Witnessing the Unlimited Potential of Children Being Peaceful: Impact of Proactive Restorative Circle Practice on Early Childhood Students in a Montessori Setting

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Acknowledgements

I feel so tremendously blessed to be at this juncture in my career where I can actively research what I love to do every day; be with an amazing team of BIPOC women who believe in the limitless potential of our children and of course work with the most beautiful and precious little beings on earth – our students. Thank you to my colleagues for supporting my research, in particular to Susana who always has supported my creativity and push for innovation. A huge thank you to my family who showed up for me in so many ways while I have pursued my Montessori licensure, opened a school, and now completed my Master's. Alhamdulilah - We did it!

Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to study the effects that daily proactive restorative circle practice (PRCP) had on speaking skills, listening, and positive classroom culture amongst Montessori Children's House students. The research took place over a four week period of time in a two way immersion Children's House in a Montessori public charter school in the Midwest. The population included 8 students ages 4-5.5 years. Students participated in a daily proactive restorative circle each afternoon. The researcher also observed students during lunch to collect data on any influence the PRCP had outside of circle time. Data was collected through field notes, tallies, and a sense of community scale. The intervention suggested an increase in speaking skills and maintaining positive classroom culture. Students also demonstrated an increased sense of responsibility and accountability to the implementation of PRCP. Continued research is needed to determine the effectiveness of PRCP with more participants as well as how the effects of the PRCP transfer over to the general classroom experience.

Keywords: restorative practice, Montessori, circle time, early childhood, proactive circle practice

What could the future look like if children learned how to critically and empathically be in community with one another starting in preschool? When children develop a sense of confidence in using their voice, listening to others and working in community with peers, they also foster a love for themselves, which is the first step towards confidence to speak not only their own truth but also advocate for another when faced with a challenge or injustice.

Educators who see their work as a form of activism for social change understand the importance of early childhood education as a bedrock for a generation's future success. Too often though, the emphasis for high quality education, early childhood or otherwise, fails to encompass the whole child and uses a limited scope based primarily on academic success. From a Montessori perspective, children between 3-6 years of age have a fundamental developmental goal of learning to become and belong to their place and time. They must learn not only how to care for themselves but also others and, in this light, set herself up to fundamentally advocate for her own needs and those in her community. The social and emotional components necessary in the Montessori environment are inherently social justice-oriented. In particular, given the extent of systemic inequities and social challenges faced today, there is the need to create an intentional space to observe and examine the extent to which Montessori environments are supporting this growth of which this study hopes to contribute to.

Dr. Montessori saw children in her original Casa de Bambini as young as three years of age demonstrated the uttermost grace, care, compassion and peaceful discourse towards one another in some of the roughest neighborhoods in Italy. In a Montessori Children's House, children beginning at three years of age are offered a supportive and child centered environment that creates the space for their own inner dignity and grace to thrive. Children learn how to adapt

and belong to their place and time in the community within their school setting as they prepare themselves to be community members of the larger world as well.

The Montessori environment is a perfect starting point for more pointed critical pedagogy and strategies that address some of the social and emotional frameworks needed to set children up for success. One tools that many schools have opted to implement in supporting students is the use of restorative practice (RP). RP aims to utilize an array of both proactive and responsive tools to create community with the hopes of curtailing large conflicts, preserving and developing student voice, and addressing conflict in a community based way to repair harm (Anyon et al., 2016). It is unclear why most studies on the implementation of RP apply to the K-12 settings, not the early childhood programs. The unlimited potential of children in preschool to Kindergarten coined with their desire to learn to adjust to their community and surroundings presents a unique opportunity for this action research.

There are many tools in RP. One that is widely used is circle practice. Circle practice to foster and strengthen a community is called proactive circle practice. In early childhood programs, circle time is already a common practice although its implementation differs from that of the RP proactive circle. Therefore the use of proactive restorative practice circles and more specifically may be advantageous if practiced in early childhood settings.

This research was conducted in a one room, two way Spanish immersion Children's House in a public charter Montessori school in an urban area. A Montessori Children's House is a mixed age classroom designed for children ages 2.5-6 years old using the pedagogy of Dr. Maria Montessori's theory of development. The school where the study took place has 29 students. Only 8 of them participated in the action research as it was conducted during the afternoon work cycle when many of the children were sleeping. The school has around 89%

students who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) and of those students, 75 % of the students identify as Latinx. For the purpose of this research, the children who participated in the research will be referred to as "students".

Guides in the school have noted that while the students have a strong sense of friendship amongst one another, there is an overall lack of empathy and compassion when a student sees another student who may be in conflict or has a need they could use support in fulfilling. Students often turn to the teacher to report or monitor on behaviors or conflict amongst students instead of helping their peers to come to resolution. In addition, students in need of help themselves do not consistently voice their need and solve it independently.   This could be a missed opportunity for young children to be developing a sense of agency, or the feeling of confidence on one's ability to influence things within their control; it gives a feeling of ownership to our choices (Braun et al., 2018). And while teachers at the school are trained to consistently support children to independently resolve conflicts or meet needs, there have not been proactive opportunities to work on these skills of compassion, empathy, and sense of agency.

This research aims to shed light on the potential for children to spontaneously come into their own humanity when given intentional circle practice daily and then extend those skills refined within circle space into their overall classroom setting.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework I am using for my research is based on critical pedagogy stemming from Paolo Friere's work. The definition of critical pedagogy as it has emerged from Friere's education initiative in Brazil is broad, but overall encompasses the necessary critical consciousness required in education in "thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the

relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structure of the school and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state" (Tarlau, 2014, p. 372).   The foundation of critical pedagogy blends the lines between the traditional sense of education and social justice work where education acts as a vehicle to enable students to develop the necessary consciousness and skills to critically transform the world starting with the earliest stages of education" (Lin et al., 2008, p. 188). Tarlau goes on to delineate current day understanding of critical pedagogical work as carrying two elements: first, a focus on the deconstruction and critical analysis of current educational structures and secondly, tools that support students "reflect on these realities through concepts such as…collective learning" (2015, p. 372).

