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

Patience Azubuike Odu & Prof. Nath. M. Abraham

Department of Educational Management,
Faculty of Education,
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
The study examined restorative mediation and dialogue 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 Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients obtained for the restorative mediation and dialogue sections were 0.78 and 0.82, 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 mediation and dialogue were used to a high extent in managing student discipline. The study further revealed a significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative mediation, with female teachers recording the higher mean rating. However, no significant difference was observed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative dialogue. The study concluded that mediation and dialogue had gained considerable practical presence as strategies for addressing student conflicts and misconduct in public senior secondary schools. The study recommended that school administrators strengthen the consistent use of trained mediators and structured dialogue procedures. It also recommended that teachers should enable students to explain their conduct, listen to affected parties, reflect on the consequences of their behaviour and participate in peaceful resolution before disciplinary decisions are reached.
Keywords: Restorative mediation, restorative dialogue, student discipline, conflict resolution, secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Education is a structured process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes requisite for meaningful societal participation. Beyond cognitive development, it cultivates the human capacities that underpin social and economic productivity, while simultaneously preparing citizens to contribute to national advancement (Adesemowo & Sotonade, 2022). This dual commitment to personal fulfilment and collective progress is enshrined in the Nigerian national policy framework; indeed, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN, 2014) explicitly designates education as "an instrument par excellence for national development." The educational system 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). Secondary education is designed to promote intellectual development, practical competence, responsible behaviour and citizenship. The achievement of these expectations requires an orderly school environment in which teachers can teach and students can learn without persistent disruption. School discipline therefore constitutes an important aspect of secondary school administration because it helps to regulate the behaviour of learners, and also creates the conditions required for educational activities.

Discipline extends beyond mere punishment or the enforcement of compliance; it encompasses the cultivation of self-control, responsibility, respect, and an awareness of the consequences of one's actions (Bear, 2010). An effective disciplinary system should therefore not only correct inappropriate behaviour but also foster the judgement and interpersonal skills necessary for students to make sound decisions. Teachers and school administrators occupy central roles in this process. According to Igbozuruike et al. (2018), teachers are responsible for establishing classroom expectations, monitoring conduct, and addressing minor infractions, whereas principals and discipline committees handle more serious conflicts and cases. Ultimately, the efficacy of these responses hinges on whether the strategies employed are fair, consistent, and attuned to the specific circumstances surrounding each incident.

Traditional school discipline has historically relied on punitive measures such as corporal punishment, suspension, expulsion, and verbal threats. While these methods may temporarily suppress undesirable behaviour, they fail to address the underlying relational dynamics or unresolved conflicts that precipitated the incident. Furthermore, exclusionary practices often disrupt academic progression and weaken students' sense of belonging within the school community (Jackson, 2021). Given the inadequacy of punitive systems in resolving these root causes, educators have increasingly turned their attention to restorative approaches. Under restorative discipline, misconduct is viewed primarily as harm to individuals and relationships rather than simply a breach of institutional rules. Its focus is on clarifying what occurred, identifying those affected, and determining appropriate steps to repair the harm. In this way, restorative practices emphasize accountability, active participation, respectful dialogue, and the rebuilding of constructive relationships (Lodi et al., 2022). Restorative disciplinary practices encompass a range of strategies, including circles, conferencing, mediation, dialogue, affective questioning, and reintegration support. While these approaches vary in structure and formality, they share a common aim: to reduce exclusive reliance on punitive measures (Lodi et al., 2022; Morris, 2022). By creating structured opportunities for students to articulate their perspectives, acknowledge the impact of their actions, and collaboratively devise appropriate responses, these practices shift the focus from retribution to accountability and relationship repair.

Restorative mediation is a structured process of conflict resolution in which a neutral third party facilitates communication between disputing individuals to help them reach a mutually acceptable agreement. Rather than imposing a decision, the mediator guides participants in clarifying the issues, voicing their concerns, and exploring possible solutions. By shifting the focus from blame to dialogue, mediation transforms disciplinary conflict into an opportunity for communication, accountability, and negotiated settlement (Lešková & Haburajová, 2023). Within secondary schools, mediation can be employed to address interpersonal disputes, bullying, misunderstandings, aggression, and other forms of student conflict. The process provides both parties with the opportunity to speak, listen, and clarify their perspectives. As Kalagbor and Nnokam (2015) note, the use of appropriate conflict-management strategies enables schools to resolve disputes effectively while fostering constructive relationships among members of the school community.

