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Restorative Circle and Conferencing as Strategies for Managing Student Discipline in Public Senior Secondary Schools in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The study examined restorative circle and conferencing as strategies for managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population consisted of 5,676 teachers in 367 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. A sample of 412 teachers was selected through stratified random sampling; 388 teachers, comprising 199 male and 189 female respondents, returned valid questionnaires and formed the final sample. A validated questionnaire titled "Restorative Disciplinary Practices Questionnaire" was used to collect data. The instrument produced Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of 0.89 and 0.80 for the restorative circle and conferencing sections, respectively. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, whereas independent-samples t-test statistics were used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 alpha level. The findings showed that restorative circle was used to a low extent, while restorative conferencing was used to a high extent in managing student discipline. The study further revealed significant differences between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of both restorative circle and conferencing, with female teachers recording higher mean ratings. The study concluded that conferencing was applied more consistently than restorative circle in the management of student misconduct in public senior secondary schools. The study recommended that the Rivers State Ministry of Education organise regular capacity-building programmes for teachers and school discipline committee members on the effective use of restorative circle and conferencing. It also recommended that school administrators establish clear procedures for inclusive participation, balanced expression, reflection, accountability and the collective resolution of disciplinary cases.

Keywords: Restorative circle, restorative conferencing, student discipline, disciplinary strategies, secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as an indispensable instrument for individual and societal development. It is the organised process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes required for meaningful participation in society. Education develops the human capacities required for social and economic productivity, and prepares individuals to contribute to national development (Ukaigwe & Igbozuruike, 2018). Its contribution to individual and societal development underlies the description of education by the Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN] (2014) as an instrument par excellence for national development.

The educational system of Nigeria is organised into primary, secondary and tertiary levels, with each level performing specific but interconnected functions. Secondary education occupies the intermediary position between primary and tertiary education. It consolidates the knowledge and skills acquired at the primary level and prepares learners for tertiary education, vocational participation and useful living (FRN, 2014). The importance of secondary education is rooted in its dual objective of preparing learners for further education and equipping those who may not proceed to tertiary institutions with practical competencies. At this level, learners are expected to deepen their knowledge of academic subjects, develop responsible behaviour and acquire the values necessary for productive citizenship (Adesemowo & Sotonade, 2022). Secondary schools consequently perform both instructional and socialising functions within the educational system. The achievement of secondary education objectives requires an orderly environment in which teaching and learning can take place effectively. School discipline refers to the rules, procedures and corrective measures used to guide student behaviour and maintain conditions conducive to learning. Discipline is not limited to punishment; it includes the development of self-control, responsibility, respect and knowledge of the consequences of personal conduct (Bear, 2010).

Teachers and school administrators play important roles in managing student discipline. Teachers establish classroom expectations, monitor behaviour and respond to minor misconduct, while principals and discipline committees address more serious cases. The effective fulfilment of these responsibilities depends on the fairness, consistency and educational value of the disciplinary strategies employed. Disciplinary practices that students perceive as arbitrary or humiliating may weaken their trust in school authority and increase resistance to behavioural correction (Huang & Anyon, 2020). Conventional school discipline has often relied on punitive and exclusionary measures such as corporal punishment, suspension and expulsion. These measures may suppress disruptive behaviour temporarily without addressing the relationships, circumstances or unmet needs connected with the misconduct. Jackson (2021) observed that exclusionary discipline can disrupt students' academic progress and weaken their connection with the school community. The inability of punitive measures to address these underlying concerns has encouraged interest in approaches that combine accountability with reflection, participation and relationship repair.

Restorative discipline is an approach that treats misconduct as harm to people, relationships and the school community rather than merely a violation of institutional rules. It seeks to identify what happened, who was affected and what should be done to repair the harm. Restorative responses therefore emphasise accountability, participation, empathy and the restoration of constructive relationships (Lodi et al., 2022). Restorative disciplinary practices include affective statements, restorative questions, dialogue, mediation, circles, conferencing and reintegration support. These practices differ in structure and formality, but they share an emphasis on respectful communication and responsibility for harm. They also seek to keep students connected to the school community while enabling them to reflect on and correct their behaviour. Among the restorative strategies applicable to secondary schools is restorative circle. A restorative circle is a structured discussion in which participants sit in a circular arrangement and speak sequentially, often with the guidance of a facilitator and a talking piece. The circular arrangement symbolises equality and shared responsibility, while the talking piece regulates participation by allowing one person to speak at a time (Lodi et al., 2022).

