

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

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In this season of Lent, we reflect on the unconditional love of God and Christ. In his life, death, and resurrection Christ demonstrates that he loves us simply because we have been created by God, not because of anything we do or say. This unconditional acceptance is hard for many of us to accept. In spite of having been taught that “Jesus Loves Me this I know” many of us have grown up in a religious culture that has inadvertently sent us the message “Jesus Loves Me if I’m good.” During this Lenten time, as teachers most of us are finding ourselves writing report cards and students will be receiving these evaluations of their efforts. What messages are we sending? Do they contradict or convey God’s desire to be in relationship with us? This issue of the DIALOGUE challenges us to reflect on what it means to be in relationship with each other. Thanks to all who have contributed.

Focussed Lenses

Central to restorative justice is honouring each other as human beings, as image bearers of our Creator God. If we view each other in this way, what would our thoughts sound like? How would we look at each other? What would we share and what would we keep to ourselves? What does it mean to *honour* another person? What does it mean to *respect* one another? Often these words come rolling off our tongues and we assume we all define these words in a similar way. Stop for a moment and fill in the following sentence starters.

I feel honoured when ...
I feel dishonoured when ...
I feel respected when ...
I feel disrespected when ...

What do your responses reveal about what you need and expect from others? What might this show about what others need from you? Is this what you are giving your colleagues? Is this what you are giving your students?

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

Restorative Justice and Plagiarism

In my class I discovered that one of my students had copied and pasted his book report from an Internet site. His words and phrasing did not match his previous work. I then re-evaluated other class book reports, discovering that another student had done the same thing. It was even from the same site. I contacted my principal and together we planned out our next steps. One big question was if the two students had shared the website information with each other. How big was this problem?

As my principal supervised my class, I talked to each student individually using the RJ questions as a guide. Our school is still new to RJ, so some questions confused each of the students as they were not used to being asked to explain themselves in this way. The questions, however, kept me focussed and helped me conduct the interview calmly and rationally. Both students stated that did not know they had done something wrong, did not know another student had done the same thing, and were actually curious about the identity of the other student.

Parents were contacted and conversations were had at home. Parents responded that they had appreciated how things were explained and how quickly this was brought their attention. Together with their children they provided positive suggestions about next steps.

The students and I also talked with the other students in the class about what happened. The two students apologized to the class, understanding that a trust had been broken affecting all students.

Now the students are working on an alternative report that hopefully cannot be found on any website. —R.

Coming to Peace on their Own

The students in my class can occasionally be seen gathered around the desk in the hallway (usually after a recess break) where they are talking about issues that have come up and "making peace". Often I haven't been involved in any way but everyone comes back into the classroom as friends and ready to get back to work. It is great to see. —B.

Wondering

At our school as a staff we are working our way through 'The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools.' We read a chapter a month and talk about it in a special staff meeting. I find it very thought provoking. I have come to see that for some teachers it is intuitive and for others it simply provides good ideas that can be difficult to implement. It seems like a punitive approach to discipline is hard to unlearn. Why is this? --J.

The answer to this is far from simple and points to needing to realize that we cannot assume that everyone understands things in the same way. When a school is implementing rj, administrators should be prepared for a variety of responses and need to honour each person's journey in coming to a full realization of the comprehensive nature of rj. How people understand rj is most likely a reflection of how they themselves have experienced formative relationships. Teachers who find rj intuitive are likely aware of what it feels like personally to be honoured and respected for who they are as people regardless of what they do or say. Those who see rj as simply a good idea or another tool for their discipline toolbox, may have experienced relationship as conditional upon what they did or said and thus find their worth in the approval of others.

This is a very simplistic response that hopefully holds some nugget of insight. It comes out of my own personal experience of coming to understand that relationships can be conditional or unconditional. If we only know conditional love and acceptance, it is very difficult to offer something different to others. When we experience unconditional love we begin to realize we too are capable of offering others the same and no longer rely on ways to control and manage each other. Because we are human and not perfect, we all live with this tension to some extent. As we become more conscious of the difference, we then become responsible for demonstrating this unconditional acceptance to others.

As educators engage with the practice of rj, experience unconditional acceptance, and are also reminded that the foundation that rj is about honouring each other as human beings, a punitive, neglectful, or permissive approach to discipline will hopefully seem less and less effective. This however, can be a very long journey that requires stamina and patience. -D.

*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)*

Resources

Class Meetings: Building Leadership, Problem Solving and Decision Making Skills in the Respectful Classroom. Donna Styles (2001) Pembroke Publishers Limited 538 Hood Road, Markham, ON L3R 3K9.

An innovative book that shows teachers how to use class meetings to contribute to a culture of respect

You said it ...

Thanks to all of you who sent responses to the rj sentence starters. 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.

Since I've started using rj practices I've noticed...

- I am much calmer when dealing with difficult students or situations;
- the impact on students;
- children know what 'comes next' when there is injury or insult;
- I am much more aware of the interactions between students in my classroom and how these interactions can help or hinder self esteem, learning and community. I am also more aware of how I, as the teacher, can contribute to or take away from "community" in the way I interact with individuals and the class as a whole;
- that those who love it, use it effectively, and those who don't understand it, continue to operate punitively, so we're sending mixed messages to our respective communities about how we want to 'be', with one another;
- RJ is a philosophy that enters all aspects of my life.

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)****