The neutrality of the mediator is fundamental to the credibility of the mediation process. A mediator must regulate interruptions, prevent intimidation, and ensure that no party dominates the discussion. Equally important is guiding participants to focus on the conflict and its consequences rather than resorting to personal attacks. When neutrality is compromised, mediation risks reinforcing existing power imbalances instead of fostering constructive dialogue and peaceful resolution. Restorative mediation encourages

students to take responsibility for their role in a conflict while fostering recognition of the experiences and perspectives of others. By facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding, it reduces reliance on punitive disciplinary measures and enables affected parties to reach agreements that are both constructive and mutually acceptable.

Statement of the Problem

There is increasing recognition that student conflicts and misconduct should be addressed through strategies that promote communication, responsibility and behavioural correction. Consequently, restorative mediation and dialogue are receiving attention as alternatives to exclusively punitive discipline. Preliminary observations, however, suggest that some disciplinary cases in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State are still handled through threats, punishment and one-sided decisions. The extent to which teachers use mediation to help students resolve conflicts peacefully remains unclear. Similarly, the extent to which restorative dialogue enables students to explain their conduct, reflect on its consequences and participate in corrective discussions remains uncertain. The seemingly limited use of trained mediators, structured conflict-resolution sessions and reflective disciplinary conversations indicates this uncertainty. The situation may be connected with inadequate teacher competence, limited time, weak institutional procedures and insufficient administrative support. Continued dependence on punitive responses without appropriate opportunities for mediation and dialogue could deepen resentment and contribute to repeated misconduct. The researcher therefore examined restorative mediation and dialogue 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 mediation and dialogue as strategies for managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study had the following objectives:

1. To ascertain the extent to which restorative mediation is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. To examine the extent to which restorative dialogue 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:

1. To what extent is restorative mediation used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
2. To what extent is restorative dialogue 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:

1. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative mediation is used in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative dialogue 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 information about the respondents, while section B contained 14

items used to elicit responses on restorative mediation and dialogue. The researchers and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation validated the instrument. Cronbach's alpha was used to establish the reliability of the instrument at 0.78 and 0.82 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 mediation 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 mediation is used in managing student discipline

S/N	Description of items	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Average Mean	Rank Order	Remark
15	Mediation is used to resolve conflicts among students in this school.	2.83	0.83	2.89	1.01	2.86	4th	High Extent
16	Both parties are allowed to speak during mediation sessions.	3.05	0.81	2.88	1.06	2.97	3rd	High Extent
17	Mediation enables students to settle disputes peacefully.	2.95	0.92	3.14	0.71	3.04	1st	High Extent
18	Mediation gives students equal opportunities to present their views.	2.86	0.67	3.12	0.45	2.99	2nd	High Extent
19	Mediation sessions sometimes favour one party over the other.	1.79	0.92	2.21	1.06	1.99	6th	Low Extent
20	School authorities use mediation to reduce harsh disciplinary responses.	2.74	0.65	2.92	0.63	2.83	5th	High Extent
21	Students' rights are ignored during mediation sessions.	1.52	0.83	1.95	1.02	1.73	7th	Low Extent
	Aggregate	**2.53**	**0.80**	**2.73**	**0.85**	**2.63**		

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative mediation is used in managing student discipline. Items 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20 had average mean scores of 2.86, 2.97, 3.04, 2.99 and 2.83, respectively, and were rated to a high extent. The ratings indicate that schools used mediation to resolve conflicts, allowed both parties to speak, enabled students to settle disputes peacefully, gave students equal opportunities to present their views and reduced harsh disciplinary responses. Items 19 and 21 recorded average mean scores of 1.99 and 1.73, respectively, and were rated to a low extent. The low ratings indicate that respondents generally disagreed that mediation sessions favoured one party or ignored students' rights. The aggregate average mean of 2.63 was above the criterion mean of 2.50. The result therefore shows that restorative mediation was used to a high extent in managing student discipline in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Question Two: *To what extent is restorative dialogue 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 dialogue is used in managing student discipline