Restorative circle may be used proactively or reactively. Proactive circle helps teachers and students build relationships, establish classroom expectations and discuss shared concerns before serious misconduct occurs. Reactive circle is used after conflict or misconduct to allow affected persons to explain what happened, describe its effects and participate in identifying appropriate responses. Gregory et al. (2015) noted that restorative practices can strengthen relationships and facilitate more constructive responses to school conflict. The structured format of restorative circles can promote balanced participation. Students who may be reluctant to speak during conventional disciplinary meetings are given an opportunity to express their views without interruption. Circle procedures can also enable participants to listen to other perspectives, recognise the effects of misconduct and contribute to collective agreements. Parker and

Bickmore (2021) observed that circle processes can promote respectful listening and reduce domination by more powerful participants.

Restorative circle is not informal conversations without direction. Effective circle requires a trained facilitator, agreed procedures, appropriate questions and an environment in which participants can speak honestly and safely. Facilitators must manage interruptions, prevent intimidation and ensure that the discussion remains focused on behaviour, harm and possible repair. Poorly facilitated circles may reproduce existing power imbalances or pressure students into agreements they do not genuinely accept (Lustick, 2017). Restorative conferencing is a more formal strategy used to address serious misconduct or conflicts involving identifiable affected parties. It brings together the student responsible for the misconduct, those affected, their supporters and a trained facilitator. Participants discuss the incident, examine its effects and develop an agreement for accountability and repair. Restorative conferencing evolved from family group conferencing approaches that emphasised collective responsibility and participatory decision-making (Morris, 2004).

A restorative conference usually begins with separate preparation of the participants. The facilitator explains the process, assesses willingness to participate and identifies safety or emotional concerns before the joint meeting. During the conference, affected persons are expected to describe their experiences, while the student responsible for the misconduct is allowed to explain the circumstances under which the misconduct took place, acknowledge the effects of the behaviour and participate in developing an appropriate response (Rukuni et al., 2025). Restorative conferencing differs from conventional disciplinary hearings because its primary concern is neither the assignment of blame nor the imposition of predetermined punishment. Its purpose is to clarify the harm and reach an agreement that responds to the needs of those affected. Such agreements may include apologies, restitution, counselling, behavioural commitments, community service or follow-up meetings. Weber and Vereenooghe (2020) observed that restorative conferencing can create a structured process for accountability and relational repair.

The participation of supporters can strengthen the conferencing process. Supporters may offer emotional assistance, clarify information and help students fulfil agreed responsibilities. Their participation can also demonstrate that students remain members of the school community despite their misconduct. Nevertheless, the facilitator must ensure that supporters do not dominate discussions or impose outcomes that undermine voluntary participation and balanced decision-making. Restorative circle and conferencing are closely related but differ in their level of formality and typical application. Circles may be used for community building, minor conflict and inclusive group reflection, while conferencing is generally more structured and suited to serious incidents involving identifiable harm. Both strategies enable affected participants to speak, listen to other perspectives, accept responsibility and contribute to collective solutions.

The effective use of restorative circle and conferencing depends on teacher competence, administrative support, sufficient time and appropriate institutional procedures. Teachers require skills in facilitation, questioning, conflict de-escalation and the management of group dynamics. Schools must also allocate suitable spaces, establish documentation procedures and maintain follow-up mechanisms. Morris (2022) noted that restorative processes can be time-intensive and may be weakened when schools lack trained personnel or consistent implementation structures. Gender may influence teachers' assessments of restorative disciplinary practices because male and female teachers may differ in their experiences, communication patterns or involvement in disciplinary administration. An examination of their ratings can therefore indicate whether the teaching workforce interprets and applies restorative circle and conferencing consistently. Such evidence can guide training and implementation assistance without assuming that either group is inherently more restorative. Although restorative circle and conferencing offer participatory alternatives to exclusively punitive discipline (Samimi et al., 2023), their level of use in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State remains insufficiently established. Preliminary observations indicated lack of clarity on whether these strategies are consistently applied when student misconduct occurs and whether male and female teachers hold similar assessments of their utilisation. It

was against this background that the study examined restorative circle and conferencing as strategies for managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