Both critical pedagogy and Dr. Maria Montessori's vision for humanity share the common goal of transformation and empowered community members committed to serving the common good. For Friere, this called for a critical understanding of the responsibility and autonomy that comes along with a rejection of the status quo (Lin et al., 2008).   In addition, he understood that one of the best tools for supporting this transformation was through collective learning and dialogue (Friere, 2000). Researchers who have used Friere's work as the founder of critical pedagogy have surfaced many approaches in education that lead creating community, appreciation of culture, and supporting individual freedom through developing agency and self-confidence.

In modern day schools, the classrooms which develop this type of consciousness can adopt various frameworks to achieve the goals of critical pedagogy.   Considering the importance of classroom culture and collective learning that critical pedagogy implicates many mainstream approaches to positive classroom culture attempt to align themselves to achieve this end.   Yet

approaches that still place the educator at the center as the knowledge giver and administer of classroom culture may be missing the mark. At its core, critical pedagogy requires the liberation and activation of all individuals within the classroom. Friere called it the "practice of freedom" where individuals "deal critically and creatively with realty and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Friere, 2000, p. 34).

In my educational context, at a two-way dual immersion primary Montessori environment where our students are ages 2.5-6 years old, the attempt to embody critical pedagogy in the classroom must begin with the students themselves; in not only their sense of agency, independency, and voice but also how that dynamic is nurtured and celebrated in the classroom. Our school was founded on principles of equity and community-based transformation where students can come to a space created just for them to feel seen and loved as they learn to take care of themselves and their fellow classmates as they learn to support the needs of building a community together. Through the use of the critical pedagogy lens, I was able to utilize restorative practices to build a strong and empowered community where individual voice and empathy are proactively and meaningfully facilitated on a daily basis.

Literature Review

The purpose of this action research project is to examine how schools can effectively implement proactive circles, an element of restorative justice (also referred to as RP), to positively affect student voice, listening, and classroom culture. This section reviews the current scholastic landscape on the practice of RP in schools. This section is organized under the following headings: definition of practice and elements; positive outcomes; use of circle time in early childhood programs.

Definitions of restorative justice practice and elements. Restorative practice holds its roots in many cultural and religious communities ranging from Native American and Maori traditions to aspects of Judaism. RP aims to utilize an array of prevention based and intervention based methods to build community as well as provide space to address and repair harm or conflict when it arises (Anyon et al., 2016). Bevington (2015) goes as far as to state the core of restorative practice is genuinely a reclamation of connection and humanness amongst one another.   Pavelka (2013) further deepens this definition with the explanation of three core principles of RP: to repair harm, reduce risk, and empower communities. The main elements of RP in practice on the prevention/intervention continuum include proactive and circles (both proactive and responsive), mediation, conferencing, student and family voice, and peer/accountability boards (Pavelka, 2013). For the purpose of this study, proactive circles are the use of community circle to build collective understanding, knowledge, and community with the aim to proactively prevent larger conflicts from occurring.

Positive outcomes of proactive circles. Bevington (2015) shared in an evaluative study of RP, including the use of the circle, that the emotional literacy ("ability to empathize and to take responsibility for their actions") and feeling of improvement around school climate were a prevalent outcome in gathering data from staff and students (113). In addition, feelings of agency and self-confidence shared amongst students who participated in circle practice in particular that High (2017) reported in her study of the use of RP in an American K-8 school district. In addition to individual impact the use of RP has on students, research indicates that the use of AP contributes positively to the discussion on the need for culturally conscious approaches to address our current racialized discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2017). Studies shared results ranging from the effects on teacher/student relationships where both reported feeling an

increased sense of confidence and feelings of respect towards one another as well as patterns

where the presence of RP correlated with the decrease of exclusionary practice in particular

amongst Black/Latino/Native American students (Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2016).

Use of circle time in early childhood programs. Circle time is very prevalent in most

early childhood programs and serves as a teacher directed space to facilitate academic learning

both directly and indirectly. Examples of direct academic skills often incorporated in circle time

are counting, phonics, patterns, shapes, and seasons whereas indirect academic skills are

practicing listening, taking turns, and working in community with others (Zaghlawan and

Ostrosky, 2011). Both Zaglawan and Ostrosky (2008) and Bustamente et al. (2018) shared that

little formal study has been done on circle time specifically but felt that given its wide use in

preschools across the nation, in particular in programs that serve our most underserved

populations via Headstart or similar models, more formal research on circle time is necessary. In

particular, both studies mentioned were critical of the lack of academic quality and engagement

during circle time. Bustamente et al. (2018) saw that although the setting for genuine

engagement and community was possible in circle time, teachers were often having to address

disruptions and conduct challenges which negatively affected the circle experience. Both studies

observed lack of engagement which led to behavior challenges as something that needed to be

better assessed in the implementation of circle time. Baustamente et al (2018) specifically

questioned as to whether or not the children's interests and needs were being properly addressed

which could contribute to disruptive behavior due to lack of engagement.

