

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

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The Golden Rule—treat others as you want to be treated—or as the Old Testament instructs—love your neighbour as yourself—is an adage that is well known in all religious traditions. For restorative justice that integral belief can bring people to dialogue together to resolve difficult issues. What occurs in such a dialogue however if a safe space is created is what Jesus commands when he gives his disciples a NEW command ... *to love each other as Christ loves us*. That command pushes the envelope as we are asked to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to recognize our participation in the harm done and the harm experienced. This is a difficult thing to live out but made possible because Christ promises that where 2 or 3 of us are gathered in his name to resolve differences (Matt. 18:19), he will be there.

Focussed Lenses

Many of us chose to engage with rj in education initially because we were looking for a way to address inappropriate harmful student behaviour. What we have discovered along the way is that rj encompasses much more. To reflect on what your current thoughts are regarding your personal and your school's engagement with rj, ask yourself the question, "Whose interests are being served by your current practice of rj?" Answering this question honestly takes courage. Any response that brings to mind controlling behaviour and maintaining your or the school's reputation first rather than nurturing relationships needs to be acknowledged as an abuse of power. Admitting this tendency will bring us to a place of vulnerability, a place that holds great hope for implementing rj principles effectively.

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

RJ in action

What can rj look like in daily practice? The following snapshot of a classroom teacher's practice exemplifies an effective means of integrating rj principles into every aspect of a school day.

Terri is intent on valuing her 32 grade six students highly and unconditionally, seeking their well-being and encouraging them to be active members of the class community. Consistently and purposefully Terri welcomes each person warmly regardless of the time they arrive, gives reasons for any request she has of students ("if you'd turn this way, Paul, you'd be able to get the details"), praises and celebrates their personality and gifts ("That's a really mature way of connecting ideas, Sue"), invites them to share concerns and questions ("I haven't heard this before ... you're really frustrated by this"), gives them a voice and choice in selecting activities and groups, and allows them to participate in assessment practices. In curriculum

content, Terri highlights relationship and community at every opportunity regardless of whether it is math, social studies or language arts. When students are hurt or cause harm to others she responds without judgement and as soon as possible provides an opportunity for students to dialogue together to find ways to repair harm and rebuild community.

Terri's approach is well received by her students who are often considered to be less academically capable and involved in conflict situations more frequently. One student, Paul is new to the school this year, coming from a school where he was in a behaviour class. He sums up the impact Terri has on the class when I ask him why he is not in a behaviour class at this school. "I'm doing fine here," Paul states, "because Ms. Tanner [Terri] cares about *me*, about *us*."

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.

I am surprised that:

- there is usually laughter during most of these rj conversations;
- rj isn't as time consuming as I first thought;
- my passion continues to grow for restorative work;
- power & control still seem to trump peace & resolution;
- rj practices are unappealing to some....**everyone** needs compassion and understanding at some point in their life.

I heard a student say:

- they are now getting along with _____ for the first time in two years.
- what happened? ☺
- that this made him feel heard for the first time in a long time.
- ...it is harder to face how you have hurt others.
- on the issue of 'mean words' verses 'nice words' a 4 year old boy said we should use nice words like...'car' ☺!

Wondering?

I teach grade 7 and have a young lady throwing some scathing insults at a young lad. She claims that he gets in her face, and won't leave when she asks. He admitted in a preparatory interview with me that he had a crush on her. (My heart was already breaking at that point). He was willing to reveal this to her in the conference; I thought it might explain some of his behaviour to her. At the end, I asked what they each needed to move forward. He talked about an end to the put-downs. She said, "I just want him to totally leave me alone." (ouch – heart cleft in two... cold feeling in my veins). She is unmoved by his feelings, and is actually insulted by the crush. Should I have asked him to keep the crush confidential? Have you run across this before?

Thanks for sharing so openly. This is a challenging but very real situation. Let me begin by encouraging you to follow up with each of the students separately now that a few days have passed to see how they are doing. Use the rj questions to guide your conversation again as they are now familiar with them. I suspect that what the young lady said may not be what she is feeling now that she has had some time to think about it. Initially she may have been shocked by what she heard and felt very uncomfortable about it especially in your presence, which could have made her very defensive. Her request, though hurtful, is not surprising as it was his attention she was trying to curb in the first place.

What the young man needs is your support and encouragement to keep his head up. He needs to be reminded that sharing as he did took courage and though the situation may not have resulted in a desired outcome, he needs to hear from you that he took important steps to stop further harm for the two of them. If he can continue in the same courageous direction, his actions will impact the situation positively from here on in.

And given time, if he can actually respect her wishes for him to not 'get in her face' she may actually see him in a different way. Of course there is no guarantee. Adolescents can be brutal. The fact that he actually was able to confide in you shows me that he trusts you and your continued support for him and coaching about how to convince girls that they are respected is critical. He needs to realize that in situations like this, adults can be trusted--and when we are the trusted adult we have a key responsibility to support effectively.

As for the girl, it is important too that she is not left hanging. She is struggling with what is appropriate in this adolescent stage. They both need to realize that they can choose to treat each other like humans or like objects and during adolescence, media especially

encourages them to objectify each other.

Your role at this point is to stay connected with each of them regarding this concern. Ask them from time to time "what's happening? what are you thinking/feeling now? what's the hardest thing for you? what do you need?" Your purpose is to always be pointing them back to seeing each other and themselves as people of worth.

As I write, I think about this being a great general topic for a class meeting at this level--boy-girl relationships and what it means to be honoured. You could do a circle around the question, "What makes you feel worthwhile when you are with your friends?" OR "What do boys need from others to make them feel like people not objects? OR "What do girls need from others to make them feel like people?" It actually could start as a series of circles, the first being: "a time I felt I was human" followed by "a time I felt like an object."

As for if you should have asked the boy to keep his crush confidential, that is difficult to answer. Perhaps it would have been important for you to ask him to think of what could happen if he shared this just so he would be aware of potential consequences. However, his sharing is exactly what we want to encourage but only if the girl commits to holding the conversation in confidence. By having him share this openly, you all are able to get at the core issue, rather than dance around it.

Upcoming Events

July 5-8, OCSTA is once again hosting **RJ in Schools** an introductory workshop and rj facilitator training at Redeemer University College. Encourage your colleagues to attend. See <http://www.ocsta.org/?q=node/52> for details.

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)*