There is increasing recognition that student discipline should promote responsibility, reflection and behavioural correction rather than depend exclusively on punishment. Consequently, restorative disciplinary strategies are receiving greater attention in contemporary school administration. Preliminary observations, however, suggest that disciplinary responses in some public senior secondary schools in Rivers State remain largely control-centred and punitive. Students may be threatened, humiliated, suspended or subjected to decisions without sufficient opportunities to explain their conduct or understand its consequences. The extent to which teachers and school administrators use restorative circle and conferencing as alternatives for managing student misconduct remains unclear. The seemingly limited use of inclusive group sittings, structured discussions, balanced participation and collectively developed accountability agreements accentuates this uncertainty. This situation may be connected with inadequate competence on the part of facilitators or appointed disciplinary officers, limited time, weak institutional procedures and insufficient administrative support. Continued dependence on punitive approaches without corresponding restorative opportunities could weaken students' trust in school authority and contribute to repeated misconduct. The researchers therefore examined restorative circle and conferencing as strategies for managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study was to examine restorative circle and conferencing as strategies for managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study had the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which restorative circle is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. To determine the extent to which restorative conferencing is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

3. To what extent is restorative circle used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
4. To what extent is restorative conferencing used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

3. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative circle is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
4. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative conferencing is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted descriptive survey design. The population consisted of 5,676 teachers in 367 public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, comprising 2,762 male and 2,914 female teachers. A sample of 412 teachers was drawn through stratified random sampling, with gender serving as the basis for stratification. Of the 412 copies of the questionnaire administered, 388 valid copies were retrieved and analysed. The final respondents comprised 199 male and 189 female teachers. A structured questionnaire titled "Restorative Disciplinary Practices Questionnaire" was used to collect data. The instrument had two sections. Section A was used to obtain demographic information of the respondents, while section B contained 14 items used to elicit responses on restorative circles and conferencing. The instrument was

validated by the researchers and experts on measurement and evaluation. Cronbach's alpha statistics was used to establish the reliability of the instrument, resulting in coefficients of 0.89 and 0.80 for the two sections, respectively. The instrument used a modified four-point rating scale comprising Very High Extent, High Extent, Low Extent and Very Low Extent, with respective weights of 4, 3, 2 and 1. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were interpreted as high extent, while mean scores below 2.50 were interpreted as low extent. Independent-samples t-test statistics were used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 alpha level.

RESULTS

Research Question One: *To what extent is restorative circle used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?*

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative circle is used in managing student discipline

S/N	Description of items	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Average Mean	Rank Order	Remark
1	An inclusive group sitting involving all affected parties is used when student misconduct occurs.	2.43	0.61	2.76	0.66	2.59	4th	High Extent
2	Students are allowed to speak during restorative circle sessions.	2.87	0.62	2.62	0.95	2.75	1st	High Extent
3	A restorative circle gives students a fair hearing in misconduct cases.	2.59	0.93	2.62	0.89	2.61	3rd	High Extent
4	A restorative circle addresses harm caused by misconduct.	2.67	0.75	2.57	0.90	2.62	2nd	High Extent
5	Students are sometimes judged before an inclusive group sitting begins.	2.11	0.86	2.33	0.89	2.22	6th	Low Extent
6	Restorative circles are used to promote respect for students during disciplinary proceedings.	2.44	0.89	2.61	0.92	2.52	5th	High Extent
7	School authorities ignore students' views during restorative circles.	1.90	0.80	2.19	0.88	2.04	7th	Low Extent
	Aggregate	2.43	0.78	2.53	0.87	2.48		

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative circle is used in managing student discipline. Items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 had average mean scores of 2.59, 2.75, 2.61, 2.62 and 2.52, respectively, and were rated to a high extent. The ratings indicate that schools used inclusive group sittings when student misconduct occurred, allowed students to speak, gave students a fair hearing, addressed harm resulting from misconduct and promoted respectful treatment. Items 5 and 7 recorded average mean scores of 2.22 and 2.04, respectively, and were rated to a low extent. The low ratings indicate that respondents generally disagreed that students were judged before inclusive group sittings began or that school authorities ignored students' views during restorative circle sessions. Nevertheless, the aggregate average mean of 2.48 was below the criterion mean of 2.50. The result therefore shows that restorative circle was used to a low extent overall in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Question Two: *To what extent is restorative conferencing used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?*

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative conferencing is used in managing student discipline