In this review of scholarly work, I found little to no studies drawing specifically on the

use of proactive circles in the early childhood setting where we know that the use of community

learning and culture is so critical. More so, in my context of Montessori and two-way immersion

Children's House, there was no indicated research examining the use of proactive circles at these specific program levels. With the indicated benefits of the use of circle practice in settings with older children, its extension to research its use with younger grades is necessary. Drawing from all that I have learned, I have conducted action research on the implantation of daily proactive circles in a two way immersion Children's House environment to investigate if daily use of proactive circles creates similar outcomes seen amongst older children including an increase in student listening, increased student agency or participation, and positive classroom culture.

Methodology

The intervention in this study consisted of facilitating a proactive restorative circle every day to see how it impacted students' sense of community, kindness towards one another, collaboration, and ability to voice one's needs. Data were collected two times a day by the researcher every day using the Proactive Restorative Circle Data Tool (Appendix A). During proactive restorative circle time the researcher collected data in four ways. First, data was recorded using tallies based on four student behaviors including: participation during the proactive restorative circle time, use of the talking piece, behavior redirections by the researcher, and engagement. During lunch time, the researcher observed for kindness, helpfulness, and use of voice to communicate a need.

Proactive Restorative Circle Structure

The participants of the proactive restorative circle were eight children at a two way Spanish Immersion Montessori Children's House in an urban community. The participants ranged from 4 – 5.5 years of age with six girls and two boys. Four of the participants identified as Latinx, one identified as African American mixed race, and three identified as White. Three

of the participants qualified for Free and Reduced Lunch, meaning their household income was less than 130% of the federal poverty level.

Proactive restorative circle time occurred every day during the afternoon work period where the non-napping students came together to continue their Montessori work. The students were called to proactive restorative circle time and then sat down together on the floor with the researcher. The researcher would set out the talking pieces (a small calla lily card, a dollhouse sized lamp from a Montessori material, and a small turtle figurine from France) on a lace doily in the middle of the circle.   Talking pieces are a common tool used in restorative practices that help participants take turns and focus their attention on the person speaking. There are often multiple talking pieces to choose from, each one fits in your hand. In our circle, the researcher and students were invited to bring in their own special small objects with personal significance to serve as talking pieces. The first day the talking piece was brought int, its owner would tell the story of its significance and then it was put in the center on the lace doily to be used by any participant during proactive restorative circle time. The speaker uses the talking piece when they want to speak and other participants listen until the speaker is done. The talking piece is then passed onto the next person who wants to share.

After everyone was settled in the circle the students would go over the rules of proactive restorative circle time together. The first time the participants met with the researcher for proactive restorative circle time the researcher facilitated a conversation where the group decided on the rules they would follow when meeting. There were four rules that they had collaboratively decided upon with support from the researcher. The rules the students agreed on were 1) Listen to your friends 2) Sit in the circle criss- cross applesauce 3) Stay in the circle once

it begins 4) Respect the talking piece 5) Use the language you feel most comfortable with to share (See Appendix B). These were inspired from restorative circle agreements used by the Center for Restorative Process (Center for Restorative Process, 2015).

Once the students had gone over the rules during proactive restorative circle time, the researcher would pick up the talking piece and pass it around the circle and each child would check in and share how they are doing that day and anything else they had on their mind. Then the researcher would pose the question of the day. students were given approximately 30 seconds to reflect on the question and then they would give a thumbs up to show they were ready to share. Questions were developed initially by the researcher and covered a variety of topics, but started with simple either/or questions (Do you like dogs or cats?), to more advanced questions that the students created (i.e. What is something you love about yourself?). The researcher would ask who felt like starting the circle today, and then chose a student to begin sharing and handed them the talking piece. The child would decide which talking piece they wanted to use and then they would begin responding to the question of the day. The child who went first to share would then choose a direction to their right or left to go in and pass on the talking piece. Each child had a turn to share. No one was obligated to speak and could say "pass" if they did not want to share. While a child was sharing, the students were taught by the researcher on ways to participate through listening actively (making eye contact, having their body calm and facing the speaker, and not talking) and showing connections or commonalities with the sharer through pre-taught hand signals.

The researcher would redirect individual students if they were not following the rules of the proactive restorative circle time, in particular if a child was interrupting another without

using the talking piece, or if a child was being preventing others from being able to listen. Once the proactive restorative circle time began, the researcher began to fill out the Afternoon Restorative Circle Data Tool that was on a clipboard in her lap (see Appendix A).

In the first three weeks, during proactive restorative circle time each child shared once and then the group stopped to do a reflection round on how proactive restorative circle time went. During the reflection round, the students would pass around the talking piece and when it was their turn they could share what they noticed about proactive restorative circle time from that day in relation to either our rules we had established or the nature of the conversations that were being had. The reflection could result in another round of circle sharing happening if needed based on what was brought up. For example, one time during reflection round one of the participants shared that they did not like how difficult it was to hear their friends when someone else was speaking and interrupting. The students then decided they wanted to do another round of proactive restorative circle time where they shared how having other participants interrupt affected them. The conclusion of that reflection round resulted in the students establishing a new expectation that if you do not respect the rules with a reminder, a participant in the circle or the researcher could ask you to sit out for that proactive restorative circle time and try again the following day.

In the last three weeks, the reflection round continued at the end, but the time to respond to the question of the day was extended. The talking piece was passed around again through the circle if others wanted to continue talking after each person had a turn. When no one was wanting to share anymore, the sharing part of the proactive restorative circle time was over and

reflection time began. The researcher did not interrupt if a child was off topic or did not answer all of the question unless the participant speaking asked for help.

The last part of the proactive restorative circle involved the researcher taking a visual survey of the students' experience during proactive restorative circle time. The researcher had a laminated sheet with visual cues on each of the questions in the survey (see Appendix C). The students had gone over the visual survey questions and internalized them in the first proactive restorative circle meetings. When it was time for the survey, the students closed their eyes and gave a thumbs up or down when the researcher asked the following questions:

- I used the talking piece to share.

