BLACK STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE CIRCLES AND
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BLACK STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

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Abstract

Despite the aspirations of restorative justice (RJ), there has been little empirical research that has systematically examined student experience of RJ and student-perceived social and emotional benefits of RJ circles. The current study addresses gaps in knowledge about RJ circles using a mixed methods study. The author used student voice to better understand student-reported circle benefits. The sample was comprised of approximately 445 students from three predominately Black middle and high schools located in a Northeastern U.S. city during 2018. Analysis of student-reported circle benefits found that a majority of student responses could be grouped into the Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies. These student perceptions were referred to as social and emotional circle benefits (SECB). To better understand the experience of Black students, in an effort to identify how this population can be better supported in school systems, SECB was examined further by race (Black compared to students from other race/ethnic groups) and gender (male compared to non-male). Results indicated no gender differences in student discussions of SECB. In contrast, Black students, relative to students from other racial/ethnic groups, slightly reported fewer SEL-oriented circle benefits. Using multiple regression, the study also found that SECB was significantly associated with three indicators of positive school climate, as measured by adult support, sense of safety, and sense of community. In other words, when students perceived greater SEL oriented benefits through their circle participation, they also tended to report greater support, safety, and community in their school, relative to their peers who saw fewer circle benefits. This implies that there should be more consideration given to the explicit inclusion of SEL curricula. Also, given the fewer reported SECBs by Black students, cultural relevance during community-building circles should be
targeted with the consideration of cultural synchrony between community-building circles, Black students, and protective parenting.
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Introduction

Zero tolerance policies originated as a response to school shootings in the mid-1990’s (Davis, 2019). These policies were also put in place as a deterrence measure to increase student safety within schools. As a result of these policies, schools have created mandatory punishments for students which significantly mimic the criminal justice system. Despite the type of infraction, Black students are receiving higher rates of discipline than their counterparts (Huang, 2016; Mittleman, 2018; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Discipline can come in the forms of out-of-school suspensions and school-based arrests for a wide range of infractions, including weapon possession and assault, tardiness, student bullying, insubordination and classroom disruption (Diliberti, Jackson, Correa, Padgett & Hansen, 2019). School-based arrests are particularly problematic as the neighborhoods in which Black students reside already have higher instances of police presence and surveillance (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017; Pentek & Eisenberg, 2018).

Studies have shown being suspended once increases the risk for dropout (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Moreover, when students dropout, their potential for juvenile justice involvement increases as well (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2014). Furthermore, it has been shown that students with a history of suspensions are at risk for higher suspensions rates in later grades; thus, it is the repeated disproportionate suspensions which may best explain the path from a student’s initial suspension to arrest later in life (Mittleman, 2018). Black students, in particular, continue to be suspended at higher rates than students in other racial groups which is linked to increased risk for dropout (Office for Civil Rights, 2018; Suh, Suh & Houston, 2007).

Scholarly consensus based on numerous empirical studies have found that implementing non-exclusionary approaches focused on prevention and intervention is a developmentally-
appropriate method to address behavioral infractions (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Initiatives such as restorative justice (RJ) aim to prevent behavioral infractions or intervene when a behavioral infraction has occurred (Gregory, Huang, Anyon & Greer, 2018). Further, the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) practices have also been integrated into schools in an effort to aid in fostering a positive school climate which research has shown reduces the likelihood that students engage in problem behavior (Elias, DeFinis & Bergmann, 2010; Reaves, McMahon, Duffy & Ruiz, 2018).

Yet, little empirical research has systemically examined student perception of RJ and student-reported social and emotional circle benefits. The current study is a mixed methods study from three schools which examines the relationship among RJ practices, student race/gender, student-reported social and emotional circle benefits, and school climate. The following literature reviews synthesizes theory and research on the value of student voice, student experience of RJ, school-based RJ, potential social and emotional benefits of circle, and school climate.

The need for research on students’ RJ experience

Research on school reform efforts often does not center student voices, which limits comprehensive examination of the effort’s social validity. Social validity can be understood as the stakeholder’s (i.e., student, staff, administration, providers) voice—attitudes, beliefs or perceptions—about a program and its effects (Cleary, Gregory, Kitsantas, Slemp & Panish, 2019). The importance of social validity is found in the three areas that Wolf (1978) considers the three levels at which society can judge the relevance and importance of a program or intervention. The three levels are (a) significance of intervention goals, (b) appropriateness of intervention procedures, and (c) importance of the outcomes of an intervention. When
considering the significance of intervention goals, the opportunity to have collaborative exchanges between various stakeholders (i.e., students, staff, administrators) emerges and creates the opportunity for programs or interventions put in place to align more closely with the respective needs (Cleary et al., 2019). The appropriateness of the intervention focuses on the acceptance of the intervention procedures and activities while the importance of the intervention outcomes examines how meaningful the observed effects are to the various stakeholders (Cleary et al., 2019). These three levels combine to form social validity and go beyond the typical examination of a program’s effectiveness as it not only examines the direct consumers (i.e., recipients of the intervention) but also the indirect consumers (i.e., those who are directly interested in or affected by changes resulting from the intervention; Cleary et al., 2019). In order to obtain the most valid feedback from recipients of a program, the first level (collaborative exchanges) should be considered (i.e., student voice).

When implementing new programs such as RJ into schools, student voice may not be considered and, as a result go, unheard. This is especially important when examining racial and gender subgroups of students as there can be microclimates within schools, and school climate scholars have cautioned against solely examining aggregated student perception (Bottiani, Bradshaw & Mendelson, 2014). This is essential when considering the racial disparities of student experience of a supportive school climate (Bottiani et al., 2014). Bottiani et al. (2014) assessed the differences in Black and White students' experiences of school climate (i.e., perceptions of caring, equity, and engagement) and explored whether indicators of school organizational health disparities (i.e., personal connectedness, staff affiliation, supportive leadership, and burnout) moderated differences in students' school experiences by race. Utilizing hierarchical linear models, Black students ($n = 6,228$), White students ($n = 12,169$) and school
staff \((n = 2,391)\) in 53 schools were surveyed (Bottiani et al., 2014). Results indicated Black students' reports of school climate were significantly lower than White students' reports; this finding held for each construct used to measure school climate: caring, equity and engagement (Bottiani et al., 2014). Males also reported a higher level of caring, equity and engagement than females (Bottiani et al., 2014). These findings persisted even after controlling for “socioeconomic status (maternal education), gender, and age at the student-level and socioeconomic status (free and reduced-price meals), percent highly qualified teachers, percent minority enrollment, and school size (total enrollment) at the school-level” (Bottiani et al., 2014, p. 578). Some subgroups of students perceived school climate differently; therefore, the only way to surface this disparity is to center the voices and perceptions of students themselves.

Student voice can be crucial in offering directions for program improvement. Moreover, reflecting on student perspectives of a program may ultimately increase the likelihood students will attend program activities and engage with them. One study demonstrated the utility of collecting student voice and feedback to ascertain experiences of restorative circles (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles & Espelage, 2016). Students found that those who participated in circles said circles improved peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships and suggested that the use of restorative circles contributed to the prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict through news skills and less physical fighting (Ortega et al., 2016). Added benefits of restorative circles, according to participants, included the opportunity for reflective listening, feeling understood, connectedness and having an opportunity to have voice (Ortega et al., 2016).

A restorative circle provides a space for anyone involved in conflict to repair harm through a facilitated process (Ortega et al., 2016). As demonstrated in the Ortega et al. (2016) study, assessing the progress of a program through the incorporation of student voice can aid in
creating solutions to smaller problems early in implementation process (Greenberg et al., 2003; Weinstein & Ebrary, 2004; Zinn & Macedo, 2004). This in turn has the potential to increase a program’s meaningfulness to the direct recipients thus impacting the effects of the program overall (Elias, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weinstein & Ebrary, 2004).

In a single-case study which sought to better understand how student voice may best contribute to program success and improved school climate, researchers utilized participant observation, interviews with students and staff, program documentation (e.g., meeting minutes, pre-post surveys with student participants) and survey responses (Voight, 2014). There were 1165, predominately Black, 6th-8th grade students involved in the study which was conducted over the course of two years. The objective was to understand the pathways through which student voice may affect positive school climate (Voight, 2014).

One of the pathways was *direct action and youth organizing* where students identified an issue that was important to them, gathered information on the issue and used the information and their voice to influence decision makers. Seventh grade students became champions of anti-bullying during informal interactions with their peers, which students felt aided in the reduction of bullying and gossiping in the school (Voight, 2014). Thus, the *direct action and youth organizing* pathway, suggests that school climate can indeed be improved through student voice (Voight, 2014). Staff shared that they witnessed students develop a greater sense of responsibility to maintain their personal character and contribute to school improvement (Voight, 2014).

**Restorative Justice within Schools**

RJ is often conceptualized as driven by a set of values and beliefs. Some of those values include dignity, respect, accountability, fairness, courage, inclusivity, empathy, trust, forgiveness
and love (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Pranis, 2014). Enacted values, it is theorized, should be associated with people being their “best selves” and lay the foundation for RJ practices that offer structural elements to create a safe space for connection—connection in times of difficulty, conflict or harm (Pranis, 2014). The structural elements which guide RJ practices include ceremony, guidelines, a talking piece, circle keeping/facilitation and consensus decision-making (Pranis, 2014). While values may be core to RJ initiatives, specific, observable practices are also systematically implemented – sometimes through what is called a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) model (Armour, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

The MTSS is derived from the public health model in which there is a three-tiered triangle that places harm-specific incidents at the top (tier 3), problem-solving incidents requiring maintenance in the middle (tier 2) and preventative community-building approaches at the bottom (tier 1; Armour, 2016). At tier 1, community-building circles are used to build connections as students sit facing one another, problem solve, facilitate student-teacher connection through reflection on a prompt or question and provide a respectful space for establishing values (Armour, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). At tier 2, students who were involved or affected by an incident engage in affective statements and work together in responsive circles to problem solve, repair harm and/or provide conflict coaching or peer mediation (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). At tier 3, all of the persons involved in a serious disciplinary event participate in a restorative conference (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). In a restorative conference, there is a facilitator present that guides the exchange; participants in the conference jointly determine a solution and repair the harm caused (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Tier 3 may also require the involvement of school administrators after a student’s return to school after being absent in what is known as re-entry or reintegration back to school; the student
is welcomed back and provided supports that are needed (Armour, 2016; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). These specific approaches are based on the “‘non-authoritarian’ culture of high expectations with high levels of support that emphasize doing things ‘with’ someone as opposed to doing things ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone” (Armour, 2016, p. 1017). Though a MTSS approach has been used as a framework for implementing RJ school-wide, the core components of RJ continue to be circles and conferences.

A recent review summarized quantitative research of the effectiveness of RJ on specific, measurable student and school outcomes and concluded that RJ was linked to less student misbehavior, less bullying, less exclusionary discipline (suspensions, expulsions), smaller racial discipline disparities, improved student attendance, improved school climate and improved academic outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Evidence suggests that RJ can lead to improvements in discipline, discipline disparities, misbehavior, and school climate; however, evidence of reducing bullying and student absenteeism remains mixed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In addition, the effectiveness of RJ on academic performance is mixed, with some correlational studies suggesting RJ can produce benefits, while large-scale school-level RCT and other studies suggest mixed results of RJ’s impact on academic performance (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

**Community-building circles.** As mentioned above, both conflict and community-building circles are utilized as core RJ practices. There are various forms of circle processes such as, talking, understanding, healing, support, community-building and conflict (Pranis, 2014). The current study will use community-building circles and restorative conference terminology specifically. In a community-building circle, obstacles and barriers are removed from inside the circle in order to emphasize equality and connectedness (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). As part
of the process, a centerpiece is created and typically placed on the floor in the center of the circle; this emphasizes the values of the circle (e.g., participation, empathy, honesty, privacy; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Values are identified by participants naming the values they want for the circle and writing down a value on an index card and sharing the value’s importance (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). After sharing the importance of the value, each participant places the index card with the value in the center of the circle (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

As a school-based practice, RJ endeavors to build safe communities for engaged learning, produce collaborative and inclusive solutions, increase cross-cultural connections and foster healing and restoration (Armour, 2016).

In schools, the community-building circle is used to foster relationships among staff and students and support effective collective actions as well as mutual responsibility (Pranis, 2014). Community-building circles aim to develop a school climate in which relationships are established, healed and maintained. They also aim to have a preventative function through the formation of social harmony. It is theorized that the emphasis on relationships and its ability to contribute to social harmony may be one of the benefits of community-building circles (Pranis, 2014). Community-building circles in RJ are intended to foster community in schools and address behavioral concerns before they escalate. Community-building circles are also intended to develop the social and emotional capacity of school members as whole and are “reaffirmed in the everyday practice of life at the school” (Pranis, 2013, p. 333).

All members of the school are “trained and supported in the development of social and emotional competencies, particularly in the area of conflict resolution, such that members of the school community are enabled to resolve differences in respectful and caring way.” (Pranis, 2013, p. 332). In some schools, community-building circles take place every day or once a week,
with a small group of 10-15 students and an adult, during a designated time of the day (e.g., 30-45-minute advisory period; Manassah, Roderick and Gregory, 2018). During community-building circles, students share their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and reactions to current national, school, or personal events. It is further suggested that in order to create a space for those involved in circles to feel open to sharing, five elements are needed: ceremony, guidelines, a talking piece, keeping/facilitation and consensus decision-making (Pranis, 2014).