S/N	Description of items	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Average Mean	Rank Order	Remark
8	Structured group dialogue involving all parties is used to handle disciplinary cases in this school.	2.60	0.72	2.71	0.74	2.65	4th	High Extent
9	Students are invited to participate in structured group sessions where disciplinary matters are discussed collectively.	2.67	0.73	2.89	0.75	2.78	1st	High Extent
10	Structured group dialogue enables students to explain their actions during disciplinary proceedings.	2.62	0.70	2.76	0.83	2.69	3rd	High Extent
11	School authorities use structured group dialogue to hear all sides of a disciplinary case before reaching a decision.	2.66	0.77	2.80	0.83	2.73	2nd	High Extent
12	Decisions on disciplinary matters are sometimes taken before a structured group dialogue session is held.	2.11	0.86	2.35	0.92	2.23	6th	Low Extent
13	Structured group dialogue promotes the fair treatment of students in disciplinary matters.	2.55	0.79	2.72	0.93	2.63	5th	High Extent
14	Students are excluded from meaningful participation during structured group dialogue sessions.	2.08	0.82	2.28	0.87	2.18	7th	Low Extent
	Aggregate	2.47	0.77	2.64	0.84	2.56		

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative conferencing is used in managing student discipline. Items 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 had average mean scores of 2.65, 2.78, 2.69, 2.73 and 2.63, respectively, and were rated to a high extent. The ratings indicate that schools used structured group dialogue involving relevant parties in disciplinary cases, invited students to participate, enabled students to explain their actions, heard all sides before reaching decisions and promoted fair treatment. Items 12 and 14 recorded average mean scores of 2.23 and 2.18, respectively, and were rated to a low extent. The low ratings indicate that respondents generally disagreed that disciplinary decisions were taken before structured dialogue sessions or that students were excluded from meaningful participation. The aggregate average mean of 2.56 was above the criterion mean of 2.50. The result therefore shows that restorative conferencing was used to a high extent in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative circle is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 3: Independent-samples t-test analysis of the difference between male and female teachers' ratings on restorative circle

S/N	Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	t-crit.	Remark
1	Male teachers	199	2.43	0.60	386	-1.98	±1.96	Significant; H_0 rejected
2	Female teachers	189	2.53	0.62				

Table 3 shows that male teachers recorded a mean score of 2.43 and a standard deviation of 0.60, while female teachers recorded a mean score of 2.53 and a standard deviation of 0.62. The absolute calculated t-value of 1.98 was higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 386 degrees of freedom and the 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. The result shows that a significant difference exists between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative circle, with female teachers recording the higher mean rating.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative conferencing is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 4: Independent-samples t-test analysis of the difference between male and female teachers' ratings on restorative conferencing

S/N	Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	t-crit.	Remark
1	Male teachers	199	2.47	0.39	386	-3.83	±1.96	Significant; H_0 rejected
2	Female teachers	189	2.64	0.51				

Table 4 shows that male teachers recorded a mean score of 2.47 and a standard deviation of 0.39, while female teachers recorded a mean score of 2.64 and a standard deviation of 0.51. The absolute calculated t-value of 3.83 was higher than the critical t-value of 1.96 at 386 degrees of freedom and the 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis was therefore rejected. The result indicates that a significant difference existed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative conferencing, with female teachers recording the higher mean rating.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the data in Table 1 showed that restorative circle was used to a low extent overall in managing student discipline. The aggregate result did not indicate the complete absence of the strategy because the schools applied several of its procedural elements. Students were allowed to speak during circle sessions, inclusive group sittings involved affected parties, harm resulting from misconduct was addressed and respectful treatment was promoted. The low aggregate mean therefore indicates that the schools had not sufficiently organised these elements into a consistent disciplinary strategy. This finding agrees with Kapembwa et al. (2020), who reported that restorative practices in secondary schools were often implemented inconsistently because of inadequate training, limited monitoring and weak stakeholder sensitisation. The finding also supports the observation of Morris (2022), who observed that restorative practices were useful for improving behaviour and repairing relationships but expressed concerns about implementation fidelity. The present finding likewise indicates that schools employed individual elements of circle practice without establishing restorative circles as a school-wide disciplinary procedure.

The item-level results showed low agreement that students were judged before inclusive group sittings began or that school authorities ignored students' views during circle sessions. These findings suggest that, when schools used restorative circles, the sessions enabled students to participate and required

school authorities to consider differing perspectives in discussion. Lodi et al. (2022) found that circles were among the most frequently reported restorative practices in schools and were associated with improved relationships, social-emotional development and reduced reliance on exclusionary responses. However, the benefits of circle practices depended considerably on the consistency and quality of their implementation.