- I was kind by listening to my friends.

- My friends were kind and listened to me.

- How did circle go for me today?

The research explained and modeled how to decide a thumbs up or down the first two times that the participants met for proactive restorative circle time with the students and by the third circle the students knew how to participate independently in the visual survey. Once the survey was completed the proactive restorative circle time was over for the day. The researcher took five minutes after proactive restorative circle time ended to write down additional notes using the Afternoon Restorative Circle Data (see Appendix A). She then rated the sense of community felt during the proactive restorative circle between 1-5 using the rating scale, and her field notes around kindness, helpfulness, and student voice from circle that day.

Using the Data Tool During Proactive Restorative Circle Time

The Afternoon Restorative Circle Data Tool (Appendix A) was comprised of four data collection methods. The first section was a tally of students' behaviors and actions observed during the proactive restorative circle time. Behaviors recorded were child participation, use of talking piece, redirections by the teacher, and engagement. The purpose of this tool was to see if and how behavior was affected by the daily proactive restorative circle. These included: Every time the researcher noticed a child engaging in one of these actions or behaviors she would place a tally. The second section was a 1-5 sense of community scale (see Appendix A), where one indicated a low sense of community and five indicated a high sense of community. Sense of community was defined as the extent to which the students were being kind, listening to one another, helpful, and united. The researcher would take notes during and after the proactive restorative circle time to help inform her decision on the rating. The third section was the Whole Group Post Circle visual survey (see Appendix C) which all students participate in after each proactive restorative circle time. The last section of the data tool was for field notes where the researcher wrote down observations from the proactive restorative circle time for that day.

Lunch Time Observation Structure

Each day during lunch, the researcher would complete the Restorative Circle Data Collection tool lunch time section (see Appendix A). The researcher took tally of the following behaviors amongst participants of the afternoon proactive restorative circle: Kindness, spontaneous collaboration/helpfulness, and using words to communicate needs. The researcher would sit at a table with a group of students to eat lunch and would keep her clipboard on her lap with the data tool. She tallied the targeted behaviors identified on the data tool when they

occurred amongst the students who participated in proactive restorative circle time. After collecting the behavioral data during lunch, the researcher would rate the sense of community amongst the students on the same scale as used during the proactive restorative circle. She also took notes on other observations related to kindness, collaboration, and student voice witnessed during lunch time that day. At the end of the four week intervention, data was compiled and analyzed to look for the impact of the afternoon restorative circle time both within the circle time itself as well as its effects during lunch time.

Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect that daily proactive restorative circle time would have on classroom culture in particular around kindness, helpfulness, listening and sense of agency. The subjects were 8 Montessori primary students between the ages of 4-6 years old who attend a two way Spanish Immersion public charter in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative data tools including tallies, checklists, scales, and field notes. Data were collected during the afternoon proactive restorative circle and again the next day at lunch to see what affect the circle had on the participants when they were outside of circle time.

The proactive restorative circle consisted of four parts: 1) Sharing the rules 2) Check in with each other 3) Circle prompt 4) Shared observations of how circle went. The rate of participation is illustrated in Figure 1 below.
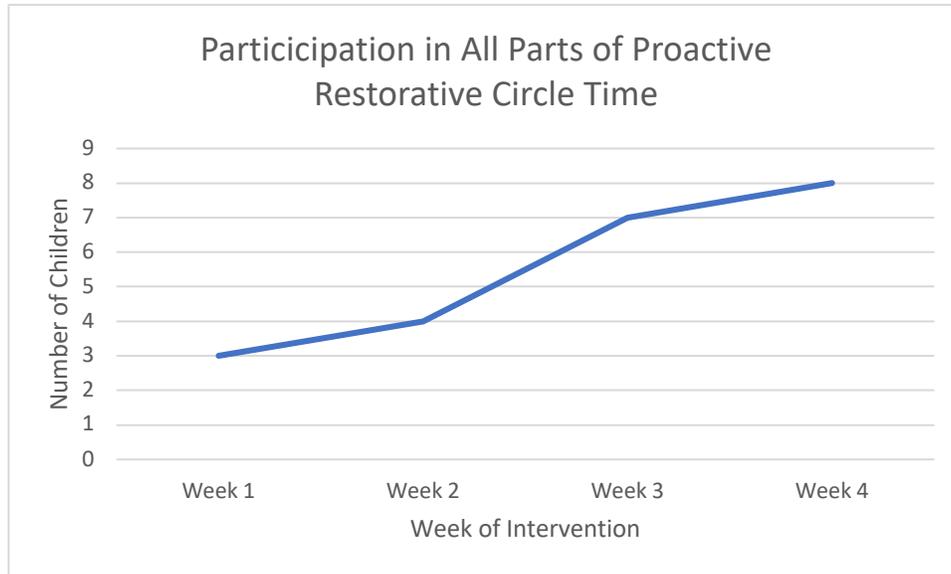
Figure 1. Student participation during Proactive Restorative Circle.

During week 1, three of the eight students participated in all parts of the Proactive

Restorative Circle time. Then by week four all students were participating in all four parts of the

circle.

