

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

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June 2010

It's June! High schools are in the midst of exams; elementary schools are in their last 2 weeks of classes, which means final evaluations, projects, and field trips. As the year closes, it is very easy for adults and youth alike to fall back into old patterns in an attempt to just hold on till the year is over. Owen Webb insightfully acknowledges this and calls us to recognize the temptation, in his contribution to this month's DIALOGUE. Read it, muster up your last bit of energy and finish the race well! Though difficult, we can never take a holiday from honouring all people as image bearers of God.

Focussed Lenses

June 11, 2008

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on June 11, 2008 at 3:00 PM? Do you remember the significance of that day? It was a turning point in Canadian history, one that is having and will continue to have a major impact on all of our lives. If we remember it and allow it to penetrate our lives, we will discover more fully the gift that restorative justice can be.

On June 11, 2008 at 3:00 PM Prime Minister Stephan Harper stood in the House of Commons and apologized to Aboriginal peoples of this land for the suffering inflicted on them by Western peoples through the abuses of forced assimilation through residential schools. Have you found ways personally and culturally to live out that apology? Many aboriginal peoples in the early days of Canadian history willingly shared significant gifts with foreigners. Today they continue to graciously offer us incredible insights, including talking circles that restore our understanding of each other as connected human beings. To focus our lenses this month, reflect on the words of Ojibwa elder Hilda Nadjiwan who stated after the public apology:

*We are broken
within the context of relationships;
and we are also healed
within the scope of relationships.*

times, another has expressed that she is done with school, the stresses of exams and final grades weigh heavy on both students and teachers, and my encouraging words seem to fall on deaf ears. When incidents occur, they are clouded by previous interactions, end of year emotions, and an underlying tone of "I just need to make it to the end."

Regardless of the stresses and pressures of the end of the year, the September student is as worthy as the June student! I would be remiss if I stated that previous incidents and pent up emotions need to be ignored. They can't be ignored, for the interactions, episodes, and adventures of the past year have moulded both educator and student in both positive and negative respects. We are not the individuals we were in September.

An important characteristic of Restorative Justice is focussing on the incident, starting with the question, "What happened?" This enables us to hear the voice of the student and to legitimize the rights of the student. In hearing the student's story, we are provided with the opportunity to discern the facts and to move forward with the student's best interests in mind. At the same time, we give ourselves an opportunity to separate the incident from the emotions of the past year. Our experiences have shaped us and will shape our responses. Focussing on the incident, and working through the restorative questions will assist us in ensuring that our responses are just.

Simply "making it to the end" without addressing issues is a bandage solution that fails to uphold the needs and interests of both the student and the teacher. We must seek to restore that which has been broken, for brokenness opposes worthiness. As teachers, it is within our discretionary power to address the incidents we observe, to work with students, and to lead them towards making things right. Regardless of the number of incidents, when students fall short, we need to advocate for them, providing support and expectations to meet their needs. I was recently at a conference where Dr. Bruce Hekman stated, "Some

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

*"It is Easier to Be Restorative in September
than it is in June"*

I was recently asked how things were going. I responded with, "It is easier to be restorative in September than it is June..." September starts with a blank slate: I have little or no history with my students, my classroom commences with a culture of potential and hope, and classroom incidents are islands unto themselves with no background to complicate them. It is now June: one student has been late to my class 29

things are loved because they are worthy; some things are worthy because they are loved.” My students and I are worth the effort—even in June. —Owen Webb

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. Here are some of the final ideas you sent:

I am disappointed that:

- at times we still look for RJ to punish kids;
- our default setting (as teachers and adults) is to mete out punishment when children misbehave;
- rj is not more widely understood;
- I do not have all the time in the world.

I do not understand that:

- how people 'coopt' the term restorative, and repackage it to be something that it is not, thereby contributing to further alienation of our truly restorative work.
- the conservative, almost adult-centred focus of many schools and the fear of young people;
- people who are unwilling to talk.
- *A helpful resource would include:*
 - a way to resolve incidents where no one accepts responsibility;
 - a book for students, staff and community;
 - funded curriculum;
 - 12x18 photographs of children's' faces showing a variety of feelings.
 - grade/age specific teaching curriculum for teaching skills on an ongoing basis, such as classroom meeting format, character traits training

Wondering?

Is rj more applicable to girls than to boys? It seems that boys are less able to share their feelings than girls.

This is a question that is asked often. Though gender differences do exist, this perspective may be buying into and perpetuating a stereotype of gender preferences. In fact, this is a dangerous myth. Some of the most successful restorative conferences and culture changes have occurred in all-male youth detention centres, such as Brookside Youth Centre in Cobourg, Ontario and among male gangs.

What educators need to be alert for are both boys and girls who are having difficulty articulating what happened and how they are feeling. If you sense that anyone in the group is finding it a challenge to talk about what they are “feeling” shift the question and only

focus on “what are you *thinking*?”

Students of both genders grow in their receptivity to a rj circle because it is the one place where they feel like they can articulate what they are feeling. Though there may be some initial resistance, when students experience the outcome of a circle, they are much more receptive to it the next time. This is like anything new we are learning.

In a recent conversation with elementary students of both genders about their experience with how harm is addressed in their schools, the boys were very vocal about the fact that teachers don't listen to them when they call attention to harm that has been done and identify that things would be better if they could share their stories. Could this observation point to the fact that our perception that boys are less receptive to rj than girls might actually be a reflection of the messages boys are sent socially, not what they actually want?

This is a challenging question. It would be good to hear from others about the circles that are held and if boys are reluctant to participate. Send in your stories. In looking back at the last 7 issues of the DIALOGUE it is interesting to note that the majority of the stories shared involved boys.

Upcoming Events

July 5-8, OCSTA is once again hosting **RJ in Schools** an introductory workshop and rj facilitator training at Redeemer University College. If you haven't attended yet, COME. If you have, encourage your colleagues to attend. See <http://www.ocsta.org/?q=node/52> for details.

It's not too late to sign up!

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)*