

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

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It's spring! The start of new life, the wonder and calm that comes with warmer days and lighter evenings, arrives. The same lightness that comes with spring is not unlike the atmosphere that exists in an environment where everyone's dignity is upheld and a deep respect for each other is allowed to take root. People in this kind of space, do not fear disagreement and conflict. Though they may feel the darkness and weight that comes with brokenness of relationship, they know that these are but seeds or bulbs that can break through to the light of day if tended to carefully to produce the most intricate blooming flowers. As you read the stories and comments of your fellow colleagues engaged in restorative justice, imagine the field of flowers that have grown up over this year. Thanks to all who have contributed to this spring edition.

Focussed Lenses

"When I feel pain, I stop and acknowledge it and celebrate it, because it points in new directions. This has been a painful experience for all of us. I hope that on this road we travel that we take the time to acknowledge the pain of each other and celebrate it, because out of that pain comes opportunities for growth."

--A circle participant in *Peacemaking Circles* by Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart and Mark Wedge.

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

A colleague and I took the OCSTA summer 2009 workshop on Restorative Justice, and we were duly impressed. As such we ordered enough copies of [Restorative Discipline for Schools](#) to supply our staff. They graciously agreed to be 'invited' on board. They have all read the book and are excited about possibilities for the future. I gave a short talk on restorative discipline at our recent society meeting, and the response was very encouraging. In the meantime I have been holding monthly class meetings, with all of us in a circle, and a mini soccer ball for a talking piece on a stool in the middle.

In one such meeting, a young lad mentioned that it was really annoying when you ask someone to stop doing something but they just keep on doing it. The talking piece prevented the typical outburst of responses, and people had time to let his words simply hang there for a while. The next month we had another meeting, and the same lad reported calmly that now, whenever he asks someone to stop doing something, they stop. To me, the beauty lay in the fact that with a little facilitation, the class had worked out the problem all by themselves.

On another occasion I had two boys who were in an ongoing conflict with each other. I used the affective

questions in an impromptu circle with both of them. They each indicated a need for the back and forth put-downs to stop. So I asked each of them to name specific behaviours that they could alter to help bring this about. One of them began to speak with eyes downcast and said, "Well, I often say that he's gay." Then there was a pause and he added, "But I know that he's not..."

This emboldened the other to say, "Yeah...I sometimes tell him his hair looks like a rat's nest...but actually, I think it's really cool!" It was like they had this sudden epiphany that the put-downs had more to do with the person giving them, than the person receiving them. The hurt that had developed seemed to vaporize. They've had some other bumps along the way, but they have a much greater understanding of each other and a greater respect. Often, they solve their differences themselves, or steer clear of potential problem areas. Neither of them was punished or berated, and both became invested in moving forward positively.

Personally, I have begun to feel the power of restorative practice. I think I am beginning the journey toward a restorative classroom. I believe that our school as a whole including students, staff and parents are poised to travel this road as well. Wherever you are on your journey, I wish you God's blessing and many rich rewards.

--Laurence Stassen, Gr. 7 Ottawa Christian School

Resources

Resources in your hands--Social studies, history and geography—don't let opportunities for developing rj awareness for students pass by in social studies, history or geography. Ask students to take on the role of a historical character, a present day citizen, or even a land form and ask them to respond to key rj questions as if they were experiencing the situation being studied—what is happening/happened? What are you thinking? What are you feeling? How is this impacting you?

Others? What's the hardest thing for you? What do you need to move forward? What can you offer to move the situation forward? In doing this, you'll discover new and effective ways of developing empathy and respect.

Wondering?

I took rj training recently and am the only one on our staff to have taken it. Though I am keen to implement it in our school, I have discovered that our administrator and board have some very negative impressions of what rj is. I am finding I need to be careful about saying anything about rj. I do what I can to use the ideas in my class but I don't have a lot of hope for what could happen in our school. --W.

As different communities have been introduced to rj both at a community level and within schools there are a wide variety of reactions to suggestions for implementation. In fact within the field of restorative justice itself, there are some significant disagreements about what it is and how it should be implemented.

As you indicate this is unfortunate and makes it difficult for communities to benefit from the gifts rj can provide. As an educator in this situation, you are wise to be careful about what you say as always bringing it to the foreground will only entrench the differences more visibly.

It is important to use the restorative justice principles of honouring and causing no harm in your relationship with your administrator and board in spite of the differences you have with them. This is far from easy. However, it is the reality for many and in these situations it is best to remember that you may be planting seeds that have a long germination period.

However, remember that you do have opportunities to engage with rj with your students, in the way you have conversations with parents and colleagues, and in your relationships outside of the school setting. By using it within your classroom, by allowing rj principles to be woven through your pedagogy and curriculum, you are planting seeds for a whole classroom of students.

Though you may think that is not significant, imagine what 25 students will do in time who have learned the difference between honouring and measuring each other.

Also remember that by using it in your classroom and nurturing within yourself a stronger understanding of rj principles and processes, should the time and opportunity ever present itself at your school you will be ready to inform others. In the meantime consider too that there are other ways of presenting the ideas to your administrator and board without using the rj

terminology. What is important is finding ways to encourage people to honour and respect each other in everything that is done. At its core that is what rj is all about.

You said it ...

Thanks to all of you who sent responses to the rj sentence starters awhile back. In just a few words you said so much. In this and issues that follow I will publish a few of your insights each time.

The best thing about restorative justice is:

- seeing kids understand others more;
- working with people;
- it brings hope to difficult situations;
- ...how it rehumanizes us;
- having an alternative vision to move forward to resolution that is not so individualistic;
- children have a voice;
- that students become more self-aware and begin to be more skilled at solving relationship problems;

The hardest thing about restorative justice is:

- the time it takes and wondering if the message is always sinking in;
- working with people who don't trust the process;
- the huge time commitment--dealing with restoring relationships take time!
- the time it takes to continue to engage people, support people.. can we have an RJ force AND a police force?
- applying it to self;
- taking the time to see the process through;
- the time factor, too 'feelings oriented' for a class with 22 10 year old boys.

You are invited ...

Do you have a story to share, a question to ask, a great idea for integrating rj into your curriculum and pedagogy? If you do, email it to: dvaandering@mun.ca Remember this is a 'comfy chair' DIALOGUE. Don't fret too much about format or style ... just get your thoughts down in writing and send it my way.

THE RJ MONTHLY DIALOGUE IS BROUGHT TO YOU THROUGH A COLLABORATION BETWEEN SHALEM MENTAL HEALTH NETWORK (SHALEMNETWORK.ORG) AND DOROTHY VAANDERING (MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND)

*Rj acknowledges justice as honouring the inherent worth of all and is enacted through relationship. When something occurs that undermines the well-being of some, a space is provided for dialogue whereby the dignity of all involved and affected can be restored so that each can once again become a fully contributing member of the community of which they are a part.
(D. Vaandering, 2009)*