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Restorative Justice Circles in the Elementary Classroom

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Research Question

- In what ways can restorative justice circles affect the overall classroom environment?

Literature Review

- Restorative practices are alternative discipline methods whose main values focus on developing good relationships while restoring a positive classroom environment. (Costello, 2009)
- Without strong relationships, there cannot be a strong classroom environment. A lack in classroom community makes it extremely hard for students to learn. (Shaw, 2007)
- Tudor and Wallis (2007) found that problems are better resolved by holding students accountable for their offence by involving them in face-to-face encounters with the people they have harmed.

Methodology

- The participants in this study included 21 third grade students from a low-income, suburban elementary school.
- Once a week, the class sat in a circle in the middle of the classroom and participated in a restorative justice circle.
- The students decided that our weekly restorative justice circles should be called Family Meetings.
- Throughout the week students put suggestions in the suggestion box, of what they wanted to discuss in our meetings.
- In the meetings the students talked amongst themselves, my role was to introduce the topic and to ensure students followed the rules we set at the beginning of the year for our meetings.



Figure 1. Students are sitting in a circle in the middle of the classroom ready to participate in the weekly Family Meeting. In the Family Meeting students talk to each other about issues that arise in the classroom.

Student Family Meeting Suggestions	
"inappropriate language"	"People pushing me"
"If someone has treated you mean"	"Liking each other"
"People not stop tickling when I asked them to stop"	"Not cutting in line"
"In the bathroom everybody is messing around and I DON'T LIKE IT"	"Ignoring the people around you"
"Tell us that you just use the bathroom it is not a place to talk"	"How to get people to stop doing things that are annoying"
"Do highs and lows!"	"I don't like it when people don't just put their finger to their mouth and say shhhh"
"Fighting over things that are not necessary"	"How to stand up to a bully!"

Figure 2. This chart shows the different suggestions that students put into the Family Meeting Suggestion box. I looked at the suggestions before each Family Meeting to determine what the students were going discuss.

Results and Data Analysis

- After each Family Meeting I took note of what each student shared, who decided to not talk, and what we talked about in each meeting.
- I found that by at the end of the semester, students became more willing to share and talk about problems that were arising in our classroom.
- The student suggestions also became more productive. Students wanted to discuss more serious problems that affected the whole classroom, instead of simple arguments that could be easily resolved.

Conclusion

- I found that overtime students became more aware of how their actions affected others in the classroom. This was positive for the overall classroom environment. Students were able to work through their problems and discuss issues that affected the class as a whole.
- Teachers should be aware that restorative justice circles can improve the overall classroom environment, but it takes time to see the results.
- Teacher education programs may wish to include the importance of understanding how restorative justice is implemented and how it can be taught to students.
- In future research, I would recommend doing more with conflicts that do not affect the whole class. Personal conflicts can have negative effects on the classroom environment as well.