

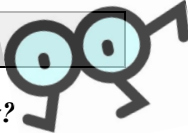
Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

Volume 2: Issue 7

May 2011

April came and went without a monthly DIALOGUE! We're hoping you missed it, but given everyone's busy schedule, we're sure the time slipped by for you as it did for us. Recently I had several wonderful conversations with people about their schools' journeys with restorative justice. It hasn't all been smooth sailing but when we consider the alternative, what would we like to return to if we gave up restorative justice practices? Read this month's issue and consider the gift we have of freely exploring how to better live together in community. As always, thanks to our contributors for your insights.

Focussed Lenses



What came first: the chicken or the egg?

This proverbial perplexing question can often be dismissed as insignificant and irrelevant to life. But consider the question: *what comes first: behaviour or relationship?* Our perspective on this may be the key to being able to sustain restorative justice in schools. If our starting point for being together with our students and colleagues is focussed on appropriate behaviour, all of our energy will go into being sure we have the right rules and that they are followed. From this we expect healthy relationships will grow. In this context, restorative justice tends to be understood as a strategy for responding to inappropriate behaviour. However *if relationship is our starting point*, then our energy will go into appreciating and caring for one another. Rules exist, but only after we are clear about our vision for a healthy community. In this context, restorative justice is understood as a way of being together, a means for addressing harm so the well-being of communities and individuals are nurtured. At first glance, the difference may seem irrelevant, but take some time to reflect ... are you and your school focussed on rules and behaviour, or are you focussed on nurturing relationships? Your starting point does make all of the difference.

the others often are frustrated with them. By January/February I was noticing some rather unhealthy frustration with one student in particular, Stephen. From an earlier circle I had tried to conduct, it was clear that Stephen was not ready to be in a full class circle. His maturity level is quite low and is seemingly unaware of group dynamics being unable to give and receive comments without causing further harm. When specific concerns arose about Stephen, I was hesitant but finally decided to have a circle without Stephen. I had my assistant take Stephen out of the classroom to read with him while we had the circle. In order to assure the students we weren't talking 'behind his back', but were trying to help him, I told them what the circle would be about and that I'd share with Stephen what we talked about. I acknowledged for them that I felt they were having a hard time and that the purpose of the circle was to find ways to help him and ways that we could work together to make things better. I gave everyone a chance to share what they saw happening with Stephen, both positive and negative. Then I asked them to share why they thought he was doing these things. I got some very interesting responses that reminded me that little children are wise! Finally, I asked them to share ways that they could help Stephen or ways that I could help them to help him. They didn't come up with a lot of ways, but we did decide on a few ways that we could help him.

Bullfrogs and Butterflies

"It's working!"

A story challenging us to see the responsibility of those involved beyond the actual incident

I have quite a difficult Grade One/Two class this year. There is rarely a time that they are quiet and listen to each other, however when I introduced sharing circles, they really seemed to do well with them. I think it was the first time they all actually seem to listen to each other! As long as the circles are short, they go well.

A couple students in the class are quite challenging, and

After the circle was over I talked to Stephen outside of the room about the circle we had and the 'plan' that we had decided on--that they'd tell him to stop if they didn't like it, that if they walked away it was because they were getting hurt--not because they didn't like him, tell him when they liked what he was doing, try to play with him, etc. He was fine with this, showed little emotion and happily returned to his reading.

Things got a little better after that as the students have a bit of a better outlook. However, the most visible result was about 3 weeks after we had the circle. It just so happened that we had to pair Stephen up with one of my other very challenging students when we were working

with scooters in the gym. About 5 minutes after they were working together, the other student came up to me and said "Mrs. Stake! it's working!" When I asked him what was working, he exclaimed, "Playing with Stephen. I'm teaching him how to play nicely and we're even having fun! I think he's learning!"

I don't think the circle changed Stephen's behaviours, but it has helped the other students interactions with him. I wasn't sure about how to run that circle, but I think having the circle without him was the right thing in this situation. I'm not sure if I did it all right, but as a first attempt with this sort of circle, I was happy with the outcome.

Grade 1/2 teacher

Wondering

Is it ok to hold a circle without the person who has caused the harm present?

The story above illustrates how a circle without the person directly involved can be very beneficial. However, you must *always* proceed with caution, being transparent with the absent party that the circle is happening, and with those participating that information will be passed on to the one absent as the teacher wisely did in the above example. I often use the analogy of rj being a 3-legged stool—dialogue happens with (1) the one causing harm, (2) the one harmed and (3) those who care about them or have been impacted indirectly. Without one of these parties present, you proceed but always as if that party is present, always being clear that impact affects all 3 parties. Restorative justice requires that all three groups are acknowledged so that the big picture emerges.

In my school it seems that rj is only about talking through problems. The ones causing harm rarely are required to do anything and to me it seems little changes.



If this is what is occurring, only some aspects of rj are being implemented which in essence may result in a practice that is not restorative. Rj is definitely a means for holding people accountable, and as such is as much about *doing* as it is about *talking*. Because rj is primarily about honouring one another and building nurturing relationships, in a specific behavioural incident, all

people in a circle need to respond with *doing*. For the one causing harm, *doing* can involve an apology, restitution, time to practice what they didn't do well, time out to think, cleaning up garbage, writing a letter, an essay with a new approach, etc. Remember however, *doing* must be meaningful and not about retribution. Along with those who have caused harm remember too that the adults and other students involved indirectly will also be accountable for supporting and encouraging the one who has caused harm, and changing those things they may be doing that have contributed to the person acting inappropriately. As the teacher you also need to take time to reflect on your responsibilities and identify if you have contributed to the problem in any way. Often teachers excuse themselves from the process believing they are not involved. However, as a teacher you are affected/impacted and thus you have a voice and needs that should be met as well. You can identify things you need for restoration/restitution to occur. A CAUTION is necessary however: because you are 'bigger' than the student and are in an authority position, you may be prone to using manipulation to manage the student for your convenience. You are in a power position that can easily be misused if you aren't constantly holding yourself accountable.

Accountability is a key component of rj. Talking is appropriate when the repair of harm or change is the result. But when it isn't, specific, active expectations are put in place so restitution occurs.

You are invited!

Look for and plan to attend a wonderful rj professional development experience sponsored by OCSTA this summer ...<http://www.ocsta.org/?q=node/52>

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)

*As the readership of the RJ DIALOGUE grows, for those new to it, a note explaining its origins and original audience is warranted. The first issue of RJ DIALOGUE came out in October 2009 for those who had taken rj training workshops through the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools and Shalem Mental Health Network in Ontario, Canada. Set in the context of a faith-based independent school system, the connection of rj to indigenous and spiritual traditions was made with a particular focus on the Judeo-Christian perspective. This focus is also the context of the RJ DIALOGUE. If you are receiving this e-newsletter, your contact information was provided by yourself or someone who thought you might be interested. **If you wish to be removed from the list, please reply to this email with a subject line stating: Remove me from e-list.** If you are enjoying the newsletter be sure to contribute your questions, stories and resources. And if you know of others who might benefit from it, by all means pass it on and/or send me their email address to add to the mailing list.*