Ceremonies for community-building circles come in two forms, the first is the opening ceremony which helps participants remove their “masks” and protections that create distance from others, center themselves, remove negative affect from stress, honor the presence of others and encourage a sense of optimism (Pranis, 2014). Closing ceremonies acknowledges the efforts of everyone in the circle, “affirms the interconnectedness of those present, conveys a sense of hope for the future and prepares participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives” (Pranis, 2014, p. 30). Through guidelines, commitments or promises are made to one another about how they will present in the circle (Pranis, 2014). The purpose is to establish clear expectations around conduct, based on what each participant needs to make the space safe for themselves and others (Pranis, 2014). Guidelines allow participants an opportunity to speak authentically and include respectful speaking and listening as well as some form of confidentiality (Pranis, 2014). Guidelines are created by all participants in the circle, not just the facilitator, and are adopted by consensus of the group (Pranis, 2014). Respectful listening is a common guideline that is adopted and facilitated by the talking piece (Pranis, 2014; Wachtel, 2016).

The talking piece is an object that is held and passed from one person to the next in the circle (Pranis, 2014; Wachtel, 2016). When a participant is holding the talking piece, the other
participants have the opportunity to listen without interrupting. Participants may choose to pass the talking piece without speaking as there is no obligation to speak when the talking piece comes (Pranis, 2014). The talking piece is meant to slow the pace of conversation and encourage reflective interactions. Moreover, the piece carries symbolic meaning as it has the potential to allow the expression of difficult emotions and the management of difficult feelings as one waits to receive the talking piece to share (Pranis, 2014). The talking piece may also act as an equalizer in that everyone has an equal opportunity to share. This creates an opportunity for those who are usually quieter and less assertive to speak without interruption (Pranis, 2014; Wachtel, 2016).

Although everyone has a chance to share, a “keeper” or “facilitator” initiates a safe respectful space that aims to engage everyone in sharing the responsibility for the space (Pranis 2004; Wachtel, 2016). The facilitator does not control the group; the facilitator is a participant in the process (Pranis 2004; Wachtel, 2016). The facilitator of the circle monitors and draws attention of the group to the guidelines established if necessary (Pranis, 2014). When a decision needs to be made, they are made by the consensus (Pranis, 2014). Not all community-building circles make decisions; however, if one is made, it means everyone is in agreement with the decision and supports its implementation (Pranis, 2014). If a consensus cannot be reached, the decision can revert to the standard that would apply; however, decisions in the interests of all participants have a greater prospect of success, as everyone has something to gain in the agreement (Pranis, 2014).

Within schools, whole staff are trained to be circle facilitators; however, a conference facilitator can be one who is hired to be a full-time RJ coordinator or staff reassigned in the building to this position (The Denver School Based Restorative Practices Partnership, 2017). If hiring or reassigning a role is not possible, typically a “trained and motivated vice principal,
dean, teacher or counselor” can be a facilitator (Oakland Unified School District-Restorative Justice, n.d.). Facilitators are trained in “RJ community-building, RJ discipline, RJ reentry and in offering RJ trainings” (Oakland Unified School District-Restorative Justice, n.d.). Students can also participate in leadership training to become a circle facilitator (Gregory, Ward-Seidel, & Carter, 2019). Ideally, student facilitators vary in diverse achievement, race, gender and extracurricular interest groups (Gregory et al., 2019).

**Restorative Conferences.** Although community-building circles endeavor to address behavioral concerns before they escalate, they do not always prevent problem behaviors. In the event that there is a problem behavior, such as fighting, restorative conferences are held to repair the harm (Morrison, 2007). As RJ operates on a continuum based on the needs of the members of the school community, restorative conferences allow the person who was harmed to confront the person who caused the harm, express their feelings and offer an opinion in the outcome (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005; Wachtel, 2016). If a restorative conference is deemed appropriate and both parties agree to attend, rather than utilizing the traditional disciplinary approach (i.e., suspension), there is a discussion about how the harm will be repaired, how to repair the relationship if possible and how to reintegrate the person who caused the harm back into the community (Wachtel, 2016).

In a restorative conference, both parties are offered support through the presence of one or more allies—such as family members or friends—as they aim to hold the person who caused the harm accountable (Ortega et al., 2016; Wachtel, 2016). This can potentially aid in the learning and understanding of each participant during the restorative conference process and repairing the relationship. Staff and student reports of the circle and conference process as well as the theorized skills practices, indicate there may be an opportunity to intentionally incorporate
specific SEL competencies into RJ practices in order to foster skills such as relationship-building, self-management, self-awareness and impulse control (Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014). Thus, it is relevant to consider the varying domains of SEL skills. A detailed description of typical SEL skills will then allow for a consideration of how each skill might be intentionally incorporated in the circle and conference process.

**Social-Emotional Learning**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) aims to help students understand how to manage their emotions, achieve positive goals, show empathy, build relationships and make responsible decisions. While there are many typologies of SEL in the field (Jones, 2019), the most common conceptualization of SEL domains is that of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] (2019), which was also adopted by the state of New Jersey (New Jersey State Board of Education, 2017). This includes five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2019). The goal of SEL is for these competencies to evolve from external encouragement to internal values and beliefs. This is done through systematic instruction in which SEL skills are taught, modeled and practiced, then applied to various situations that students encounter on a daily basis (Durlack, Weissberg, Schellinger, Dymnicki & Taylor, 2011).

A meta-analysis reviewed 82 school-based, universal SEL interventions from kindergarten to high school (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). The authors characterized the SEL interventions, broadly speaking, as Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs. The PYD programs were implemented in schools in an effort to enhance students’ strengths, establish supportive and engaging environments and provide opportunities for
constructive interactions (Taylor et al., 2017). PYD programs also sought to address protective and risks factors between peers, within schools, families and communities which are also the skills SEL aims to develop. This occurs through fostering safe and caring learning environments, and through the involvement of peers, staff, and families in whole-school community-building activities. The examination of PYD programs creates a unique opportunity to not only understand the potential effects of SEL interventions, but also understand how the benefits of SEL may also be relevant to RJ. In the Taylor et al. (2017) meta-analysis, it was found that students demonstrated significant SEL benefits not only while in the program but also up to approximately four years later. The relationship between the PYD programs and SEL benefits or effect size (ES) was found to be significant in improved SEL skills ($ES = .17$), positive attitudes ($ES = .17$), academic performance ($ES = .22$), emotional distress ($ES = .12$) and drug use ($ES = .12$; Taylor et al., 2017). This remained true when taking into consideration demographics such as student race and socioeconomic status. Additionally, the importance of skills training was highlighted as having a greater association with long-term follow-up effects than student attitudes. Moreover, a long-term effect was found in developmental outcomes 18 years post intervention. Long-term effects included: improved social relationships, high school graduation rates, college attendance and reduction in negative outcomes such as arrests or the presence of clinical disorders (Taylor et al., 2017).

**Student social and emotional benefits linked RJ practices.** There are not many published studies that have examined, in-depth, the student experience of community-building circles or conferences; however, two studies (Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014) have sought to do so. Thus, an in-depth description of the studies is warranted. Ortega et al. (2016) interviewed 35 high school students and 25 school staff to examine their experience of
restorative conferences, and perceived outcomes. They used grounded theory methodology to analyze the interviews and they concluded that neither staff nor students found punitive ways of handling conflicts and violation of rules to be effective. Additionally, staff and students reported positive outcomes of restorative circles such as taking ownership of the process/bypassing adults (i.e., using the process to handle conflict rather than fighting; stepping into the facilitator role without adult involvement) and interrupting the School-to-Prison pipeline (i.e., students were not getting suspended or “locked up”). Added benefits of restorative circles, according to participants, included the opportunity for reflective listening, feeling understood, connectedness and having an opportunity to have voice (Ortega et al., 2016).

Staff and students also reported improved relationships (i.e., relationships were repaired and improved) and prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict (i.e., students learning new ways of handling conflict because of the conference process; staff using conferences to more effectively handle student conflict). Lastly staff and students reported that there was meaningful dialogue (i.e., understanding and connecting, no rumors/boosting in the conference, getting to the actual cause of the issue) as well as academic and social achievements (i.e., staff reported that students were better behaved and more focused on academics; Ortega et al., 2016). Based on the outcomes reported by staff and students, conferences not only repaired harm, but also served as the framework by which students continued engaging in conversations and utilized preventative methods to prevent harm from being caused in the first place.

Schumacher (2014) also explored students’ responses to their experience in community-building circles. Schumacher (2014) sought to understand whether Talking Circles (i.e., community-building circles) would create growth-fostering relationships and encourage the development of emotional literacy skills. Her study took place in multi-ethnic high school within
a small town which had 51% of children living in poverty and was comprised of African American, South Asian, Middle Eastern, and Southeastern European residents (Schumacher, 2014). Over the duration of two years, 60 girls ages 14-18 participated in 12 Talking Circles that met between 15-33 times each for a total of 257 hours. Schumacher (2014) utilized participant observations (257 hours of detailed Talking Circles memos and interpretations), individual semi-structured interviews (31 students, 5 teachers and 2 gatekeepers) and archival documents (i.e., students’ emails and text messages). In her search for “semantic relationships, or link of meaning connecting patterns and categories,” (Schumacher, 2014, p.4) identified what she considered to be four relational themes and three emotional literacy skills.

The four relational themes included the joy of being together and building relationships; a sense of safety which was grounded in trust confidentiality, not feeling alone and not being judged; the freedom to express genuine emotions; and increased empathy and compassion. In terms of the joy in togetherness, girls described their happiness in being together and deepening their friendships which also contributed to the cohesiveness of the circle. The girls shared that hearing one another’s opinions and feelings made them understand and like each other more. A sense of safety was found in girls’ account of being able to trust one another in knowing that what they discussed would not leave the circle. Additionally, through sharing, Schumacher (2014) speculated that many girls discovered that they were more similar than different, which made them feel safe in knowing that they were not alone or being judged. Schumacher (2014) extrapolated that the ability to express genuine emotions enabled the girls to openly say what they felt without suppressing their emotions. In addition, the girls discussed recognizing their own ability and power to control overwhelming emotions. Schumacher (2014) theorized that the girls also demonstrated the capacity to be aware of how someone might feel in a given situation.
which led to an enhanced awareness and affirmation of self that gave them a greater sense of purpose and meaning (Schumacher, 2014).

The three emotional literacy skills, Schumacher (2014) surmised, included the capacity to listen, the ability to manage anger, and an interpersonal sensitivity developed through self-awareness. Schumacher (2014) observed that the girls who participated in the circle were able to listen without interruption. Schumacher (2014) also proposed that the talking piece functioned as a reminder to be respectful and listen while also monitoring themselves during the process. The talking piece was observed as a regulator, thus Schumacher (2014) concluded that it appeared to prompt impulse control and focused listening. During the circle process, according to the researcher, the girls appeared to listen intently and reported feeling heard. Several girls also described feeling like they “held power” - the power to speak and be heard with respect.

In terms of managing anger, some girls said they learned that they did not need to respond in every situation, especially situations where there was conflict. These girls shared that matters were better resolved through constructive dialogue and calming outlets, such as supportive friends, where they could responsibly and safely manage their anger. Schumacher (2014) inferred that the girls’ self-awareness also played a role in the strengthening of their interpersonal sensitivity. Schumacher (2014) speculated that the girls began to not only show empathy toward those in the circle, but even those who were not in the circle—as reported by the girls who shared stories about how they addressed gossip and backstabbing. Schumacher (2014) concluded that the girls shared that they no longer had the desire to judge others or gossip because one did not know the personal and life challenges another faced (Schumacher, 2014).

Whereas the study did not examine the larger school climate, interview data, however, did show that when the girls joined with their friends in the circle, they reported being happier and feeling
more connected and invested in the school. While there is little research on student perspective on circles, especially as it relates to perceived benefits and school climate, continuing to advance the research of Schumacher (2014) and Ortega et al. (2016) may provide valuable insights. Thus, the current study will expand on this research. It has already been suggested that connections may be built in community-building circles through sharing opinions and open expression (Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014); conferences may create the ability express how one was harmed, then collaboratively problem-solve how the harm can be repaired (Morrison, 2007; Ortega et al., 2016; Wachtel, 2016). Inherently through these experiences, students may begin to feel empowered and can begin to translate these practices to areas of their everyday lives which can potentially reshape their outlook on their homes/communities, as well as their school climate. The current study will examine the extent to which students who participate in community-building circles report social and emotional benefits. In addition, much remains unknown about RJ and school climate, especially the degree to which students who perceive benefits from the circle process perceive a more positive (or negative) school climate. Therefore, the current study will examine whether students who report social and emotional circle benefits tend to perceive a more positive school climate, relative to students who do not report social and emotional circle benefits.