In addition, according to the data collected from the Restorative Circle Data Collection

Tool, the overall satisfaction from the student perspective of how the Circle routine went that day

shifted over the four week period. When participating in the visual survey, the students would

give a thumbs up if they felt the circle that day had been "Great" and they gave a thumbs down if

they felt the circle that day had been "Challenging". During week one, on average 71% reported

that circle went "Great" and 29% reported it was "Challenging. By week four, 100% of the

students reported that circle went "Great". This is consistent with the increase in participation as

well as noted above which suggests students' increased participation affected their enjoyment of

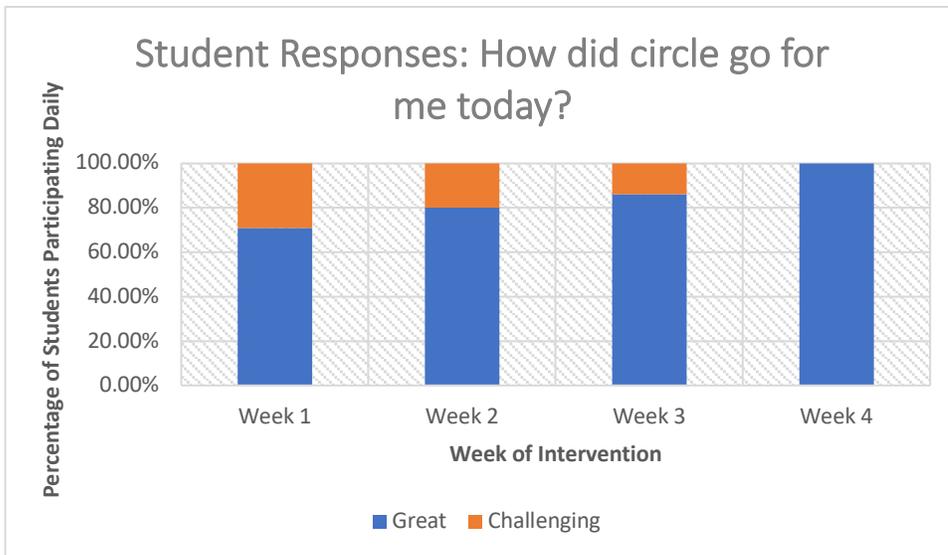the proactive restorative circle time.

Figure 2. Percent Average from Students when answering the question, "How did circle go for me today?"

Effects on Kindness

Kindness was measured by the words students were using towards each other during the proactive restorative circle time such as saying "It's your turn" or "I like the talking piece you brought". The average instances of kindness per week did not significantly change throughout the study. The students as a group averaged 4 kind remarks each proactive restorative circle time during Week 1 and by Week 4 they were averaging 6 kind remarks each circle time. Two examples of kindness interaction are captured below

Example 1:

Student A: Hey do you want to come to circle with us today? We are meeting in the office, want me to wait for you?

Student W: Yes thanks, coming now.

In this example, the student was inviting their classmate to come to proactive restorative circle time. The student showed kindness by extending the invitation and offering to wait until the student was done with his work to join.

Example 2:

Student J: You haven't shared yet. Did you want to say something today? (Picks up a talking piece and invites classmate to share)

Student M: (Shakes head and declines to share)

Student J: Oh, ok just checking.

In this example, a student noticed that someone had not shared yet in the check in round of proactive restorative circle time. He took the initiative to verbally recognize that a classmate had not shared and offered a talking piece to the student. When she declined, he also showed kindness in accepting her not wanting to share and responding to her and then letting it go.

Effects on Listening

It was challenging to capture data on how students were listening to each other. The researcher tallied when students were making eye contact or other non verbal active listening behaviors such as body facing the speaker and nods of understanding or use of the sign language that was taught to the students by the researcher to show they had a connection to what was being said. This was captured through the engagement section of the Proactive Restorative Circle Data Collection Tool. The average amount of behaviors categorized by engagement each week during the proactive restorative circle time is shown in Figure 3. The amount of engagement behaviors observed increased by four-fold between Week 1 to Week 4.
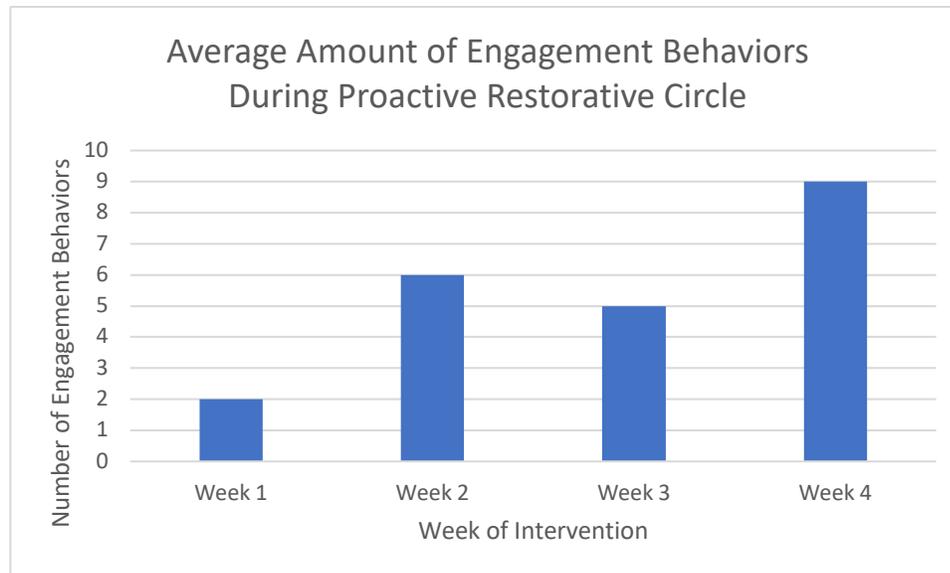
Figure 3. Average Amount of Engagement Behaviors During Proactive Restorative Circle

Another way to look at listening during the proactive restorative circle time was through the

visual survey that the researcher took based on student responses. One of the questions that

students responded to was "Mis amigos fueron amables conmigo y me escucharon" (my friends

were kind to me and listened to me). By the end of the study all students felt they were being

treated kindly and listened to. This differed from the other three weeks of the study were on

average 6.5 students felt that they were being treated kindly and listened to.