S/N	Description of items	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Average Mean	Rank Order	Remark
22	Dialogue is used to address student misconduct in this school.	2.91	0.94	2.97	0.87	2.94	3rd	High Extent
23	Students are allowed to respond during dialogue on misconduct issues.	2.93	0.95	3.03	0.87	2.98	1st	High Extent
24	Dialogue enables students to reflect on the effects of their behaviour.	2.91	0.85	2.95	0.82	2.93	4th	High Extent
25	School authorities use dialogue before disciplinary decisions are made.	2.71	0.68	2.69	0.88	2.70	5th	High Extent
26	Students are sometimes interrupted when they try to explain themselves.	2.24	0.72	2.32	0.90	2.28	6th	Low Extent
27	Dialogue promotes respectful treatment during misconduct management.	2.91	0.94	3.02	0.88	2.96	2nd	High Extent
28	Dialogue sessions rarely protect students' right to a fair hearing.	1.72	0.86	2.00	0.97	1.86	7th	Low Extent
	Aggregate	**2.62**	**0.85**	**2.71**	**0.88**	**2.66**		

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation ratings of male and female teachers on the extent to which restorative dialogue is used in managing student discipline. Items 22, 23, 24, 25 and 27 had average mean scores of 2.94, 2.98, 2.93, 2.70 and 2.96, respectively, and were rated to a high extent. The ratings indicate that schools used dialogue to address student misconduct, allowed students to respond, encouraged reflection on behaviour, held dialogue before reaching disciplinary decisions and promoted respectful treatment. Items 26 and 28 recorded average mean scores of 2.28 and 1.86, respectively, and were rated to a low extent. The low ratings indicate that respondents generally disagreed that students were interrupted when explaining themselves or that dialogue sessions rarely protected their right to a fair hearing. The aggregate average mean of 2.66 was above the criterion mean of 2.50. The result therefore shows that restorative dialogue 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 mediation 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 mediation

S/N	Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	t-crit.	Remark
1	Male teachers	199	2.53	0.39	386	-3.89	±1.96	Significant; H_0 rejected
2	Female teachers	189	2.73	0.51				

Table 3 shows that male teachers recorded a mean score of 2.53 and a standard deviation of 0.39, while female teachers recorded a mean score of 2.73 and a standard deviation of 0.51. The absolute calculated t-value of 3.89 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 existed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative mediation, 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 dialogue 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 dialogue

S/N	Respondents	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-cal.	t-crit.	Remark
1	Male teachers	199	2.62	0.60	386	-1.47	±1.96	Not significant; H_0 not rejected
2	Female teachers	189	2.71	0.62				

Table 4 shows that male teachers recorded a mean score of 2.62 and a standard deviation of 0.60, while female teachers recorded a mean score of 2.71 and a standard deviation of 0.62. The absolute calculated t-value of 1.47 was lower 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 not rejected. The result indicates that no significant difference existed between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative dialogue.

DISCUSSION FINDINGS

The analysis of Table 1 reveals that restorative mediation was employed to a substantial degree in managing student discipline across the sampled schools. This approach was primarily used to resolve interpersonal conflicts, affording both parties the opportunity to speak and present their views equitably. Importantly, the strategy facilitated peaceful dispute settlement among students and reduced reliance on punitive disciplinary measures. Overall, the findings suggest that mediation has established a strong practical foothold as a participatory conflict-management strategy within these schools. This result aligns with the work of Lodi et al. (2022), who identified mediation as a key restorative practice for fostering accountability and repairing relationships in educational settings. It also corroborates the findings of Kariuki et al. (2023), which reported a significant positive relationship between mediation-based conflict

management and teacher productivity. Thus, mediation appears to serve both disciplinary and relational functions: it enables students to articulate their perspectives, listen to others, and collaboratively contribute to peaceful outcomes.

Item-level results indicated low agreement with the notion that mediation favoured one party or disregarded students' rights. Overall, respondents perceived mediation as a balanced and inclusive process. This aligns with Kalagbor and Nnokam (2015), who similarly found mediation to be an important strategy for conflict management and reconciliation in unity colleges. However, the effectiveness of mediation is contingent upon the neutrality and competence of the mediator. A process labeled as mediation can become one-sided if the facilitator unduly influences the outcome or allows a more powerful participant to dominate proceedings. This finding is in contrast with Kerega (2019), which reported that mediation and peer mediation were inadequately employed in resolving interpersonal student conflicts, largely due to administrators' lack of formal training. This discrepancy suggests that mediation was more visibly institutionalized in the sampled Rivers State schools. Nevertheless, its sustained utility will depend on consistent procedural application, voluntary participation, and systematic follow-up on agreements reached during mediation sessions.