School climate. Positive school climate is associated with student learning, academic achievement, school success, and healthy development, as well as, effective risk prevention, positive youth development efforts and increased teacher retention (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009). In addition, positive school climate is correlated with decreased absenteeism in middle and high school as well as lower rates of student suspension in high school (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). School climate is defined as the quality and
character of school life reflective of norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Center, 2017). Generally, school climate can be measured by five major dimensions: 1) Safety, which includes rules and norms, physical security and social-emotional security; 2) Teaching and Learning, which includes support for learning and social and civic learning; 3) Interpersonal Relationships which includes respect for diversity, social support-adults, social support-students; 4) Institutional Environment which includes school connectedness-engagement and physical surroundings; 5) Social media (National School Climate Center, 2017). However, it is important to note that not all studies use every dimension in their measures with some using more or less (Bartolino-Krachman, Arnold & Larocca, 2016; Hough, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2017; Shukla, Konold & Cornell, 2016). Despite the varying dimensions used to measure school climate, three dimensions have remained central: adult support, sense of community and safety (Bartolino-Krachman, Arnold & Larocca, 2016; Hough et al., 2017; National School Climate Center, 2017) – the three dimensions of school climate that will be used in the current study.

Adult support refers to the students’ perceptions that adults are willing to help, supportive and respectful (Shukla et al., 2016; Zullig et al., 2010). Examples of adult support would include, supportive practices such as encouragement, constructive feedback, opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and skills and support for independent thinking (Hough et al., 2017). Sense of community refers to students feeling valued, accepted and included by others (adults and students); feeling welcome at the school (Hough et al., 2017). Examples of a sense of community include, mutual support and ongoing communication, school-community involvement and participation in school decision-making (Cohen et al., 2009). Safety refers to students’ perception of feeling safe, in and around school, from verbal abuse, exclusion or teasing by
others (Hough et al., 2017). Examples of safety include, physical safety: clearly communicated rules, a crisis safety plan and clear and consistent responses to a rule violation (Cohen et al., 2009). Another example of safety would be social-emotional safety; this includes, attitudes about individual differences, attitudes about and responses to bullying and conflict resolution taught in school (Cohen et al., 2009). Few studies have examined the relationship between RJ and school climate. The few studies that have examined RJ and school climate and other student outcomes are reviewed below.

**RJ and school climate.** Districts are implementing RJ to improve school climate, yet there have only been a few rigorous experimental studies examining the link between RJ and school climate; taken together, the results suggest mixed evidence. In a randomized control trial, which included 44 schools (evenly split between treatment and control groups) in a mid-sized urban school district, researchers sought to study the impacts of RJ on classroom and school climate and suspension rates (Augustine et al., 2018). The treatment group received restorative practices through “Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities” (PERC) intervention (Augustine et al., 2018). The data for the study was collected through observations of International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) trainings, surveys of school staff, observations of restorative practices in four case study schools and interviews of school, district and IIRP staff; in addition, administrative data from the district and the county was obtained (Augustine et al., 2018). The data were collected over two years and analyzed outcomes at the student level (e.g., suspensions, arrests, attendance, mobility and achievement), teacher level (e.g., composite teaching performance, value added and student ratings of teachers) and school level (e.g., teacher ratings of teaching and learning conditions; Augustine et al., 2018). Results from the study demonstrated a reduction of the number of days lost to suspension per student
during Year 2 in the PERC treatment group which equated to a 16-percent reduction in days of instruction lost to suspension (Augustine et al., 2018). Though the overall rate was driven by decreases in suspensions at the elementary level, the estimate was significant at the 0.05 level and was equivalent to the small effect size of -0.060 which suggests that the PERC treatment group was successful in its primary goal of reducing exclusionary discipline rates (Augustine et al., 2018).

The Augustine et al. (2018) study used a comprehensive measure of teacher effectiveness called RISE to monitor teacher performance (Augustine et al., 2018). RISE contains a composite scale from the Tripod student survey which is made up of seven subscales (Augustine et al., 2018). The Classroom Management scale was also used in this study to measure students’ judgements about their teacher’s classroom practices related to safety and discipline, as well as student perception of culture (Augustine et al., 2018). Results indicated a reduction of students’ ratings of teacher’s classroom management with an effect size of 0.21 and significance at the 0.01 level (Augustine et al., 2018). The impact of PERC was negative and significant on one of the four climate and culture scales (In-Class Peer Support) and not significant on the others (School Climate, Trust, and Bullying (Augustine et al., 2018). However, staff’s responses to the district’s survey indicated significantly higher ratings of conduct management, teacher leadership, school leadership, and overall teaching and learning conditions in the PERC schools than in control schools (Augustine et al., 2018). The results for conduct management were driven by staff’s responses indicating whether they felt they work in a safe environment and whether they understood policies regarding student conduct (Augustine et al., 2018). Given the mixed findings of reduced suspensions, negative student perceptions and positive staff perceptions
(Augustine et al., 2018), there is need for more focused research around student experience of reform efforts such as RJ.

Another randomized control trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention (RPI) occurred in 13 predominately White middle schools (Acosta et al., 2019). Acosta et al. (2019) assessed the extent of implementation and changes in school connectedness, positive developmental outcomes and bullying victimization (Acosta et al., 2019). Four scales from the Inventory of School Climate: Consistency and Clarity of Rules and Expectations, Teacher Support, Positive Peer Interactions and Student Input into Decision-Making were used to assess school climate (Acosta et al., 2019). Students were asked in both baseline and post-test surveys about their experiences of restorative practices at school involving the use of affective statements, restorative questions, fair process and reintegrative management of shame (Acosta et al., 2019). Students in the intervention school were asked an additional ten questions at post-test which asked about the specific use of circles, both proactively and in response to behavioral issues (Acosta et al., 2019).

Results from the study demonstrated that RPI did not have significant effects on students in the treatment schools. Furthermore, middle-school students who received the RPI did not report more school connectedness, better school climate, more positive peer relationships and developmental outcomes, or less victimization than students in the control schools (Acosta et al., 2019). Yet, a more restorative school environment based on student survey responses across all the schools (outside of the experimental design) was associated with more positive youth development and reductions in bullying among middle school students, relative to schools with a less restorative environment (Acosta et al., 2019). In addition, self-reported restorative practices experience at follow-up showed significant and positive relations with all school climate, school
connectedness, peer attachment and social skills outcomes as well as significant negative relations with reports of physical and cyber bullying based on their teachers’ actions; associations with emotional bullying were not significant (Acosta et al., 2019).

It is important to note that consistent RPI was not implemented over two years which may explain the lack of significant findings in the treatment schools; inconsistency of RPI implementation may have been due to teachers not participating in the RPI implementation or implementing RPI without fidelity (i.e., inconsistently or not at the recommended levels; Acosta et al., 2019). The authors also discuss the findings in light of staff turnover and the need for implementation support, tools and coaching (Acosta et al., 2019). It is important to note that this study was conducted within predominately White school populations; therefore, there remains a need to understand student experience of RJ practices outside of predominantly White experiences alone. Thus, the current study will examine the similar or difference experiences of circles by student race.

**Current Study**

In response to zero tolerance policies, which disproportionally affect Black students, schools have now implemented efforts such as RJ and SEL to prevent behavioral infractions and aid in fostering a positive school climate (Elias et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2018; Reaves et al., 2018). Studies of SEL suggest that the development of skills that contribute to a person’s character can aid in increasing positive school climate through fostering deeper relationships, developing empathy and making responsible decisions (Elias, DeFini & Bergmann, 2010; Reaves, McMahon, Duffy & Ruiz, 2018). Practitioners of RJ have theorized that practices such as community-building circles and conferences may reduce the likelihood students will cause harm and increase the likelihood that harm will be repaired (Pranis, 2014). Through the use of RJ
community-building circles, it has been suggested that students engage in social-emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-management, communication and relationship-building (Schumacher, 2014). RJ research has shown mixed results in fostering social harmony and school climate (Acosta et al., 2019; Augustine et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020); thus, there is a need to advance RJ research. There are three gaps in knowledge that have been identified in the above literature review:

First, so often research on school reform efforts do not center student voices which limits comprehensive examination of the effort’s social validity; thus, more RJ research is needed that centers student voice. We do not know much about how students conceptualize benefits from their participation in RP circles; however, two studies point to possible social and emotional benefits (Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014). Thus, the current study will address this need to understand how students experience circles through the lens of self-reported SEL competencies (e.g., self-awareness).

Second, based on prior research, it has been shown that student experience of a supportive school climate differs by race and gender (Bottiani et al., 2014). To increase RJ programs’ effectiveness, its goals should aim to address marginalized (i.e., Black) students’ lack of support. When goals of RJ programs reflect the needs of the population, it increases the likelihood that students will be more engaged and feel more supported (Armour, 2016; Bottiani et al., 2014; Voight, 2014). With the exception of Schumacher (2014), there is little research on student experience of circles based on gender (or race); therefore, the current study will examine the associations between student gender, student race, and student perceptions of community-building circles.
Third, much remains unknown about RJ and school climate, especially the degree to which students who report social and emotional circle benefits perceive a more positive (or negative) school climate. The current study addresses these gaps by examining whether students’ reported social and emotional circle benefits are associated with more positive (or negative) perceptions of school climate. More specifically, the study examines student-reported social and emotional circle benefits in relation to perceived safety, adult support and sense of community—three indicators of positive school climate. Using students’ open-ended and survey responses, the current study seeks to address the aforementioned gaps with the following three aims:

**Aim 1: Student experiences of circles**

R1. If students indicate circle benefits, to what degree do the themes discussed map onto social and emotional competencies?

H1. Few studies have examined reported social and emotional circle benefits, with the exception of Schumacher (2014) and Ortega et al., (2016). It is hypothesized that a majority of students’ comments about what they like about circles will fall into one or more of five social and emotional competencies (e.g., social awareness, self-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, self-management).

**Aim 2: Divergent and convergent experiences of perceived benefits**

R2. Are Black students, relative to non-Black students, and male students, relative to non-male students, more or less likely to report social and emotional circle benefits? That is, given the need to address divergent experiences of school-based reform efforts related to students’ identities, are certain students more or less likely to report social and emotional benefits from circles?
H2. Study results remain mixed around reported circle benefits as a direct result of RJ participation (Acosta 2019; Augustine et al., 2018) and there is a lack of research examining divergence or convergence among student race and gender groups. Due to little research exploring divergent and convergent experiences of perceived benefits of circles, this question is exploratory.

**Aim 3: Differences in students’ experiences of school climate**

R3. Accounting for student race and gender, do students who report social and emotional circle benefits tend to perceive a more positive school climate, relative to students who do not report social and emotional circle benefits? More specifically, relative to their peers, who report fewer social and emotional circle benefits, do students who report greater social and emotional circle benefits, tend to report greater adult support, perceived safety, and sense of community – three dimensions of school climate?

H3. This question is exploratory given the lack of research in this area. On the one hand, students who report social and emotional benefits of circles may tend to perceive a more positive school climate. On the other hand, students who report social and emotional benefits of circles may see a more negative school climate given their possible abilities in critical thinking.

**Method**

**School and Student Participants**

Students from one middle and two high schools located in a northeastern U.S. city participated in the RJ survey. Each school had been implementing RJ for at least two school years prior to 2018 survey administration. There were 1,020 students who completed the survey. The response rates varied across schools, 73%, 86% and 75%. Of the 1,020 students who completed the survey, 38% identified as Black, 19% identified as White, 17% identified as
Latinx, 13% identified as Asian, 8% identified as two or more races, 4% identified as Other and 1% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. Thus, overall a majority of the students taking the survey were Black. Additionally, 54% of students who participated in the survey identified as male, 44% identified as female and 2% identified as transgender/gender non-conforming/questioning/other.

**Inclusion criteria.** Students who wrote in the number “1” or more to the question, “In the past month, how many community-building circles in your classrooms have you participated in?” were included in the sample. Students who indicated no participation (i.e., wrote in a zero) were not included in this study. Approximately 44% (*n* = 445) of the 1008 students with useable surveys entered open-ended responses (See Appendix A, Figure 1 for details on the selection of the subsample for the current study).

The sample for the current study was diverse across the three participating schools. The School 1 (*n* = 170) survey sample was comprised of predominately Black students (57%), followed by Latinx (19%), Asian (11%), Two or more races (7%), Other (2%), White (2%) and American Indian or Alaska Native (2%) students. In addition, 54% of students who participated in the survey identified as female, 45% identified as male, and 1% identified as transgender/gender non-conforming/questioning/other. The School 2 (*n* = 97) survey sample was comprised of predominately Black students (58%), followed by Latinx (23%), Two or more races (10%), Other (5%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2%) and White (2%) students. In addition, 53% of students who participated in the survey identified as male, 46% identified as female, and 1% identified as transgender/gender non-conforming/questioning/other. The School 3 (*n* = 174) survey sample was comprised of predominately White students (36%), followed by Asian (22%), Latinx (15%), Black (12%), Two or more races (9%), Other (5%) students and
American Indian or Alaska Native (1%) students. In addition, 54% of students who participated in the survey identified as female, 45% identified as male, and 1% identified as transgender/gender non-conforming/questioning/other. Each school focused on building community and repairing harm when it occurred. As part of a larger project, each school also aimed to integrate explicit exercises that would increase social and racial justice.