Effects on Helpfulness to Articulate Sense of Agency

Helpfulness and sense of agency were seen as interconnected for the purpose of this

study. A student's sense of agency meant that they saw a need either in themselves or amongst

peers that they were observing and felt they could do something to address the need they saw

whether it was a negative or positive situation. Helpfulness is one way in which sense of agency

was measured. The other way was when a child was able to voice a need and get it fulfilled

independently either by doing it themselves or taking initiative to ask for help from a peer or

adult. Helpfulness to articulate sense of agency were measured in three ways during the study.

First, sense of agency through helpfulness was measured by how the students supported each other to follow the routine and rules of the proactive restorative circle routine. An example of this from field notes from Day 10 was when students would remind one another to use the talking piece without prompting from the researcher. This happened in total 15 times by the end of the study after having been modeled by the researcher when the study began.

The second way helpfulness came through were instances when the students reminded each other of a rule they needed to follow. These reminders were coded as redirections in the Proactive Restorative Circle Data Collection tool as well as taken down as field notes by the researcher. Redirections were coded in two ways: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal redirections are instances when the researcher had to remind a student of a Proactive Restorative Circle rule ("Remember we promised to listen to each other") or an overall school rule relating to safety, kindness, or helpfulness. Nonverbal redirections involved the use of eye contact, nonverbal modeling or signaling to give a reminder of the rule (researcher points to her ear and makes eye contact with the student talking to remind them to listen).
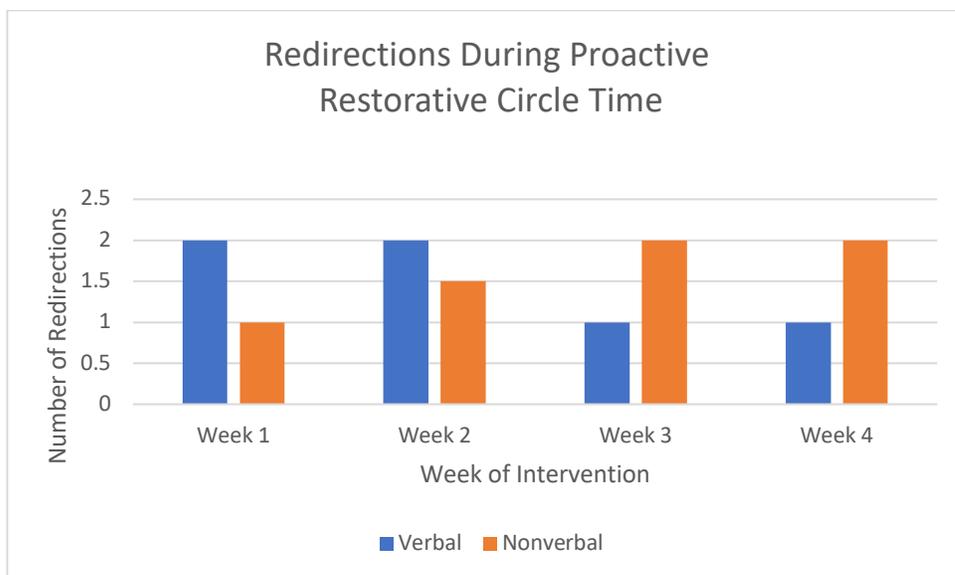

Figure 4. Redirections during Proactive Restorative Circle Time

The presence of redirections on average remained consistent as noted in the graph above where the average amount of redirections was 3. Yet it is worth noting that the distribution of the type of redirection needed to bring an individual or group back on track during the Proactive Restorative Circle routine shifted by week 4 in two ways.

First, by the type of redirection needed. By week 4, the researcher was using more nonverbal redirections than verbal ones. Nonverbal redirections are the least intrusive because they allowed for the routine to continue without delay or disruption to the person talking. Second, is an increased sense of agency amongst students. As indicated in figure 5, the students increased their own daily redirections towards each other by week 4. Student led redirections often mimicked what they had seen the researcher do. For example, the use of nonverbal redirections by using eye contact, pointing to the ears to remind a child to listen, or putting a finger to the lips to remind a child to listen quietly were all nonverbal redirections that students demonstrated that were also used by the researcher during proactive restorative circle time. In addition, the researcher relied primarily on nonverbal redirections, this was also mirrored by the students as they began to redirect each other with 80% of the student led redirections using nonverbal communication. An example of a student led redirection is below, as written in [name data tool]:

> *During Proactive Restorative Circle Time Student J is laying down on the floor and begins talking to Student Y. Student M who is on Student J's other side taps Student J on the shoulder and points to his legs which are criss crossed and then gives the quiet signal putting his finger to his lips. Student J sits up and crosses her legs to sit and goes back to following the speaker* (observation, February 19, 2020).
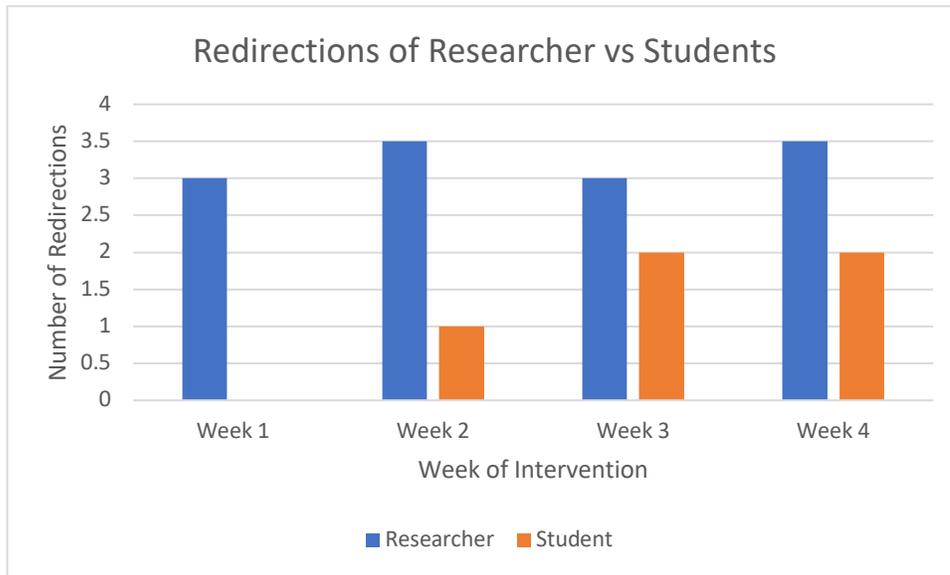
Figure 5. Average per day number of redirections by researcher and students

The third way helpfulness and sense of agency was measured was when students voiced a need they had and acted independently to fulfil the need. One way in which this was observed was when students shared they did not feel they could fully participate and follow the expectations of proactive restorative circle time and opted out of participating. This happened only 2 times during the entire study, but in these instances 2 students shared they did not want to join for the day and would prefer to do afternoon work instead. When the researcher asked them why they thought that was better for them that day and they did not have a concrete answer. The students chose engaging work and stayed concentrated the whole time which suggests they were reading their own body's needs to be successful.
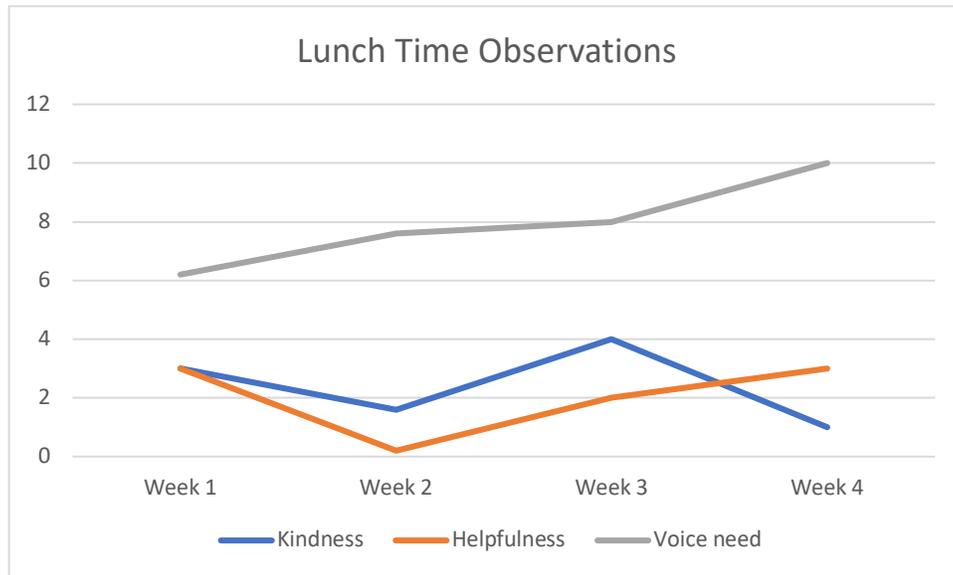
Effects Crossover During Lunch

Figure 6. Tallies of Behaviors During Lunch Time.

The researcher observed for three behaviors in particular during lunch over the course of the four week study. The lunch time observation was challenging as the researcher had to isolate interactions of the eight student participants in the midst of 28 students. Three behaviors were being observed for - kindness, helpfulness, and voicing a need. Of those three, only students voicing a need had a steady increase in daily interactions recorded (See Figure 6).

During Week one, the researcher saw students voicing a need six times a day on average. Voicing a need encompassed both physical and social/emotional needs. For example, a student a physical need receiving a tally on the Lunch time Proactive Restorative Circle Data Tool when students asked for something like more milk, went to get their own towels to clean up a spill, or asked to go to the bathroom. A student was also receiving a tally for social emotional needs such as conversing with someone at their table, comforting someone who was sad or needed help, telling someone they did not like a behavior/action that the other person was doing, or asking a

teacher for support to help their body stay safe and in control (i.e. getting a wobbly chair, asking for a fidget, moving to sit at another table).

The other two behaviors the researcher was observing for, kindness and helpfulness, were not consistently increasing or decreasing during lunch time. Kindness was tallied when the researcher saw a participant giving a classmate compliments, showing affections, or using encouraging words. Average daily incidents of kindness did not seem to be affected by the PRC (see Figure 6). Helpfulness was tallied when the researcher saw a participant offering to help another classmate or adult with a task. The average daily incidents of helpfulness did not seem to be affected by the PRC. Both helpfulness and kindness had a slight drop in average daily incidents of targeted behavior during week two. This was the week when the flu had reached its pick at the school site and around 60% of the students were absent and teachers were absent as well with illness. This may have contributed to students feeling out of the routine and less able to look outside of their individual needs which could translate into less incidents of spontaneous kindness and helpfulness.