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 mediation. Female teachers recorded the higher mean rating. The result indicates that male and female teachers did not assess the use of mediation similarly. The difference may reflect variations in their disciplinary responsibilities, communication experiences, conflict-management orientation or exposure to mediation procedures. The significant gender difference implies that the teaching workforce may not interpret or apply mediation consistently. Schools should therefore establish common procedures specifying who may serve as a mediator, how parties should be prepared, how neutrality should be maintained and how agreements should be documented. Professional development has to be designed with the equal involvement of male and female teachers, so that mediation does not depend on the preferences or personal skills of selected staff members.

The analysis of the data in Table 2 showed that restorative dialogue was used to a high extent in managing student discipline. Schools used dialogue to address misconduct, allowed students to respond and encouraged reflection on the consequences of behaviour. School authorities also held dialogue before reaching disciplinary decisions and promoted respectful treatment during the management of misconduct. This finding supports Lodi et al. (2022), who identified restorative conversations as important components of school-based restorative practice. It also agrees with Huang and Anyon (2020), who associated students' experiences of disciplinary resolutions with their attitudes towards school and perceptions of school climate. Dialogue can make discipline more educative by enabling students to recognise the effects of their conduct rather than merely receive punishment. The low ratings recorded for interruption and inadequate fair hearing further clarify the character of dialogue in the sampled schools. Respondents did not generally perceive students as being prevented from explaining themselves during disciplinary conversations. The ratings indicate that dialogue was more than a symbolic invitation to speak; it enabled students to explain their conduct, reflect on its consequences and engage respectfully before decisions were reached.

The test of the second hypothesis revealed no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female teachers on the use of restorative dialogue. Although female teachers recorded a slightly higher mean, both groups held broadly similar assessments. The result indicates that the teaching workforce interpreted or experienced restorative dialogue more consistently than mediation. The absence of a significant gender difference is important because dialogue is often the most immediate restorative strategy available to teachers. It can be used during routine classroom interactions without the formal preparation required for mediation or conferencing. The shared assessment by male and female teachers may therefore provide a useful foundation for strengthening dialogue as a consistent school-wide disciplinary practice.

The findings have important implications for student discipline, particularly in relation to the distinct functions of mediation and dialogue. Although the two approaches are related, dialogue is generally suited to routine misconduct and behavioural reflection, whereas mediation is more relevant when conflict

between parties requires the involvement of a neutral facilitator (Huang et al., 2023; Cantera-Rios et al., 2024). This distinction indicates that the effectiveness of restorative discipline may depend partly on matching each strategy to the nature and severity of the disciplinary situation. Clear differentiation between direct dialogue, structured mediation and formal administrative intervention can therefore contribute to greater consistency in the handling of misconduct, particularly where safety concerns or substantial power imbalances are involved. Such differentiation may also limit the selective application of restorative strategies and strengthen the appropriate use of procedural safeguards. The significant gender difference in mediation, alongside the shared assessment of dialogue, further suggests differences in the areas where professional development may be most relevant. Existing familiarity with dialogue may provide a foundation for its continued use, whereas mediation may require greater attention to neutrality, balanced participation, voluntary agreement and conflict de-escalation. Within a supportive administrative environment, both approaches can provide viable alternatives to an exclusively punitive approach to student discipline.

CONCLUSION

The results establish that restorative mediation and dialogue had gained considerable practical presence in the management of student discipline. The study concludes that both strategies provided participatory alternatives to exclusively punitive responses in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Male and female teachers differed significantly in their assessments of mediation but held similar views on dialogue. Consistent implementation will therefore require common mediation procedures, sustained dialogue practices, inclusive staff development and effective administrative monitoring.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Rivers State Ministry of Education should organise regular capacity-building programmes that equip principals and teachers with practical skills for managing disciplinary problems through restorative mediation and dialogue.
2. School administrators should establish clear procedures for determining when disciplinary cases require direct dialogue between affected parties and when the intervention of a trained, impartial mediator is necessary.
3. Selected teachers and counsellors should be trained as restorative mediators who can facilitate balanced participation, guide students towards mutually acceptable agreements and monitor compliance with the agreements reached.
4. Teachers should employ restorative dialogue before resorting to punitive measures, particularly where misconduct arises from misunderstanding, damaged relationships or interpersonal conflict.
5. Capacity-building programmes should involve both male and female teachers and address differences in their knowledge and application of restorative mediation. Such programmes should emphasise neutrality, confidentiality, active listening, documentation and post-resolution follow-up.

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