

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

*** Brought to you through a collaboration between Shalem Mental Health Network and Dorothy Vaandering***

Welcome to the first edition of the RJ Monthly DIALOGUE. The purpose of this newsletter is to create a space in which people committed to implementing restorative justice in their educational setting can share their experiences. Here we can be reminded of the basic principles of restorative justice that we were introduced to in training, share what Zehr (2004) calls our “butterfly and bull-frog” stories, and ask questions to help us clarify our daily practice and overall understanding. For now this Monthly DIALOGUE will go to people who have participated in the RJ trainings provided by Shalem. It can be sent to others on request. Feel free to pass it on to anyone interested. At this point I will serve as editor. Let me know if you find it helpful. My intention is to keep it going as long as there is interest—that could be 2 months or 20 years ... who knows.

The format will be informal and simple ... like a comfortable, well worn chair, a place where we’ll want to come to sit and chat or listen for awhile. A place where you can share your stories and questions without thinking too much about the finesse of the writing. A place simply to *be*. Over time some regular columns will develop. For now, we have — Focussed Lenses; Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies; Wondering; and Resources. For now it is an e-mail DIALOGUE. In time it may become a blog. Feel free to suggest different categories and a different name ... this is a DIALOGUE in process. Thanks to those who contributed to this first edition. *Dorothy Vaandering*

Focussed Lenses

At the heart of rj is one’s view of humanity—are we objects to be *measured* or subjects to be *honoured*.
Three key questions to guide our practice:

Am I measuring?

Am I honouring?

What message am I sending?

These questions relate to our relationship with ourselves, our students, our colleagues, our loved ones, our enemies, our God, as well as our environment.

Think back over your day and reflect how you engaged with others and this world.

Resources

Many picture books which can be used at any grade level, carry strong restorative justice themes. Some favourites include:

The Hating Book by Charlotte Zolotow;
If Only I Had a Green Nose by Max Lucado
Don’t Laugh at Me by Steve Seskin & Allen Shamblin

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

*My First Healing Circle at
John Knox Christian School.
Michael J. Meinema: Principal*

“Quit it!”, “That’s not fair!”, “What are you doing?”
These are just a few of the phrases that could be heard over a soccer game turned bad! Picture a group of students playing outside at recess, and as usual, a soccer game has just begun. The weather is nice, the students are excited about another game, and the teams have just been made. Two of the stronger players in grade 3 decided that they would be the captains, and each quickly choose teams, in order to not delay the game any longer. Once the teams were picked, the students hit the field, ready for another exhilarating game!

It quickly became clear that the teams were not fair, and one team began to dominate the other. It was actually becoming difficult to keep track of the score, and the frustration levels were escalating! Soon, a fight breaks out, and the teacher on outside duty puts a stop to the fight, helps the students even out the teams in order to even the playing field, and talks with the fighters to restore the situation back to what the soccer game was intended for, and restores peace to a situation that needed it!

I was told about the situation, and how the teacher handled things. It sounded like everything was handled well, and I was thrilled with that; the students learned more about the expectations we have here at John Knox Christian School, and they learned about team dynamics. I did not intend to intervene, as my colleague had handled the situation perfectly! But, at the next recess, another fight broke out! This time, I was outside to see how the students were doing, and the three leaders approached me and asked if I could “facilitate a healing circle for them”.

We headed inside and sat around the table in my office. Each person took turns speaking about what they viewed to be the issue on the soccer field. The students listened to each other, took turns speaking, and expressing how they felt at the time of these fights and at recess in general. I had barely spoken a word, and the students had already discovered what the bigger issues were with regards to the fighting that was taking place during recesses. Two of the boys agreed that they should not be captains, because they were so competitive with each other. Not only that, the students came up with a plan of action that they all hoped would solve the issues they were experiencing not only outside, but as classmates. I must tell you that I was amazed at what I was seeing, and I was thrilled with how honouring each student was to each other, to the rules of our school, and to me as their principal. It was clear that they did not want to have issues, and that they just needed a place that they could safely and securely work through the situation, which allowed for restoration.

Restorative Justice and Pedagogy

Laura, a grade 2 teacher relates the following:

They were reading a story about Herbert the other day and [in the story] one of the classmates teased the other one with nicknames and it's interesting that the kids themselves in that group said, “I wonder how those kids feel being called those names?” ...

Its funny because I think just in the years that I've been teaching, years ago they probably would have laughed ... But they didn't automatically go 'funny', they automatically went, 'Oh I wonder how that person feels', so you know you think because we talk about it, it's not funny anymore.

RJ Wondering

I have students that have been through the [rj] process and still want a 'pound of flesh' afterward, even months later they hate the framework, ridicule the philosophy and down play the benefits. Is it okay to allow them to float in their own ambiguity and frustration?

--Nathan Siebenga

As you indicate Nathan, rj takes time ... it is a paradigm shift and when people are expecting 'a pound of flesh' it is hard for them to shift their expectations. At the time of the circle they may indicate honestly that they are satisfied as they sit with their community. As they enter back into their environment, they may begin to second guess what actually happened as our social structures do not encourage us to resolve harm done in this way. When after a time you hear that there is dissatisfaction, it would be wise to connect with the people speaking this way and provide them with an opportunity to express what they are thinking as it contradicts what was decided on in the circle. At that time, you can invite them to participate in a circle again. To let them float in their own ambiguity and frustration could result in the rj experience being portrayed to others inaccurately. It is always wise to follow up a circle with individual conversations to check for satisfaction or with an informal meeting with those most directly involved. In fact one of the agreements should always include a specified time of follow up in a week to ten days after the circle was held. ***--Dorothy***

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.

Partnership News ...

OCSTA Summer Institute RJ Workshop participants gathering ... Thursday, October 29, 2009 at 5:00 at Redeemer College. Location to be determined.

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)