Action Plan

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of implementing daily proactive restorative circle practice amongst 4-6 year old's at a two way immersion Montessori Children's House. There is limited research on the effects of restorative practice measures implemented in early childhood settings. At its core, restorative practices aim to facilitate welcoming, compassionate, and student driven spaces where proactive measures are just as important as reactive ones to support positive classroom culture. As educators and Montessorians, we understand the importance of classroom culture in supporting the whole child in their development socially, emotionally, and cognitively. The study aimed to isolate what the

researcher extracted as key components of positive classroom culture; kindness, helpfulness, listening and speaking, and a sense of agency. The use of the proactive restorative circle as means to facilitate space where the behaviors listed above could be nurtured on a daily basis to see how they affected the students during the intervention itself, as well as if the use of the circle had any impact outside of the circle time as it related to the listed behaviors.

While this study can only speak to the narrow scope of its context and participants, there were some positive and hopeful results upon completion. Participation in all parts of the proactive restorative circle increased to 100% by week four. The participants requested to have the proactive restorative circle continue as an option during work time after the study had ended, where the students facilitated the entire routine. They did not want the dedicated time every day with their classmates to end. This seems consistent with past research that linked the use of proactive restorative circles to a heightened sense of community and classroom culture. At the completion of the research, it seemed that when preschool/Kindergarten age students were engaged in high interest, participatory, and structured group experiences with a scaffold towards independence there was an overall sense of enjoyment of the activity which is consistent with the data collected on the participants' attitude toward circle time. In addition, when the students had opportunities to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility of the circle, they began to hold themselves more accountable and data suggested that they also felt that their classmates were being more kind and listening to them.

While the overall feelings of enjoyment and rate of participation increased over the course of the research during the proactive restorative circle time, the researcher really was interested in seeing how the effects of circle could transfer into the students' everyday interactions in social settings such as lunch time. The data gathered during lunch time

observations seemed to suggest that over the course of the four weeks, the students demonstrated an increase in instances of voicing a need and looking for solutions to fulfil the need. This is a critical skill for all individuals to have in order to take care of oneself as well as believe that the individual voice carries enough value and weight to change given circumstances. While this may be at the micro level in an early childhood setting, the implications are significant if we can consistently nurture a child to feeling that it is within their locus of control to meet their own needs and or the needs of their peers/community.

In a Montessori early educational context, one of the primary goals of development between ages 3-6 is support the students in coming into their own independence and developmentally appropriate self-sufficiency as well as nurturing a sense of belonging to their wider community. In this light, proactive restorative circles may be a good fit to complement the developmental framework of the students in the preschool/kindergarten environment. Educators who are working in preschool/kindergarten programs may consider the use of proactive restorative circle practice as means to foster positive classroom culture as well as give opportunities for students to lead in a scaffolded manner and possibly curtail some of the negative behaviors that studies showed traditional circle time struggled with. Consider the use of more opportunities for students to lead small groups in a scaffolded manner. The staff at the site where the research took place, expressed interest in continuing to implement the proactive restorative circle practice because they saw how much the participants enjoyed it and wanted to explore what its use could entail on a larger scale with the classroom community.

Future study is necessary to continue to examine the effects of implementing restorative practices in particular proactive restorative circles in early childhood settings. Based on the findings of this research, three recommendations were made. First, more research needs to occur

on the amount of students in a proactive restorative circle given the age range and developmental needs of early childhood students. This research saw eight students as being an adequate amount for everyone to share and feel connected, but more research needs to be done to determine how many students could participate and still gain benefits of the proactive restorative circle. Second, as research had previously indicated, the use of circle time is not foreign to early childhood settings. But its traditional implementation has not be thoroughly studied nor seen positive results (Bustamente et al. 2018). This research suggests that the use of a proactive restorative circle could lay the foundation for a drastically different circle experience in early childhood. More research on different ways in which the traditional preschool circle time could be innovated would greatly support educators in breaking past the current limitations of circle time. Finally, this study began to explore the use of restorative practice in the early childhood setting and the findings suggest that early childhood students are capable and eager to utilize restorative practice methods. More research to examine the scope of implementation of restorative practice methods in early childhood settings is needed. It would also be of interest to see if more early childhood programs utilized restorative practice methods, how the students would be impacted longitudinally if they graduated into elementary and secondary programs that also implemented restorative practice methods.

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Appendix A
Afternoon Restorative Circle

Date: Time:	# students Present:	Topic:
Tallies		
Participation		
Use of talking piece		
Redirections by teacher		
Engagement (eye contact, me too sign, body language)		

Sense of community scale:

1	2	3	4	5

Weak sense of community   Strong sense of community

Whole Group Post circle visual survey (student facing – anchor chart)		
Prompt	Thumbs up (Tally)	Thumbs down (Tallly)
I used the talking piece to share		
I was kind by listening to my friends		
My friends were kind and listened to me		
How did circle go for me today?		

Afternoon Circle Field Notes: How did children participate in circle today? How did the teachers engage in circle today?

Lunch time (following day)

Date:	Time:	# of students present: Adults in the room:
Tally kindness:	Tally spontaneous collaboration/helpfulness:	Tally using words to communicate needs (voice):

Sense of community scale:

1	2	3	4	5

Weak sense of community   Strong sense of community

Lunchtime Field Notes around kindness, collaboration, and voice:

Appendix B
Rules for Proactive Restorative Circle

Reglas de Círculo
1.Escuchar a los amigos

2.Sentarse en criss cross applesauce

3.Quedarse en circulo

4.Respetar el artículo de habla

5.Usar el idioma que prefieras

Appendix C
Visual Survey for Proactive Restorative Circle

👍 <u>Tiempo de Círculo</u> 👇

● Usé el artículo de habla

● Fui amable por escuchar a mis amigos

●

● Mis amigos fueron amables conmigo y me escucharon

● Cómo estuvo el tiempo en círculo hoy?