**Measures**

Students were administered a 30-minute survey comprised of multiple scales including Likert-type scales and the following open-ended question: “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” (See Appendix C). Students also responded to a range of other open-ended questions which are not the focus of the current study.

**Measures of school climate.** In the survey, school climate was measured through three constructs, Adult Support, Sense of Community and a single item on School Safety. The survey items asked students to indicate their feelings toward various topics as measured by their responses on the multiple-choice items. Response options were as follows: “Not at all true”, “A little true”, “Somewhat true”, “Very true”, and “Completely true”; each response was coded from one to five, respectively.

The Adult Support scale was measured by assessing a student’s willingness to seek help from staff and/or other students (See Appendix D). The 6-item scale were partially derived from Learning Environment Scale (Austin & Duerr, 2005) and has a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .77 demonstrating high internal consistency (Oliveira, 2020). Prior research using this scale found concurrent validity (Gregory, 2010). Adult support is characterized by students’ perceptions of their teachers caring about them and helping them in the school (Cornell & Huang, 2016; Gregory et al., 2010). Students feeling supported by adults has been linked to
academic growth, higher grade point averages and engagement in school (Gregory et al., 2010). The Sense of Community 5-item scale was derived from the Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002) and the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the student scale is .70, demonstrating high internal consistency (Oliveira, 2020; See Appendix D). No prior research examined the validity of the Classroom Community Scale.

**Student perception of community-building circles.** The Schoolwide RJ Climate Survey offered qualitative open-ended questions about students’ perception of community-building circles. Following the criterion question (i.e., how many community-building circles in your classroom have you participated in?), students were asked, “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” (See Appendix C).

**Student self-report of gender and race.** The Schoolwide RJ Climate Survey also asked students about their race and gender. Students were asked, “What is the best description of your race?” and listed various racial groups: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, White, Hispanic/Latino, 2 or more races, Other (in which students could write in their description of their race; See Appendix B). Students were also asked, “If you feel comfortable sharing, what is your gender identity?” Students were able to fill in their response indicating the various genders listed: Female, Male, Transgender/Gender Non-Conforming/Questioning, Other (in which students could write in their description of their gender; See Appendix B).

**Data Analysis Plan**

Based on the substantial percentage of students who identified as Black and the low percentage of students who identified as other races, the race variable was dichotomized into Black and non-Black. Based on decades of research, the focus on Black students is justified
given their over-representation in discipline data (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2008). Due to the low percentage of students who identified as gender nonconforming and transgender in the survey, there were not enough of these students \( n = 4 \) to examine them in their own gender category. Instead of excluding them, their data was analyzed together with students who identified as female. Thus, the gender variable was dichotomized into male (1) and non-male (0). Based on their over-representation in discipline data, the male student perceptions and correlates were of particular interest (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008).

**Qualitative Coding**

A qualitative coding process was applied to R1 – R3. First, I independently read all the open-ended questions to ascertain the degree to which SEL skills were mentioned. Then I met and discussed whether the responses overlapped with the SEL competencies. I determined there was overlap of students’ responses and the SEL competencies. This corroborated analyses with 2017 data also collected in the participating schools. That year’s student open-ended responses sufficiently overlapped with the five SEL competencies (Social-Awareness: “The students in the circle share their stories of past events, a present situation that might have affected their mood and express whom they truly are”; Self-Awareness: “I liked the process because I (am) able to share my feelings in a safe place”; Relationship Skills: “I like that every person has respect for one another and patiently listens to others’ views”; Responsible Decision-Making: “It helps me see what I need to work on”; See Appendix E for additional sample classification of open-ended statements).

For the current study, I created a manual which provided examples of various open-ended responses and how they did or did not overlap with the five SEL competencies. Open coding was used to create a coding scheme to rate levels of student responses from low (0) to high (3; Patton
2002). That is, the higher the rating, the more indicative and specific a student’s response about circle benefits are SEL related. Students’ open-ended responses regarding their benefits about circles were thematically coded from zero (0) to three (3). Examples of codes for responses are no response entered at all or a negative comment (e.g., I hate circles; 0); vague or positive comment to the survey question; and, the comment was unrelated to circles or does not speak to the circle’s purpose (1); comment about a positive experience while participating in a circle; however, did not identify how that positive experience affected them personally or the school/class wide (2); one or more comment(s) about understanding and/or managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, feeling and showing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (i.e., social and emotional circle benefits) (3).

With an establish coding manual (See Appendix F), I coded the open-ended responses in a first pass and refined the codes in consultation with a faculty advisor. Then, I trained an experienced qualitative coder using the manual. We both independently coded 25 percent of the responses and met to calibrate to increase inter-coder reliability. We then completed the independent coding. Finally, a Cohen’s kappa was calculated for each code to test inter-coder reliability. Cohen’s kappa for interrater reliability of each open-ended response yielded very high reliability without exception and ranged between 0.80-1.00 (Landis & Koch, 1977).

**Data analytic plan.** The analytic plan for each research question is detailed below.

**R1.** If students indicate circle benefits, to what degree do the themes discussed map onto social and emotional competencies? Using qualitative coding, I created a data display to show the degree to which the circle benefits fall within each of the five SEL competencies.
**R2.** Are Black students, relative to non-Black students, and male students, relative to non-male students, more or less likely to report social and emotional circle benefits? That is, given the need to address divergent experiences of school-based reform efforts related to students’ identities, are certain students more or less likely to report social and emotional benefits from circles? A descriptive data display by race and gender was created to examine the degree to which groups have perceived social and emotional circle benefits. A Chi-Square was used to test the degree to which the distribution of responses across race and gender significantly differ from the composition of students who completed the open-ended response portion of the survey. Analysis through a t-test ascertained whether one group reported more social and emotional circle benefits than another.

**R3.** Accounting for student race and gender, do students who report social and emotional circle benefits tend to perceive a more positive school climate, relative to students who do not report social and emotional circle benefits? More specifically, relative to their peers, who report fewer social and emotional circle benefits, do students who report greater social and emotional circle benefits, tend to report greater adult support, perceived safety, and sense of community – three dimensions of school climate. I examined descriptive statistics of the covariates (student race and gender), the independent variable (student-reported social and emotional circle benefits) and the three dependent variables (adult support, sense of safety and sense of community). Correlation analyses were conducted among covariates, the independent variable and the dependent variables. Then, three models were run with each of the three dependent variables: 1) adult support, 2) sense of community and 3) safety. In the first step of each model, the student race and gender variables were entered as covariates. In the second step, social and emotional circle benefits were entered as the independent variable. This step helped determine whether
there is a relationship between social and emotional circle benefits and each dependent variable when accounting for student race and gender. Percent variance explained calculated the magnitude of the relationship between the social and emotional circle benefits, based on student open-ended responses, and perceived adult support, sense of safety and sense of community. Finally, given that students are nested in three different schools, the above analyses were re-run school by school.

**Results**

**Missing Values Analysis**

A missing data analysis was conducted to assess the amount, pattern and distribution of missing data. A Missing Values Analysis (MVA) was used in SPSS (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Data was present for more than 95% of the dataset. Missing data on scales ranged from 20-23%. The highest percentage of missing data was found on the Sense of Community Scale. More specifically, 23% \((n = 103)\) of the sample was missing complete items on the Sense of Community scale. In some cases, all items in the Support scale, Sense of Community scale and the single safety item were missing \((n = 86; 19.3\%)\). In addition, 1.3% \((n = 6)\) were missing complete items for two of the scales and 5.8% \((n = 26)\) were missing data for one of the scale.

A Little’s test of Missing Completely at Random (Little, 1988) was conducted with the whole sample and the findings were significant for the Sense of Community scale \(\chi^2 (36, \ N = 345) = 62.14, \ p = .004\) and not significant for the Support scale \(\chi^2 (16, \ N = 355) = 15.42, \ p = .49\). This suggests that data for the Sense of Community scale was not missing completely at random and data on the Support scale was likely missing completely at random (Little, 1988).

Five independent sample t-tests were run to examine whether there were differences in students’ responses who had missing means on the Sense of Community scale and those who had
completed responses on the other variables being used in the study (i.e., student race, gender, social and emotional circle benefits scale, support scale, single safety item). Findings demonstrated that there were no significant differences between the missing and non-missing groups on the single safety item, the Support scale, and the Social and Emotional Circle Benefits (SECB) scale.

Two Chi-Square tests were conducted to determine (1) whether there were fewer or more Black students than non-Black students who were missing response items on the Sense of Community scale and, (2) whether there were fewer or more males than non-males who were missing response items on the Sense of Community scale. Results indicated that there was a significant difference between Black students’ and non-Black students’ missing response items on the Sense of Community scale, \( \chi^2(1, N = 432) = 6.0, p < .01 \). Specifically, Black students had more missing response items on the Sense of Community scale than non-Black students. Results based on gender for the missing response items on Sense of Community scale indicated that there was a significant difference between male students’ and non-male students’ missing response items on the Sense of Community scale, \( \chi^2(1, N = 438) = 6.9, p < .01 \). Specifically, male students had more missing response items on the Sense of Community scale than non-male students.

**Multiple imputation.** Based on results of the Little’s test (Little, 1988) and the lack of differences in scale means for those with or without missing data, multiple imputation was conducted. Multiple imputation is considered to be the preferred method for missing data analysis due to the “perimeter estimates and accuracy of standard errors” (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010, p. 5). SPSS was used to conduct automatic imputations which generated 5 datasets, as recommended by Schlomer, Bauman, and Card (2010). Hierarchical multiple regression
analyses were selected to control for specific variables, and to assign variables in the regression consistent with the hypotheses (Meyers, Gamst & Guarino, 2017). SPSS does not produce pooled results for all regression analyses; therefore, the following procedures were conducted to obtain pooled results. To obtain a pooled value for adjusted $R^2$, the average of the $R^2$ value for each imputation was calculated for each model, as recommended by van Ginkel (2019).

Following the multiple imputations, descriptive statistics were examined, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted and Pearson correlations were calculated.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Out of 479 students who participated in one or more circles, there were 445 students (93%) that responded to the open-ended question “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” Of the 445 students who responded to the open-ended question, 385 students (87%) wrote in a positive response about circles. Results indicated that a majority of students’ positive responses mapped onto the social and emotional competencies: Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-making. These students made up 69% ($n = 264$) of the positive responses. Of the 264 student responses coded as indicating social and emotional circle benefits, the greatest share ($n = 172; 41.6\%$) fell into the theme *Share and Learn Together* (Social Awareness competency). These responses included statements such as, “The thing I like about the circle is that everyone is able to share their thoughts & feelings without being judged” and “I liked the fact that we were able to understand each other better on a personal level.” See more student responses in Table 1.

Also, of note, 12.6% ($n = 56$) of social and emotional benefit responses fell into the *Express Thoughts and Feelings* theme (Self Awareness competency). These responses included statements such as, “I like sharing my stories with others so they can understand me better or I
can understand them” and “Yes, I like how I am able to talk about problems I’m dealing with.” See more student responses in Table 1. The *Express Thoughts and Feelings* theme was followed by 6% (*n* = 30) of student responses which fell into the *Felt Heard, Listened to, Respected* theme (Relationship Skills competency). These responses included statements like, “I liked how we all took turns speaking and everyone listened to each other without interruptions” and “Everyone listens to your opinion with respectful feedback.” See more student responses for in Table 1. The final theme was comprised of responses (*n* = 6; 1.3%) which fell into *Responsible Decision-Making* theme (Responsible Decision-Making competency). These responses included statements such as, “We talked and share life experiences also we got advice on college and further careers” and “Maybe like talking about how people have to learn to grow up and treat people right.” See more student responses in Table 1.
Table 1

Student-reported Social and Emotional Circle Benefits (with SEL Competencies, n = 264)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sample Quotes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Circles/conferences enable us to share and learn about one another (Social Awareness) 42% | • I like about the circle because we can express our feelings to others.  
• I liked that the circle is not one sided and everybody has a choice to share.  
• Everyone gets to say their own opinion and express what they think without judgement.  
• I like how everyone can connect with each other.  
• I liked the fact that we were able to understand each other better on a personal level.  
• Getting the chance to hear other people’s thoughts on things or just getting to understand people better. |
| Circles/conferences enable us to personally express feelings and thoughts (Self-Awareness) 13% | • How I got to express my feelings without being judged.  
• Yes, I like how I am able to talk about problems I’m dealing with.  
• The thing I like about the process is that I’m able to share and express my thoughts.  
• I like sharing my stories with others so they can understand me better or I can understand them.  
• I like being able to share my thoughts and hear new ones.  
• My opinion is taken into consideration. |
| Circles/conferences enable us to be heard, listen and demonstrate respect (Relationship Skills) 7% | • What I like is that they show how to respect and they give guidelines.  
• Accepting everyone’s flaws.  
• That people listened and cared.  
• We all pay attention to the another one and listen.  
• I like how what is said in in the circle stays in the circle.  
• What I like about the process was whoever has the talking piece gets to talk.  
• The feel of calmness in the room, no raising hands, free talking.  
• It was a comfortable environment and everyone had equal say.  
• I liked how we share things and respond to each other respectfully.  
• Getting to hear from everyone and being respected while talking.  
• I liked the fact that everyone was comfortable enough to share out loud with each other.  
• I like the fact that I feel safe enough to share.  
• I liked how we all took turns speaking and everyone listened to each other without interruptions. |
| Circles enable us to problem-solve (Responsible Decision-Making) 2% | • Maybe like talking about how people have to learn to grow up and treat people right.  
• It helped me plan out my future goals.  
• We talked and share life experiences also we got advice on college and further carriers.  
• I liked that everyone talked about their goals and stuff and what they wanted to do with their life. |
Descriptive statistics were also run by student race and gender for the student-reported social and emotional circle benefits (SECB) scale. Students had an overall positive perception of circle participation ($M = 2.4$) when asked “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” The majority of students’ responses fell into the “one or more social and emotional circle benefit comment” category, followed by the “positive experience or comment about participating in circles” category. See Tables 2a-2b.
Table 2a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Black ($M = 2.3$)</th>
<th>Non-Black ($M = 2.5$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“No” or Negative comment (0)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague or Positive Comment</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated to Circles (1) Positive Experience Comment about Circle Participation (2)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or More Social and Emotional Circle Benefit(s) Comment (3)</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male ($M = 2.3$)</th>
<th>Non-Male ($M = 2.5$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“No” or Negative comment (0)</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vague or Positive Comment</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrelated to Circles (1) Positive Experience Comment about Circle Participation (2)</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One or More Social and Emotional Circle Benefit(s) Comment (3)</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Descriptive statistics were run for the single safety item, Support scale and Sense of Community scale. As seen in Table 3a below, students indicated high ratings on the scales used to measure school climate. Most students’ reports of feeling safe ($M = 2.7$) approached the “Agree” range on the single safety item. Most students’ reports of adult support ($M = 3.0$) fell into the “Agree” range on the Support scale. Lastly, most students’ reports of a sense of community ($M = 2.7$) approached the “Agree” range on the scale.

