

Monthly Restorative Justice in Education DIALOGUE

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The second edition of the RJ Monthly DIALOGUE continues to bring stories, questions and ideas to support you in your experience with implementing restorative justice practices in your school. This month Jessica Baarda shares a story of the impact a first class circle meeting had on the culture of the class. Somewhat apprehensive about conducting such a circle and readily aware that it wasn't facilitated perfectly, there were significant changes that took place. She provided a safe space and invited her students to voice their concerns and commitments for change. Her story is a story of courage in many ways and one that will hopefully motivate more of us to take first steps. Bernice Huinink-Buiter, who has had significant experience with rj asks a difficult question that many schools engaged with rj may have confronted already or will most certainly do so in the near future. Thank you Jessica and Bernice for helping us catch a glimpse of the reality of implementing rj.

Focussed Lenses

How is restorative justice different than other safe school initiatives and approaches? In an effort to move school culture from being rule-based to relationship-based, restorative justice provides all involved in harm done with opportunity to share their story with each other. Where other approaches will bring together those who have caused harm and those who have been hurt, rj recognizes that each person involved is part of a larger community. This community (parents, friends, neighbours, peers, etc.) cares for those directly involved and thus is also affected by the harm. Hearing each other's stories serves as a reminder that the concern is not about an incident but about real people. And real people, as Jesus demonstrated, find healing in the context of a caring community.

Stories—Bullfrogs and Butterflies

A Class Circle

Jessica Baarda

As I marked my last unit test and recorded yet another low score, I knew that it was time to involve my students in a discussion about how the learning climate in our class was affecting our classroom community. At the beginning of the semester students were given an opportunity to share what learning strategies worked best for them, and we talked about the importance of creating a learning environment that acknowledged and respected the diverse needs of the students in our class. I wasn't surprised that about half of the students identified cooperative learning as one of their strengths and preferences. The remaining students, however, indicated a preference for independent work and a quiet work environment, and some of them seemed overwhelmed by the constant banter of their peers.

Given the fact that it was a grade nine class, I knew that many of my students were experiencing the growing pains of high school and the reality of choosing their identity as a learner. Would they default to the identity they had assumed in elementary school, or did they see grade nine as an opportunity to adopt an identity as a learner? By week three, it was clear to me that five individuals in my class had elected to replicate their elementary experience; impulsive movements, running commentary on what was happening in the classroom, and flippant remarks characterized their behaviour. Their shared history made their interactions more powerful as it was an act that they had honed and perfected over many years. Chaos had not ensued in the classroom; I still felt in control, but I knew that our learning community was broken. There was something daunting about considering a restorative justice circle, but after getting some encouragement from a colleague, I decided it was something our class needed to do in order to restore community in our classroom.

The circle didn't really go as I had envisioned it would. I spoke far too long and the students spoke too little. The students were a little confused by the circle formation when they entered the room, although they did sense that something serious was about to be discussed. I recorded the test average score on the whiteboard as a way to get the class to think about what had happened, as the test scores indicated that the majority of students had experienced the most difficulty answering questions related to discussions that had occurred in class. Only two students suggested that their low score might be related to a lack of studying, and a few students indicated that maybe people hadn't been paying attention during the class discussions. Overall, the students had little to say, until I suggested that maybe the test scores indicated that some people were distracted by other things that competed for their attention in class. Suddenly more students had something to say. "It's hard to pay attention when

people interrupt all the time”. I suggested that people also might be wary to participate in discussions when they aren’t sure how their peers will respond to what they have to say. There were some affirming nods and when we moved to thinking about how we might better respect each other as learners, the students who had indicated some frustration with the current situation offered many positive suggestions. Interestingly enough, the five students who in many ways had been responsible for compromising the learning in the classroom said that “Everything is fine and nothing needs to be changed. I like it the way it is”. I referred back to the test scores and reiterated the need for change, and then I challenged the class to consider what they could do to influence a shift in how we respected each other as a community of learners.

To my great delight and surprise, a subtle shift occurred quite quickly. One of the five students that had publicly stated that nothing needed to be changed, began to reinvent his identity as a learner. He began to provide mature, insightful comments during discussions and was attentive during instructional time. His friends began to exhibit more self-control and their banter became less hostile and more productive. Suddenly more students became vocal during discussions as they no longer felt threatened by their peers’ commentary. Recent test scores and assignment evaluations indicate that the majority of my students are engaged and experiencing success in their learning. I still give daily reminders to a few individuals about the most appropriate way to contribute to class discussions, but the students keep each other accountable as well. One other important thing I have tried to do is to have an informal circle every now and again to allow students to share things like the highlights/lowlights of their day or weekend. In this way they don’t view the circle as something ominous or disciplinary. Is the learning community in my classroom, perfect? No, but I do think we are striving to honor each other and God in our interactions with each other, and that is something beautiful.

Resources

Since Jessica’s story describes a full class circle meeting a resource that can guide your experience is:

The Basics of Class Circles:

<http://schoolcircles.blogspot.com/>

Bernice’s question describes the difficulty of implementing rj and often when I am discouraged I read or listen to **Kay Pranis**. Check out her thoughts at:

<http://spiritofinstitutions.blogspot.com/2008/10/kay-pranis-spirituality-and-leadership.html>

Wondering

We have worked hard to ensure that our discipline policy is restorative and have conveyed to all school participants that this is how we will be addressing issues of harm that arise. What do we do when someone refuses to participate in a circle process? Bernice Huinink-Buiter

Ensuring that your school policy is restorative in nature allows you to point to it as THE manner in which harm will be addressed at your school. However, rj is always invitational. When people resist, more than likely they realize a circle will put them or their children in a vulnerable space. Our society and past experience remind them that people will take advantage of them in such times. There is no easy answer to your question. Rj is a paradigm shift that requires significant patience on the part of us who are convinced of its value. Our response needs to be one that acknowledges their emotions as valid, that indicates a circle will be held with those who are willing to participate, and invites them to join in if they change their mind. Take the time as well in these difficult conversations to actually ask those resisting the key rj questions: What happened? What are you thinking and feeling? What impact is this having on you? What’s the hardest thing for you? What do you need to go on? What can you provide for the others involved? Though a full rj circle may not be possible, it is possible to hold a talking circle with those interested that would allow these participants to brainstorm for a way to move forward towards healing.

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)