involved. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black youth experience the Restorative Community Conferencing (RCC) phenomenon. You will be asked to complete an interview to recall your experience participating in an RCC. We expect that you will be in this research study over a 5-month period between January 2021 and June 2021. The primary risk of participation is boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed. The main indirect benefit is helping the researcher learn more about restorative community conferencing.

STUDY PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study is to better understand how Black youth experience an RCC and how their participation shapes their re-entry into the community. To this end, the following two research question will be investigated in this study through the use of semistructured interviews:

1. How do Black school-age youth responsible for harm (offenders) describe their experience of participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

2. How do Black youth describe their outcomes after participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of ten participants who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you consent to be in the study, you are agreeing to the following:

- Participate in an individual 90 minute semistructured interview with the researcher via an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom, FaceTime or Google Duo.

- You will receive a list of potential interview questions to review prior to your scheduled interview date so that you may reflect and consider your responses ahead of time.

- You will receive a copy of the written transcript of your individual interview and have the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher on accuracy.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

- A potential to experience boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed.

SAFEGUARDS:

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering during the interview.

- Participants may be directed to counseling or social support services.

- The interview may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your responses and information will be confidential

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name or other personal information will not be used. To maintain confidentiality, no interview responses will become part of this research study until a thorough check of the consent forms has been made and all permissions are present. Data used for the study will not be identifiable to specific participants. All data will be contained on the researcher's password-protected laptop in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data will be contained in a locked cabinet in my home or will be in my immediate possession. Research records will be kept confidential up to 3 years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with Cal State University San Marcos.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, your participation will help the investigator learn more about the RCC process, how the process shapes the lives of Black youth and how the larger community may benefit from this knowledge.

PAYMENT OR INCENTIVE:

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study. Instead of payment the participants who complete an interview will receive their choice of a $10 Starbucks egift card or a $10 Jamba Juice e-gift card Amazon gift card.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

If you have questions about the study, you are welcome to e-mail me at singl01@cougars.csusm.edu. You may also contact my research advisor, Dr. Manuel Vargas at mvargas@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT:

By signing below, *it means that you have read the information above and are agreeing to be in the study. You do not have to be in this study. No one will be upset with you if you do not sign this document or if you change your mind later. Being in the study is your choice and your participation in this study is voluntary and at any time during the study you are welcome to withdraw from participating. If you choose to withdraw, no one will be upset with you there will be no consequences. You will be given a copy of an unsigned consent form for your records. If you wish, you may also obtain a copy of the signed consent form*.
Please check the option that applies to you before signing:

☐ I give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

☐ I do not give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

_____   _____
Name of Adolescent (Print)   Date

_____
Signature of Adolescent

_____   _____
Name of Person Obtaining Assent (Print)   Date

_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Welcome

Thank you for agreeing to participate. This is an interview exploring your experience in a Restorative Community Conference (RCC). I will review the consent form that you agreed to and signed [review consent form].

General Information

I need to start with gathering basic information from you. [Interviewee information sheet]

Interview

I would now like to begin the interview about your experience as a participant in a restorative community conference.

[Turn on and test recording device. Proceed with interview questions]

Closure

I want to thank you for participating in this interview. [Turn off recording device]. This interview will be transcribed and save on my password-protected computer. At this time, you are invited to choose which $10 gift card (Starbucks or Jamba Juice) you would like at this time.

Again, I am deeply grateful for your time, participating in this study and most importantly, sharing your story.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW INFORMATION SHEET

California State University
SAN MARCOS

Date & Time of Interview: _____

Location: _____

Name of Interviewer: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Date of RCC _____

Referring
Agency/School_____

Community Based Organization_____

APPENDIX G: SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

California State University
SAN MARCOS

1. How do Black school-age youth responsible for harm (offenders) describe their experience of participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

    a. Tell me about your introduction to restorative justice.
    b. How were you selected to participate in a restorative community conference?
    c. Describe your experience as the responsible youth in a Restorative Community Conference.
    d. Describe the experience of openly talking about your case in front of the circle participants?
    e. How did it feel to accept responsibility?
    f. What was it like for you to face the person harmed (victim) during your community conference?
    g. Tell me about your case?
    h. What were you thinking at the time of the incident?

2. How does the RCC compare to the experience with punitive approaches to discipline? In what ways, if any at all, is the RCC different or similar to a punitive process? For example, a school suspension, expulsion, previous arrest, hearing, or trial?

    a. Does the restorative process differ from the traditional legal process?
    b. Does the restorative process heal or further harm?
    c. Tell me about a time you experienced a punitive process. For example, a school suspension, expulsion, previous arrest, hearing or trial?
    d. Can you describe for me how you felt after the process was over?
    e. What influence, if any has the process had on diverting you from the school to prison pipeline?

3. How do Black young adults describe their life choices and outcomes after participating in a Restorative Community Conference?

    a. How did your participation in the restorative community conference make you feel as a person?
    b. Describe for me how you felt after the RCC?
    c. Can you compare for me how you felt after the RCC and how you felt after any previous experiences with a punitive process?
    d. How did your participation in a Restorative Community Conference influence your re-entry into your community?

e. Tell me about your relationship with your community?
f. Was there a change in your values?
g. Was there a change in your beliefs?
h. Was there a change in your self-perception?
i. Was there a change in your self-worth?

In what ways do Black participants responsible for harm (offenders) experience a Restorative Community Conference?

How does the RCC compare to the experience with punitive approaches to discipline? In what ways, if any at all, is the RCC different or similar to a punitive process? For example, a school suspension, expulsion, previous arrest, hearing, or trial?

How do Black young adults describe their life choices and outcomes after participating in a Restorative Community Conference?