Students reports on each climate scale were also examined by race and gender (Table 3b). When examining students’ reports of feeling safe by race, Black students’ responses were close to the “Agree” range ($M = 2.7$) and non-Black students’ responses approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.4$; Table 3b). Black students’ reports of adult support approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.9$), whereas, non-Black students’ responses fell into the “Agree” range ($M = 3.1$). Both Black and non-Black students’ reports of sense of community approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.5$ and $M = 2.8$, respectively).

When examining students’ reports of feeling safe by gender, male students’ responses approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.7$) while non-male students’ responses were closer to the “Agree” range ($M = 2.8$). Male students’ reports of adult support approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.9$), whereas non-male students’ responses fell into the “Agree” range ($M = 3.1$). Both male and non-male students’ reports of sense of community approached the “Agree” range ($M = 2.6$ and $M = 2.7$ respectively).
Table 3a

*Descriptive Analysis of Measures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Safety Item</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Scale</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community Scale</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3b

*Descriptive Analysis of Measures by Race and Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black Students</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Black Students</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Safety Item</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Scale</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community Scale</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male Students</th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Male Students</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Safety Item</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Scale</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community Scale</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlations.** Pearson’s correlations were conducted to assess the associations between the independent variable (student-reported SECB), dependent variables (adult support, sense of
safety and sense of community) and control variables (student race and gender). Table 4 demonstrates the intercorrelations among variables. There were eight significant correlations. There were significant relationships between students’ race and adult support \((r = -0.14, p < 0.05)\) as well between students’ race and SECBs reported \((r = -0.10, p < 0.05)\). Black students, on average, perceived less adult support and fewer social and emotional circle benefits relative to non-Black students.

There was also a significant relationship between students’ report of feeling safe and adult support \((r = 0.41, p < 0.01)\). These findings indicate the more a student felt safe, the more likely they would be to report that they also had adult support. The significant relationship between sense of safety and sense of community \((r = 0.47, p < 0.05)\) indicated the more a student felt a sense of safety, the more likely it would be that the student would also report feeling a sense of community. A significant relationship was found between adult support and sense of community \((r = 0.45, p < 0.001)\). This indicates that as students reported higher degrees of adult support, it was likely that they also reported higher degrees of a sense of community.

The significant relationship between sense of safety and the SECBs \((r = 0.17, p < 0.05)\) indicated the student-report of more SECBs were associated with greater sense of safety. There was also a significant relationship between adult support and SECBs \((r = 0.21, p < 0.001)\) such that student-report of more SECBs were associated with more adult support. In addition, SECB had significant relationship with sense of community \((r = 0.21, p < 0.001)\). This indicates a more SECBs were associated with a greater sense of community.
Table 4

Correlations between dependent and independent variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Race</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Black 1/ Non-Black 0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Male 1/ Non-Black 0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sense of Safety</td>
<td>.41**</td>
<td>.47*</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Adult Support</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sense of Community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Social and Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle Benefits (SECB)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(p < .05^*; p < .01^{**}; p < .001^{***}\)

**Student race and social and emotional circle benefits.** Answering RQ2, two independent sample t-tests were run to examine whether there were differences in Black and non-Black, students’ reports of degrees of social and emotional circle benefits (SECB). Findings based on race (Table 5a) demonstrated that there was a significant difference in Black \((M = 2.3, SD = 1.0)\) students’ reports of SECB and non-Black \((M = 2.5, SD = .83)\) students’ reports of SECB, \(t(438) = 2.0, p < .05\). That is, on average, Black students’ reports of social and emotional circle benefits were slightly lower based on categories found on the SECB scale.

SECB could also be viewed as categorical data \((0, 1, 2, 3)\). Thus, Chi-Square analyses were conducted to determine whether there were fewer or more Black students than non-Black students who reported social and emotional circle benefits. Results indicated that there was a significant difference between Black students’ and non-Black students’ reports of social and emotional circle benefits, \(\chi^2(3, N = 440) = 13.4, p = .006\). Corroborating the t-test findings,
more non-Black students ($n = 165$) reported social and emotional circle benefits than Black students ($n = 99$).

Table 5a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Scale</th>
<th>Black Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Black Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SECB</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05

**Student gender and social and emotional circle benefits.** Answering RQ2, two independent sample t-tests were run to examine whether there were differences in male and non-male students’ reports of degrees of social and emotional circle benefits (SECB). Findings based on gender (Table 5b) demonstrated that there was no significant difference in male ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .93$) students’ and non-male ($M = 2.5$, $SD = .87$) students’ reports of degrees of SECB, $t(438) = 1.9$, $p > .05$. This indicates that there were no significant differences between male students’ reports of degrees of SECB and non-male students’ their reports of degrees of SECB.

Table 5b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Scale</th>
<th>Male Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Non-Male Students</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SECB</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Multiple Regression Analyses**

Results from the multiple regression analyses indicated that there was a positive association between SECB and school climate (i.e., sense of safety, adult support and sense of
community). That is, SECB has a significant association with all three school climate scales. Model specifics were as follows:

**Sense of safety.** Model 1 shows the sociodemographic variables race and gender (See Table 6). In Step 1, race and gender accounted of 1.8% of variability of students’ reports of feeling safe. Findings indicated neither race or gender had a significant association with how safe students felt in school (Model 1). SECB was entered into Step 2 of this model. Step 2 accounted for 2.2% of the unique and significant variability of student reports of feeling safe. SECB was significantly associated with sense of safety ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). In other words, when students reported higher degrees of SECB, they also perceived greater safety in the school.

**Support outcomes.** Model 2 shows the sociodemographic variables, race and gender, in Step 1 accounted for a significant amount of variance (4.1%) of students’ reports of adult support ($\beta = -.30, p < .05$; See Table 6). In other words, students identifying as Black perceived less support. Gender was not significantly associated with adult support (Model 2). SECB was entered into Step 2 of this model. Step 2 accounted for 3.4% of the unique and significant variance of students’ reports of adult support. Both race ($\beta = -.12, p < .05$) and SECB ($\beta = .184, p < .001$) was significantly associated with students’ reports of adult support. That is, race was associated with lower the degrees of adult support as reported by students when accounting for SECB and student gender. Also, SECB was associated with student-reported adult support, when accounting for student race and gender. That is, SECB was associated with students’ reports of adult support; thus, students who reported higher degrees of SECB were also likely to report more adult support.

**Sense of community outcomes.** Model 3 shows the sociodemographic variables, race and gender, in Step 1 accounted for 3.6% of variance of students’ reports of sense of community
(See Table 6). Race (dummy coded as 0 = non-Black, 1 = Black) approached significance as associated with a sense of community ($\beta = -.16, p = .05$). Gender was not significantly associated with a sense of community (Model 3). SECB was entered into Step 2 of this model. Step 2 accounted for 3.9% of the unique variance of students’ reports of adult support. SECB was significantly associated with students’ reports of sense of community ($\beta = .20, p < .001$). In other words, SECB was associated with a sense of community as reported by students. That is, students who reported more SECBs tended to also reporting higher sense of community. The finding held when accounting for student race and gender.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple Regression: Associations with School Climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1 Safety Outcomes Model 2 Adult Support Model 3 Sense of Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$B$ $R^2$ $\Delta R^2$ $\beta$ $R^2$ $\Delta R^2$ $\beta$ $R^2$ $\Delta R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race -.05 .018 .018 -.30* .04* .04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender -.03 -.03 -.12 -.12* -.03 -.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race -.03 -.03 -.12* -.12* -.14 -.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender -.02 -.02 -.11 -.11 -.02 -.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECB .15** .15** .18*** .18*** .20*** .20***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; $\dagger$ $p = .05$ Beta = Standardized beta coefficient; $\Delta R^2 = $ change in $R^2$; SECB = Social and Emotional Circle Benefits; Race = Black (1), Non-Black (0); Gender = Male (1), non-Male (0)

Post-hoc Analyses

The current study did not account for the nesting of children within the three schools. This means, students shared membership in schools. As a result, the standard errors were underestimated (Graves & Frohwerk, 2009). School-by-school analyses were run for RQ2 and RQ3.

For RQ2, independent sample t-test analyses were run separately with the three schools. Schools 1 and 3 yielded different results than the combined sample results described above. In
contrast to the combined sample results, School 1 did not have a significant association with being Black and lower reports of SECB. In other words, in School 1, Black and non-Black students, were on average, similar in their reports of social emotional circle benefits. Also, in contrast to the null findings related to gender and SECB in the combined school sample, School 3 yielded a significant result mean difference between the gender groups on student reports of SECB $t(1039) = 5.8, p < .001$. Findings indicated male students reported fewer SECBs than non-male students.

For RQ3, all multiple regression models were re-run separately with the three schools. Each school yielded similar results to the combined sample models. That is, in each school SECB was associated with school climate (i.e., sense of safety, adult support, sense of community).

**Discussion**

The current research was a mixed methods study from a sample of approximately 445 students from three predominately Black middle and high schools in a northeastern U.S. city during 2018. This study examined student responses to their participation in RJ circles, with a focus on the degree to which they noted benefits of participation as they relate to SEL competencies (i.e., Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making, Self-Management). Students’ social and emotional oriented responses about circle benefits were referred to as “social and emotional circle benefits” (SECB). The study also assessed whether there were race and gender differences in reports of SECB and whether SECB was associated with school climate. It was hypothesized that a majority of student responses would fit into one or more of the SEL competency categories. The examination for race and
gender differences in reports of SECB and whether SECB was associated with school climate was exploratory.

As hypothesized, the majority of responses provided by students fit into one or more SEL competency categories. The examination of differences across race and gender indicated that Black students reported statistically significantly fewer SECBs than non-Black students, although the difference between the groups was small. Finally, regression analysis results indicated that SECB was associated with dimensions of positive school climate. The strength of the findings is the use of multiple methods, drawing on quantitative surveys and qualitative responses.

**SECB and RJ circles.** Implementing reliable coding of students’ open-ended responses about circle benefits, I examined the degree to which the responses aligned with social and emotional learning competencies. Students provided positive reports about circles overall, and 69% were specifically aligned with categories of social and emotional competencies. The greatest share (41.6%) fell into the theme “Share and Learn Together” which is related to the Social Awareness dimension. When students share and learn together they may become more aware of the experiences of their peers–thereby raising social awareness. The next most commonly coded SECB category was related to the theme “Express Thoughts and Feelings” (12.6%). This theme aligned with the Self Awareness competency. Self-awareness was demonstrated through students’ understanding of their emotions and thoughts as they shared their personal opinions and feelings about a topic. Students’ reports of circle benefits (6%) were also coded in the theme “Felt Heard, Listened to, Respected,” which relates to Relationship Skills dimension. When students shared with one another, they expressed that they felt heard and respected. They also stated that they received “respectful feedback” and felt supported which
may be an indicator of relationship skills development. Finally, students’ reports of circle benefits (1.3%) fell into the “Responsible Decision-Making” theme which related to discussing their current goals and planning for the future. As far as the author is aware, this is the first study to center student voice by mapping student self-reported circle benefits on to SEL competencies. This is valuable given the need for social validity in school reform efforts (Cleary, Gregory, Kitsantas, Slemp & Panish, 2019) and the potential to increase programs’ overall effectiveness when doing so (Ebrary & Weinstein, 2004; Elias, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2003).