The test of the first hypothesis showed that a significant difference existed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative circle. Female teachers recorded the higher mean rating. The result indicates that male and female teachers did not assess the presence or application of restorative circle similarly. The difference may reflect variations in their disciplinary responsibilities, communication practices, professional preparation or exposure to restorative procedures. Onyekwere et al. (2017) observed that effective disciplinary management requires conceptual, human and technical competencies among teachers and school leaders. Where these competencies are unevenly developed, the application of disciplinary strategies may become inconsistent. The gender difference found in the present study therefore implies that general administrative endorsement alone cannot strengthen restorative circle practice. Teachers require shared knowledge of the purpose and procedures of restorative circle practice, together with the facilitation skills required to conduct them.

The analysis of the data in Table 2 showed that restorative conferencing was used to a high extent in managing student discipline. Students were invited to participate in structured group sessions, enabled to explain their actions and heard alongside other parties before school authorities reached decisions. Respondents also indicated low agreement that decisions were taken before structured dialogue or that students were excluded from meaningful participation. This finding agrees with Lodi et al. (2022), who identified restorative conferencing as a commonly used restorative practice associated with stronger relationships and reduced exclusionary discipline. It also supports Gregory et al. (2015), who found that stronger implementation of restorative practices was associated with greater student-perceived teacher respect and fewer misconduct or defiance referrals. The high aggregate mean in the present study indicates that structured conferencing had gained a stronger practical presence than restorative circle in the sampled schools.

Restorative conferencing may have recorded stronger use because its structured format corresponds more closely to existing school disciplinary meetings. School authorities can bring together the affected parties, hear different accounts and reach a decision without abandoning established administrative procedures. However, conferencing remains restorative only when participation is meaningful, the outcome is not predetermined and the discussion focuses on accountability and repair rather than public condemnation.

The test of the second hypothesis revealed that a significant difference existed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative conferencing. Female teachers recorded the higher mean rating. The result suggests that the teaching workforce did not interpret or experience conferencing consistently. Although the overall mean indicated high use, the significant gender difference shows that implementation may vary according to teachers' roles, experience or involvement in disciplinary cases. The findings have important implications for the management of student discipline. Restorative circle and conferencing are related strategies, but they require different levels of structure and facilitation. Circle can facilitate inclusive reflection and community building, while conferences establish a more formal process for addressing identifiable harm and serious misconduct (Parker & Bickmore, 2021). The contrasting levels of use suggest that the schools may be more comfortable with structured disciplinary meetings than with routine circle-based engagement.

It is important therefore for educational administrators to distinguish between the two strategies. Restorative circle requires regular use, skilled facilitation and a school culture that values shared discussion before conflict escalates. Restorative conferences require careful preparation, balanced participation, clear documentation and follow-up of agreed responsibilities. The application of both strategies will remain inconsistent when teachers lack common procedures or depend solely on personal discretion. The significant gender differences further indicate a need for inclusive professional development involving male and female teachers. Training should establish shared expectations regarding

when circles or conferences should be used, who should participate, how discussions should be facilitated and how agreements should be monitored. Consistent administrative guidelines and school-level supervision are also required to establish restorative strategies as dependable components of student discipline rather than occasional responses adopted by individual teachers.

CONCLUSION

The results establish the need to strengthen the consistent application of restorative circle and conferencing in student discipline. The study concludes that restorative conferencing was more firmly established than restorative circle in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Significant differences between male and female teachers' ratings further indicated uneven practice and experience of both strategies. Effective implementation will require common administrative procedures, practical facilitator training, inclusive staff participation and sustained monitoring of restorative disciplinary processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Rivers State Ministry of Education should organise regular capacity-building programmes for teachers, school counsellors and discipline committee members on restorative circles because the strategy was used to a low extent.
2. The Rivers State Senior Secondary Schools Board should develop clear procedures specifying when restorative circles and conferences should be used, who should participate, how discussions should be facilitated and how agreements should be documented and monitored.
3. School principals should strengthen circle practice by scheduling inclusive discussions in which participants can express their views, reflect on their behaviour and contribute to the collective resolution of minor disciplinary matters before they escalate.
4. Teachers should apply restorative conferencing consistently by enabling affected parties to explain their experiences, consider different perspectives and contribute to reasonable accountability agreements before final disciplinary decisions are reached.
5. Capacity-building programmes should involve male and female teachers equally to develop shared knowledge and reduce differences in how teachers interpret and apply both restorative strategies.

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