The findings have implications for intentionally incorporating SEL into RJ circles. Prior research suggests the most effective SEL programs are implemented in Sequenced, Active, Focused and Explicit (SAFE) manner (Durlack et al., 2011). That is, first, the facilitator ensures that skills are introduced sequentially. For example, as students share during circle, the SEL skill Social Awareness can be incorporated as a targeted skill to aid in students’ ability to actively and empathetically listen to their peers and/or show care and compassion. Social Awareness can be integrated into the circle by asking students to provide positive feedback after a student has shared. For example, if a student shares something that was difficult or an obstacle that they overcame, another student could request the talking piece to commend that student’s bravery in sharing. The active aspect of SAFE framework (Durlack et al., 2011) could be found in students’ participation in circle. Particularly, if circles are held once per week or twice per month, they will be giving all an opportunity to share their perspectives on topics. Thus, the opportunity for sharing would encourage active engagement. Using the example of students engaging in Social Awareness during circles, focused implementation could be found in the intentional teaching of a range of skills such as: identifying social norms, having a growth mindset, identifying one’s emotions, examining prejudices and biases and demonstrating open-mindedness (CASEL, 2019).
Facilitators can engage students in lessons targeting these skills prior to forming the circle and sharing with one another, or facilitators can devote one week of circle time per month toward the development of these skills (note: one week per month is based on a one circle per week model). During these lessons, facilitators may also inform students about the skills being targeted in order to have a more impactful and productive circle experience that will be safe, respectful and beneficial to everyone involved. For example, providing students with clear expectations through an agenda for the class period could address the *explicit* portion of SEL implementation.

The current study’s findings build on prior research (Ortega et al., 2016; Schumacher, 2014) and have implications for the intentional integration of SEL in RJ circles. Specifically, student responses suggest that SEL topics and activities can exist within RJ circles. Students’ SECB responses to the open-ended questions regarding what they like about circles indicates a detection of SEL. Consider what students might take away if SEL is explicitly integrated into circles. In students’ SECBs, themes about self-expression, deeper learning and understanding of one another, and feeling heard and respected emerged. This suggests SEL integration during the circle process could deepen the levels of engagement and include conversational topics that could generate greater impact on students’ lives (Manassah, Roderick & Gregory, 2018).

The qualitative coding showed that student responses about circle benefits did not raise themes about learning self-management skills. This suggests that program developers might consider how they can integrate such skills. In particular, targeting the skills included in Self-Management could take the form of students not only expressing themselves, but also circle facilitators incorporating stress management strategies at the end of the circle. If a student shares an upsetting event or situation that occurred, it can allow the student to not only share and process their feelings with the group, but it can also enable the student to practice and engage in
adaptive coping strategies when they are away from the group. An additional consideration would be allowing students to offer suggestions, share how they dealt with similar situations in the past, and discuss what helped them cope.

**Possible promotive effects of RJ circles.** Regression analyses in the current study also found the following: Above and beyond student race and gender, students who reported circle benefits related to SEL, relative to indicating no benefits or more general benefits, tended to report greater safety, sense of community, and adult support. This finding suggests a link between specific gains in the circle process and a more positive school climate. The findings also showed that there were no differences among gender groups around the types of benefits students identified through their participation in circles. This means SECBs were the same for males and non-males. Given that males, relative to females, tend to be at higher risk of not graduating (Greene & Winters, 2006; Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010; Roderrick, 2003) and not attending college (Kleinfeld, 2009), the lack of differences in SECBs between males and females is promising. Perhaps circles could have promotive effects for male students who are vulnerable and at-risk for dropping out.

**The Black experience of circles.** The analysis of student responses on open-ended questions regarding the circle experience suggested a difference for Black students than non-Black students. Overall, Black students reported experiencing slightly fewer benefits from circle participation than their non-Black peers. They also reported less adult support, and a lower sense of community in the school climate relative to their non-Black peers. This indicates findings converged around Black students’ negative experiences in the school relative to their peers.

Although alternative methods such as RJ are being used within the schools to address racial disparities in discipline, Black students reported perceiving fewer benefits from circles. If
the goal is to reduce the discipline gap, how then can the students who are overrepresented in discipline data be intentionally targeted and their perceived benefits increased? This is an important question given research that demonstrates the link between suspensions, increased risk for dropping out and arrest later in life (Mittleman, 2018; Office for Civil Rights, 2018; Suh, Suh & Houston, 2007).

The findings showing school climate being lower for Black students, relative to non-Black students, corroborates prior research (Bottiani et al., 2014) which has indicated racial disparities in students’ experiences of school climate. This is particularly concerning given there are disparities in other domains such as: academic achievement, school success, healthy development, absenteeism and suspension (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral, 2009; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013). These disparities among the aforementioned domains may contribute to Black students having lower positive perceptions of school climate.

Identifying the reason Black students reported fewer SECBs (which is associated with school climate) will aid in increasing the intentionality of topics and conversations during circles. It is incumbent upon the practitioners bringing RJ into schools to consider what Black students need to experience greater benefits through their participation in circles. Could the issue be cultural relevance? The school-by-school analyses showed that one school’s findings stood out from the others: in school 1, Black and non-Black, were on average, similar in their reports of social emotional circle benefits. An interview was conducted in school 1 with the RJ Coordinator. She described a specific focus on elevating student voice through a week of student selected activities (i.e., community-builder week).

School 1’s community-builder week consisted of “workshops for staff and students and focused on important issues taking place in the world and outside of the school community”
(Brooklyn Community Foundation, 2018). It helped to “teach and enlighten students and staff about practicing self-care” (Gregory, Hurley, Soffer, Molyneaux & Barone, 2018). The teen-talk involved “20 parents who participated in a circle led by students of the RJ task force about ways to improve communication with their teenagers” (Brooklyn Community Foundation, 2018). It is possible that the student-led circles and activities allowed Black students opportunities to have discussions that were relevant to them. Further, by students leading the circle with parents, they may have been viewed as the “expert” which could have empowered them to share their thoughts and opinions more freely. This is especially important for Black students, given the notion of respecting one’s elders as well as the roles parents typically take as authority figures and children as compliant.

Gay (2002) discussed the importance of gaining knowledge in ethnic and cultural diversity then converting the knowledge into culturally relevant curricula. She shared that there are three ways to go about this process. The first is formal which involves determining the strengths and weaknesses in curriculum designs and textbooks, then making the necessary changes to improve the quality (Gay, 2002). The second step would be revising the symbolic curriculum which includes “images, symbols, icons, mottoes, awards, celebrations, and other artifacts that are used to teach students knowledge, skills, morals, and values” typically found on bulletin boards, rules and tokens of achievement (Gay, 2002, p. 3). Gay (2002) suggests cultural relevance would take the form of ensuring that images displayed in the classroom are representative of various groups; age, gender, social class, ethnicity. The last step views the societal curriculum which targets the impressions and knowledge students have about ethnic minorities based on the mass media (Gay, 2002). A culturally relevant approach would include a “critical analysis of how ethnic groups and experiences are presented in mass media and popular
culture and teaching students how to be discerning consumers of and resister to ethnic information disseminated through the societal curriculum” (Gay, 2002, p. 4).

Taking these three steps into consideration during a circle might improve the students’ interest in participation. For example, by discussing the indigenous roots of the circle, facilitators can open a discussion about traditional practices within students’ homes and how the establishment of norms and values during the circles align with students’ personal lives. Further, given the lack of representation in media as Gay (2002) mentioned, students may not be exposed to the traditional practices of other cultural communities outside of the United States and/or the Black American experience. Discussing the origin of circles may create a “joining” of non-American students who have similar practices with their families or in their home country. A full understanding of the origin and purpose of circles may deepen students’ understanding and cultivate respect for the process. As a result of the cultivated respect for the process, students may feel honored to participate or share rather than feeling forced. Often, Black populations and other minority and marginalized populations’ voices are silenced, or their voices are the last to be heard. Black students especially, are not typically offered opportunities to share, which may reinforce the thought that no one wants to hear what they have to say; thus, they do not offer their opinions. If circles elicit Black students’ voices, Black students may feel more support, more sense of community and report more SECBs.

Trust, or lack thereof, is another factor which needs to be considered in light of Black students’ reports of SECBs. Questions to ponder include: Do Black students trust the system in which they are asked to share the more personal aspects of themselves? Do Black students trust the systems that exist outside of their homes to be safe and protective? Alternatively, do they have a justifiable cause for remaining private, participating less and/or perceiving fewer benefits
due to the racial oppression that has been consistent in the Black experience? Perhaps no matter how well-intentioned the experience of RJ circles is meant to be, Black students are not seeing the same care and compassion school wide. Perhaps students feel school systems are engaging in hypocrisy when holding circles and declaring “safe spaces” when they are still on the receiving end of harsh and more punitive types of discipline. Yeager et al. (2017) highlights this in his research addressing loss of institutional trust among racial and ethnic minorities and provides one possible explanation for the lower SECB reports by Black students in the current study. They suggest that withholding trust of authorities within institutions is a natural adaptation given the disproportionality of mistreatment in the form of low expectations from teachers and suspensions for minor misbehavior (Yeager et al., 2107). Yeager et al. (2017) goes on to state that as ethnic minority adolescents mature and become stereotyped, they also become racially and ethnically aware of how racial and ethnic groups are treated differently in larger society (Yeager et al., 2107). As a result of their racial and ethnic awareness coupled with their own experiences of mistreatment, by the time Black students reach middle school, they begin to expect procedural injustice or disrespect (Yeager et al., 2107).

Though it is speculative, there may be something about the culture of circles that may be associated with some Black students feeling less safe when sharing, if the institution is perceived as harmful. Given the nature of circles’ establishment of norms to induce vulnerability among participants, the process itself may be asynchronous to Black culture and behaviors outside the home. It is also worth noting not only is there a justifiable mistrust of institutions (Moseley et al., 2007), but there is also the teaching from parents and elders within the Black community to be vigilant (i.e., self-protective) in environments where protection is not given. This is a cultural norm that occurs within some families that may take the form of instructions regarding how to
behave in public spaces, how to act in the school setting and cautions about with whom they can confide; especially within school settings. Prior research may categorize these seemingly strict directives as authoritarian; however, within the Black culture, studies have shown that “directive” and “intentional” parenting (i.e., protective parenting) is aligned with high levels of warmth and sensitivity (Hill & Bush, 2001; Read, 2019). It is once again noteworthy that parenting styles among Black populations are nuanced as Black populations are not a monolith; therefore, discussions of culture, race, and parenting style should be done with caution.

Keeping these cultural norms in mind, it may be worthy to consider facilitating circles for Black students exclusively. With the rise in calls for equity, social justice and acknowledgement of systemic racism and oppression, circles for Black students (e.g., affinity groups) may create opportunities for Black students to feel safe to share with one another. It may also begin to increase their trust within an unjust system to voice their opinions and experiences without also having the burden to explain their perspectives to non-Black groups. This trust could eventually translate in how open Black students are in circles with other groups of students. It may also increase the likelihood of Black students inviting other Black students to attend circles and/or encourage other Black students to share during the process. This would create more opportunities for Black students to “practice” being open and evolve from what they have known and have been taught about vulnerability outside the home.

Limitations

The greatest limitation of the study was the single-informant design. When students provided responses to the open-ended and survey questions, they were the only ones reporting on their experience of circles; thus, there were no other informants to corroborate their responses. Based on this type of rater bias, there is potential for students with overall positive perceptions of
life to reflect positivity in their responses about circles and/or school climate. This is not accounted for in survey responses and findings; thus, it is a limitation. Additionally, due to the study being correlational, the researcher does not know if SECB is associated with sense of community or sense of community is associated with SECB.

The second limitation of this study was the SECB measurement. Students were prompted by the question “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” which could be considered a leading question assuming that students may have only had positive experiences of circles. Students were also asked, “If you participated in a circle, what did you dislike about the process?” This question was not used in the current study; however, it is also a leading question which is a limitation of the study. Thus, future research should integrate students’ likes and dislikes about circles.

Future research should also analyze data according to intersectional identities because the current study did not have a large enough sample size of subgroups to do so. In addition, the current study assessed groups dichotomously in the creation of Black versus non-Black and male versus non-male; thus, this study was not gender inclusive in its analysis. Future research should examine a diverse range of gender identities and racial and ethnic groups.

Future research and practice should examine the different ways Black students come to learn the skills targeted in each SEL competency. Future research should also seek to understand and accept the different ways those SEL skills manifest within Black populations. While school climate may improve overall, the improvement may be found as a result of non-Black students “driving” the numbers. That is, school climate based on reports from non-Black students alone, may be associated with schools appearing to have a more positive school climate. Thus, future research should examine Black students’ experiences in order to aid understanding around
whether Black students are gaining and utilizing any of the new skills from these programs. This is especially important due to the current study yielding results which indicated a slight difference in Black versus non-Black students’ reports of SECB. A small difference in Black and non-Black students’ reports of SECBs needs to be corroborated. Moreover, future research should also assess whether Black students are utilizing any newly gained skills in other areas of their lives (i.e., homes, community, religious organizations). Future research should further assess whether Black students: (1) feel the skills are culturally relevant for their everyday lives and experiences and (2) incorporate the findings into future implementation of such programs.

**Implications for Practice**

The following three implications arose from the study: (1) consideration for explicit inclusion of SEL curricula, (2) consideration of cultural relevance during circles, (3) cultural synchrony between circles, Black students and protective parenting. The student-reported SECBs indicate a level of awareness that they have about themselves and others. Students not only named how the circle process benefited themselves but how it benefitted others as well. In order to further develop their understanding of others and deepen self-awareness, circle facilitators may want to intentionally incorporate SEL by introducing activities that develop their skills and sharpen their discernment of SEL prior to beginning the circle. With the adoption of SEL curricula in schools, administration might be interested in incorporating circles as a means to increase social harmony. Additionally, given the indigenous roots and origin of circles, it may also create opportunities to increase discussion and activities that intentionally incorporates the voices of diverse members within the school’s population. As a result, this would increase the likelihood of cultural relevance.
Cultural relevance and social validity can work jointly in circles to amplify the voices of Black students specifically. Cultural relevance should be considered as it demonstrates to students that the school (i.e., teachers and administration) recognizes, cares and is informed about their experiences. Approaching circles from a culturally relevant lens would aid in students feeling understood by school staff that may not have similar experiences. Increasing social validity of circles could go a step further by asking students for their feedback about how to improve circles and how to meet the needs of students. In addition, social validity would allow cultural humility (Haynes-Mendez & Engelsmeier, 2020) from facilitators by their acknowledgment of not being fully aware, but being willing to learn about differences in their experiences. Equally important, the inclusion of SEL in circles may reinforce the school’s thoughtfulness for students who feel the least connected to their schools. It is during circles that teachers can also work to repair harm done to a student as a result of school-wide practices or at the very least create the opportunity for students to have a trusted adult and/or ally in the school which contributes to students’ perceptions of the school climate (Bartolino-Krachman, Arnold & Larocca, 2016; Hough et al., 2017; National School Climate Center, 2017). Keeping social validity in mind, this might be a point of focus if one of the desired outcomes is to increase social harmony among all students, especially those who experience the least of it (i.e., Black students).

While focus on increasing the cultural relevance of circles is well-intentioned, it remains important that facilitators recognize that it may still take time for students to feel comfortable enough to share. Thus, it is critical that Black students do not feel pressured or “forced” to share. If facilitators adhere to the practices of circles, there is as much emphasis of being able to “pass” on speaking when the talking piece comes around as there is on participating and sharing. Recognizing that some students may take longer than others to share or openly participate would
work toward increasing a students’ sense of feeling understood. This is especially important for students with cultural norms around self-protection and vigilance. Even though Black students may be reporting lower SEL-oriented circle benefits, it may be a result of them not feeling comfortable enough to share. They may however, be attentive to other students who are sharing and may still gain positive benefits which may turn into self-reported SEL-oriented circle benefits over time.

**Summary**

This study shows promise for circles and advancing research that is more attuned to race and the circle process. Examining social validity of RJ circles through student voice (i.e., students’ self-reported circle benefits) aided in understanding from students’ perspective what was most meaningful to them. Though the majority of students’ responses fell into the Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making SEL competencies, Black students offered fewer SEL-oriented responses. By analyzing circle benefits by race and gender, the author found that there were indeed differences in SEL-oriented circle benefits expressed that was related to race. This was noteworthy given the association that was found in the current study between SEL-oriented circle benefits and school climate. Further, the majority of responses were by Black students, in three predominately Black schools. Yet, it was the non-Black students who expressed more SEL-oriented circle benefits and a more positive perception of school climate (i.e., sense of safety, adult support, sense of community). While the results reflect the reality of Black students’ fewer positive perceptions about school climate, there still remains hope that future research can take Black students’ experiences into account and be more intentional about ensuring that Black students perceive the same benefits from RJ circles as other groups of students.
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Appendix A

Of the 1008 student respondents, 445 of them (43%) wrote in a response to the open-ended question “If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?” Of the 445 open-ended student responses, 385 (87%) were positive comments about circles. Of the 385 students’ open-ended responses, 264 of those students (59%) indicated social and emotional benefits of circles.

Figure 1.
Appendix B

Student Self-Reported Demographics

We would like to understand more about the diversity of students in your school.

1. What is the best description of your race?
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - White
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - 2 or more races: (Please write in)
   - Other

2. If you feel comfortable sharing, what is your gender identity? (Check all that apply)
   - Female
   - Male
   - Transgender/Gender Non-Conforming/Questioning
   - Other:
Appendix C

Open-Ended Responses Assessing Students’ Participation and Perception of Circles

1. During circles, you might pass a “talking piece” around and have a chance to express your opinion. In the past month, how many community-building circles in your classrooms have you participated in? ________ (number here)

2. If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?
Appendix D

Adult Support Scale

Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4

1. There are adults at this school I could talk with if I had a personal problem.
2. If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something to help.
3. I am comfortable asking my teachers for help with my schoolwork.
4. There is at least one teacher or other adult at this school who really wants me to do well.
5. If another student talked about killing someone, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.
6. If another student brought a gun to school, I would tell one of the teachers or staff at school.

(Austin & Duerr, 2005)

Sense of Community Scale

Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4

1. Students treat one another with respect.
2. I feel that students in this school care about each other.
3. I feel connected to others.
4. I feel that this school is like a family.
5. I feel confident that others will support me.

(Rovai, 2002)

Single Safety Item

Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4

1. I feel safe in this school.
Appendix E

Student Experience of Community-Building Circles and Conferences (October, 2017)
Anne Gregory, Ph.D., (annegreg@gsapp.rutgers.edu) & Easton Gaines, M.S.Ed., Rutgers University

In Spring 2017, survey data was collected in four middle and high schools were implementing RJ for at least a school year, and all were located in a northeastern U.S. city and comprised of mostly low income students ($M = 85\%$). On average, we had a high response rate ($M = 72\%$), with a total of 1154 students completing the 20-minute RJ school climate survey. The sample was predominantly comprised of Black (43\%) and Latinx students (18\%) with fewer White (15\%), Asian (9\%) and Multiracial students (7\%). One-third reported being born outside of the U.S.

The students completed the survey scales and had the opportunity to reply to the following, “If you participated in a conference or circle, what did you like about the process?” We used grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to derive four themes from the open-ended responses. Of the 1154 student respondents, 527 of them (46\%) wrote in a response to the open-ended question and 438 of those students (83\%) indicated specific “likes” about circles/conferences.

Table 1. Circle/Conference “likes”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four themes</th>
<th>Sample Quotes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Circles/conferences enable us to share and learn about one another (Social Awareness)</td>
<td>“The students in the circle share their stories of past events, a present situation that might have affected their mood and express whom they truly are.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I liked the fact that everyone had an equal chance to share their opinions and feelings.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“That we get to know about each other’s backgrounds.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>42.7%</strong></td>
<td>“People (especially if we don’t know the person) get to connect with each other and get to know more about each other.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The understanding of others’ experiences on an issue.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We got the opportunity to express our feelings and outlooks and heard from others what they think.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circles/conferences enable us to personally express feelings and thoughts (Self Awareness)</td>
<td>“You get to say what you feel, and what is going on in your life/school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I liked the process because I (am) able to share my feelings in a safe place.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We were able to open up about how we feel.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I was able the express about how I was feeling; I felt comfortable about the things I needed to talk about.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>37%</strong></td>
<td>“It helped you say what’s on your mind and your problems and situations.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circles/conferences enable us to be heard, listen and demonstrate respect (Relationship Skills)</td>
<td>“I like that every person has respect for one another and patiently listens to others’ views.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Everyone had a turn to speak and be heard without interruption.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Everyone felt equal and as if they were wanted and welcomed.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I liked how you could say something without being judged and actually have people listening about how you feel.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>15.3%</strong></td>
<td>“I enjoyed it because it gives us time to express ourselves and if there’s something that’s bothering us, we have people who listen to us; it ensures we have a good day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Everyone had respect for each other and felt comfortable sharing things about themselves.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circles enable us to problem-solve (Responsible Decision-Making)</td>
<td>“Yes, because it shows us how to do better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It helps me see what I need to work on.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I would process my problem or the reason I’m there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The fact that we would be able to overcome conflict.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.3%</strong></td>
<td>“It helped me relieve my problems.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F
Students’ Perceived Benefits of RJ Circles – Coding Manual

CRYSTAL MOLYNEAUX
October 29, 2020
Directions on how to use the manual
Codes in this manual will be based on a four-point scale (e.g., 0, 1, 2, 3). Please read the open-ended responses, then make a notation about which code the quote justifies. Open coding will be used to rate levels of students’ stated benefits about circles responses from low (0) to high (3). Please refer to the criteria and examples provided in this manual. In addition, please always use the coding manual in conjunction with the open-ended survey data.

Code 1: When students responded to a question about circle benefits, to what degree did their responses map onto social and emotional competencies?

Interview Questions that Address this Code:
- If you participated in a circle, what did you like about the process?

Coding Scheme:

(0) No response entered at all or a negative comment

Sample 0 Responses:
  - “Nothing”
  - “I hate circles”
  - “Not really big on talking in public spaces”
  - “None”
  - “No”
  - “I don’t like to sit in a circle with people”

(98) Student cannot pinpoint an exact like or student gave a nonsensical response

  - “I don’t know”
  - “I never participated”
  - “N/A”
(99) Student entered no response at all

Response area is blank

(1) Vague or positive comment to the survey question; yet, the comment unrelated to circles or does not speak to the circle’s purpose (i.e., community-building, social and emotional benefits)

Sample 1 Responses:

- “Not doing classwork”
- “Not going to class”
- “Life” (vague response)
- “Responsibility” (vague response)
- “Good”
- “Yes”
- “We chill” (vague response)
- “I like to play basketball”
- “Funny”

(2) Comment about a positive experience while participating in a circle; however, did not identify how that positive experience affected them personally or the school/class wide.

Sample 2 Responses:

- “Everyone participated”
- “The talking part”
- “Talking”
- “To just be able to talk”
o “Communication”

o “Being in a circle” (this still indicates that the like is related to the circle rather than it being a random positive response)

o “The process is cool”

o “The ending and the free time”

o “I don’t know talk about things” (demonstrates uncertainty or whimsical response)

o “Everything” (broad response)

o “It’s fun”

o “The talking piece”

o “Everyone puts their desk in a circle and we speak at once about the topic”

o “The questions we get”

(3) One or more comment(s) about understanding and/or managing emotions, setting and achieving positive goals, feeling and showing empathy for others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (i.e., social and emotional circle benefits)

Sample 3 Responses:

o “Communicate my problems”

o “Everyone’s voice is heard”

o “Sharing thoughts and feelings”

o “Talking about what you need” (this is rated as a 3 because more detail beyond just talking. It is specific to the student and/or others)

o “Chance to meet new people”

o “You acquire new knowledge”
If students provide a level three (3) open-ended response, please assign their open-ended response to one of the following thematic codes: Express Thoughts and Feelings (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ExpressThoughtsFeelings), Share, Learn (about) Each Other (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ShareLearnEachOther), Felt Heard, Listened to, Respected (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_FeltHeard_ListenedTo_Respected), Responsible Decision-Making (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ResponsibleDecision), Miscellaneous (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_Misc).

The definitions for these variables are provided below:

**Circle Like Variable Definitions:**

**Express Thoughts and Feelings (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ExpressThoughtsFeelings):**
Student stated a like about circles which includes how they valued their circle process given they got to express their OWN feelings and thoughts. It may be about having voice and/or talking about their own life (e.g., helps you get your point across, I got to express my feelings, I got to express my opinion, you get to state your ideas, I like to talk about my life, to let my thoughts out, I like it because I get to talk about [student] sister).

**Share, Learn (about) Each Other (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ShareLearnEachOther):**
Student stated a like about circle which includes how they enjoyed sharing thoughts and feelings WITH one another and learning more about OTHERS in the circle. It may be about appreciating that other students were able to express THEMSELVES. This includes statements about “we”, “each other”, “everyone expresses themselves”, “understand each other better”, “knowing other people thoughts about…”, “expressions of opinions” (based on the way this is stated, it sounds more generalizable), “everyone revealed their thoughts”, “expressive opinion” (sounds more generalized), “everyone spoke their ideas”, ‘we talked about ourselves”, “hearing others’ opinions”, “I got to know other people more”, “interacting with other people”, “we all get a chance to voice out opinion” (this statement more related to the person sharing out along with others rather than feeling heard), “hearing a different perspective”, “bouncing ideas off each other.”
Felt Heard, Listened to, Respected (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_FeltHeard_ListenedTo_Respected):
Student stated a like about circle which indicates that during the circle process, everyone was RESPECTFUL or that they FELT HEARD or LISTENED to when they (or others) spoke. It may be about feeling safe or feeling like a community. This includes statements about “everyone takes a turn”, “lets us have a voice”, “my opinion is taken into consideration”, “everyone listens to you opinion with respectful feedback”, “pay attention to one another and listen”, “people listened and cared”, “everyone treated with respect”, “the bonding experience”, “we keep our secrets in the circle”.

Responsible Decision-Making (SR_CircleLike18_SEL_ResponsibleDecision): Student made statement that indicates that during the circle process, they were able to share, plan and discuss future plans (i.e., college, jobs) and goals (i.e., achievements they are striving toward). This includes statements about planning, completing work and the future (e.g., we all contributed to each other’s work, everyone talked about their goals, you acquire new knowledge, it helps with college).

Note: Some students’ open-ended responses may contain statements that fit into more than one category. In those cases, students’ open-ended responses can be coded to fit into no more than two categories. Please see examples below:

Example1: “We talked and share life experiences also we got advice on college and further carriers”

This example can fit into 2 categories: Share/Learn and Responsible Decision-Making

Example 2: “I liked how we share things and respond each other respectfulely”

This example can fit into 2 categories: Share/Learn and Felt Heard/Listened to/Respected

Code 2: Are certain students more or less likely to report social and emotional benefits from circles?

Interview Questions that Address this Code:
- If you participated in a circle, did it help you in any way or make the classroom/school better?
Coding Scheme:

(0) No response entered at all, negative or illegible/nonsensical comment*

Sample 0 Responses:
  - “No”
  - “Nah not really!”
  - “No, I hate school”
  - “No, the classroom was the same”

(98) Student cannot pinpoint any way the circle helped or student gave a nonsensical response

  - “I don’t know”
  - “N/A”
  - “I can't say yes or no”
  - “I never participated”

(99) Student entered no response at all

  - Response area is blank

(1) Unrelated/unsure help comment about circles

Sample 1 Responses:
  - “Slightly”
  - “Sort of, we are still working on it”
  - “Kind of”

(2) Comment is limited to a simple “yes” (i.e., word or complete sentence) about circles helping

Sample 2 Responses:
“Yes”
“Yes, it does”
“It did”

(3) Specific help stated about circles

Sample 3 Responses:

“Yes, it allowed people to have a chance at working together and communicate better”
“Yes, it makes the classroom educational in a fun way”
“It help student to become respectful with each other”

If students provide a level three (3) open-ended response, please assign their open-ended response to one of the following thematic codes: General Help Statement Positive (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_General), Academic Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosAcademicGrowth), Positive Growth in Communication (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosGrowthCommunication), Positive Emotional Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosEmotionalGrowth), Positive Behavior Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosBehavioralGrowth), Sense of Community (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_SenseCommunity), Circle Help Miscellaneous (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_Misc). The definitions for these variables are provided below:

**Circle Help Variable definitions:**

**General Help Statement (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_General):** Student made a general/complete statement answering the question. This includes responses like, “Yes, it made my classroom better”, “Yes, it made my school better.”

**Positive Academic Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosAcademicGrowth):** Student stated how the circle helped improve their understanding in class and/or improvement in their grades (e.g., It help me in making the work understandable, It helped me with the work we were
supposed to do as a group, My grades became better, It helped me in a few classes and I did better).

Positive Growth in Communication (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosGrowthCommunication): Student stated how the circle helped them become more comfortable with sharing, hearing what others had to say or being able to articulate how they felt. This includes statements such as, “It helped me feel like I can talk to a teacher if I have any problems”, “It helped me get comfortable with talking”, “It helped me express my ideas more.”

Positive Emotional Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosEmotionalGrowth): Student identified how the circle helped them reflect on their life, grow internally and/or how that growth aided in how they engaged in the circle process. It may be about confidence, self-esteem, opening up or the ability to cope. This includes statements like, “The circle was helpful because I would receive feedback on whatever problem I had”, “It helped me to become more confident and open”, “Yes, because I have learned how to cope with problems that I may face.”

Positive Behavior Growth (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_PosBehavioralGrowth): Student identified how the circle helped students behave better or display better behaviour. It may be about students feeling like others are following the rules. This includes statements like, “Yes, I became more ‘social’”.

Sense of Community (SR_CircleLike18_HELP_SenseCommunity): Student made a statement that indicates how the circle helped build a sense of community. That is, student made comment that reflects understanding of the OTHERS, collaboration, respect, getting to know one another and a sense of belonging. This includes statements such as, “It made me look at people a different way”, “Yes it made the classroom better because nobody interrupted each other”, “Yes it makes the classroom educational in a fun way”, “It help student to become respectful with each other”, “Yes it did because I got to learn that there are some things that all of us think about and I am not the only one”.

Circle Help Miscellaneous (SR_CircleLike18HELPMisc): Student makes statement that indicated how the circle helped but it does not fit into any of the six aforementioned categories.

Note: Some students’ open-ended responses may contain statements that fit into more than one category. In those cases, students’ open-ended responses can be coded to fit into no more than two categories. Please see examples below:

Example1: “Yes, it allowed people to have a chance at working together and communicate better.”
This example can fit into 2 categories: **Positive Growth in Communication** and **Sense of Community**

* If student stated that the circles **did not help** (i.e., received a 0) **and** offered their reasoning (e.g., No, it did not help me because other students don't respect my feelings or opinions), please assign their open-ended response to one of the following thematic codes:
  
  o **General No** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_GeneralNo), **No Change in Classroom/School** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_NoChange_SchoolSame), **Negative Behavior/ Bad School** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_NegativeBehavior_BadSchool), **Bullies/Bullying** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_Bullies), **Circles were Pointless/Irrelevant** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_Pointless_Irrelevant), **Circle DID NOT Help** Miscellaneous (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18 Misc.).

**Circle Did Not Help Variable Definitions:**

**General No** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_GeneralNo): Student made a general "no" statement without an explanation.

**No Change in Classroom/School** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_NoChange_SchoolSame): Student stated that there has been no change in the classroom/school or that classroom/school is still the same. This includes statements such as, “No I still feel the same way I did before in it”, “Not much since most other people doesn't apply what they learn”, “No, it hasn't worsened the school and it hasn't improved it either.”

**Negative Behavior/ Bad School** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_NegativeBehavior_BadSchool): Student stated that school or other students in the school are bad. This includes statements such as, “No, it did not help me because other students don't respect my feelings or opinions”, “No because they always trouble in the circle when [teacher] talking”, “Nah they don’t know how to act”, “No, it hasn't worsened the school and it hasn't improved it either.”

**Bullies/Bullying** (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_Bullies): Student stated that there are still bullies (e.g., No because they are a lot of bullies in our school, No! because there are still bullies).
Circles were Pointless/Irrelevant (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_Pointless_Irrelevant): Student stated the circles did not help because it was pointless (e.g., No cause they won't listen anyways, No people just got to know each other better by learning [or hearing?] pretty unnecessary information).

Circle DID NOT Help Miscellaneous (SR_CircleDIDNOTHelp18_Misc.): Student makes statement that indicated how the circle helped but it does not fit into any of the five aforementioned categories.

Code 3: Student dislikes about circles

Interview Questions that Address this Code:
- If you participated in a circle, what did you dislike about the process?

Coding Scheme:

(0) No dislike stated

Sample 0 Responses:
- “Nothing”
- “I think its straight”
- “Nothing, we was good”

(98) Student cannot pinpoint an exact dislike or student gave a nonsensical response

- “I don’t know”
- “N/A”
- “No”
- “I never participated”

(99) Student entered no response at all

- Response area is blank

(1) Unrelated negative comment circles

Sample 1 Responses:
- “Yes”
(2) Negative comment about circles

Sample 2 Responses:
- “Everything”

(3) Specific dislike about circles

Sample 3 Responses:
- “Everyone does not participate”
- “Students being disrespectful”

If students provide a level three (3) open-ended response, please assign their open-ended response to one of the following thematic codes:

- Being Around People (SR_CircleDislike18_Persons_or_Being_Around_People), Not Feeling Heard/Disinterest from Others (SR_CircleDislike18_Others_Disinterested_Not_Feeling_Heard),
- Lack of Participation (SR_CircleDislike18_No_Participation_from_Others),
- Disrespect (SR_CircleDislike18_Disrespect_Rudeness),
- Boring/Waste of Time (SR_CircleDislike18_Boring_Waste_of_Time),
- Forced to Share/Participate (SR_CircleDislike18_Forced_to_Share_Participate),
- No Change in School/Class (SR_CircleDislike18_Not_Helpful_No_Change_in_Class_School),
- Topic/Subjects (SR_CircleDislike18_Topics_Subjects),
- Circle Process/Structure (SR_CircleDislike18_Process_Structure),
- Time (SR_CircleDislike18_Time),
- Disagreements (SR_CircleDislike18_Disagreements),
Nervousness/Discomfort (SR_CircleDislike18_Nervousness_Discomfort_PublicSpeaking),

Miscellaneous (SR_CircleDislike18_Misc.). The definitions for these variables are provided below:

**Variable definitions:**

**Being Around People (SR_CircleDislike18_Persons_or_Being_Around_People):** Student stated they did not like being around other students and teachers or talking to a specific student and/or teacher they don't like. This includes statements such as, “All I disliked about it is if you didn't with a person anymore you would still have to work with them, it's just uncomfortable”, “I dislike that I have to be around others”, “I disliked the type of kids in the circle some of teachers.”

**Not Feeling Heard/Disinterest from Others (SR_CircleDislike18_Others_Disinterested_Not_Feeling_Heard):** Student stated they felt unheard, misunderstood or that others were not interested in what they were saying. This includes statements such as, “People sometimes not paying attention to what other people had to say”, “People not listening to others”, “The fact that most of the time no one listens and I have to repeat myself”, “That some people are not interested”, “The people that are anti-social and be on their phones.”

**Lack of Participation (SR_CircleDislike18_No_Participation_from_Others):** Student stated that students don't participate. This includes statements such as, “I disliked that there was little participation”, ‘Not everybody engaging in it”, ‘There's nothing I dislike, I just ask that everyone speak and not only the kids who participate’, “Some people were not open.”

**Disrespect (SR_CircleDislike18_Disrespect_Rudeness):** Student stated that others are rude/disrespectful, laughing and joking or making noises. This also includes statements related to everyone speaking at the same time or improper use of the talking piece. Some examples include, “When the other persons talking when I’m talking”, “Really just when everyone speaks at once”, “I disliked the mean comments to one another”, “Kids disrespect talking piece.”

**Boring/Waste of Time (SR_CircleDislike18_Boring_Waste_of_Time):** Student stated that circle was boring. This includes statements such as, “Pointless or a waste of time”, “I felt it was kind of boring”, “Sometimes it could be really silent”, “It possible there could be some activities to do in the discussion”, “It felt like a waste of time, since nothing has seemed to changed”, “It's usually not as exciting”, “We do it pretty much for nothing.”

**Forced to Share/Participate (SR_CircleDislike18_Forced_to_Share_Participate):** Student stated that they felt forced to share/participate. This also includes statements about students feeling like they had to share. Some examples include, “That they forced us to talk even if we don't want to”, “That everyone had to speak”, “I shouldn’t be forced to talk, that you HAD to speak”, “One thing I don't like is that everyone has to talk”, “That I always have to talk”, “I dislike that the process feels forced and stresses teachers out because of that.”
No Change in School/Class (SR_CircleDislike18_Not_Helpful_No_Change_in_Class_School): Student stated that the circle was not helpful or did not change anything in the classroom or the school. This includes statements such as, ‘It didn't help anything”, “Nothing getting done about the actual process”, “Nothing changed that much.”

Topic/Subjects (SR_CircleDislike18_Topics_Subjects): Student stated something they disliked about the circle topic/subject. This includes statements such as, “Some idea that the others brought up”, “Everything, I don't like having to share personal things with other people”, “Sharing personal information”, “Certain questions that was asked”, “The people talked about things that were unclear to me”, “I disliked the questions because they weren't interesting.”

Circle Process/Structure (SR_CircleDislike18_Process_Structure): Student stated they disliked something about the structure/process of the circle. This includes statements such as, “It’s repetitive and I don't gain anything from it”, “Not everyone had a chance to speak”, “Despite it helping me internally”, “it feels staged, “I don't like to sit in a circle with people”, “We couldn't talk when we wanted to, we had to wait till the piece went all the way around and back to us.”

Time (SR_CircleDislike18_Time): Student stated that they disliked something related to the amount of time for circle. This includes statements about the time for circles being too long or short, or how quickly/slowly the circle moved. Statements such as, “Sometimes there not enough time”, “It was long”, “It was a little too long”, “They be dragging it”, “How slow it was”, “Sitting for a long time.”

Disagreements (SR_CircleDislike18_Disagreements): Student stated that they disliked that others were arguing/disagreeing. This also includes statements such as, “I disliked how some opinions do not fit together”, “Disagreements”, “That people were arguing”, “The fact that some people don't know how to handle opinions .”

Nervousness/Discomfort (SR_CircleDislike18_Nervousness_Discomfort_PublicSpeaking): Student stated a dislike related to nervousness and/or public speaking. This includes statements such as, “Talking out loud”, “Speaking to strangers”, “I don't think I'd really be able to open or people judge on my opinion”, “Talking would be the worst”, “That I had no idea but to share”, “Giving eye contact.”

Miscellaneous (SR_CircleDislike18_Misc.): Student makes statement that indicated a dislike about circle, but it does not fit into any of the twelve aforementioned categories.