

Restorative Justice in Education

Monthly DIALOGUE

For those of us actively involved in restorative justice in schools, we know that there are many bumps along the road. In fact, as committed as we are to honouring each other, we often discover that our own thoughts and actions leave something to be desired, and we can be responsible for misusing the gift of healing dialogue for our own purposes. In this issue of the RJ Monthly DIALOGUE we tackle a few of the tough questions regarding implementation of restorative justice in schools. In fact for some of those bumps, we venture out in a VW Classic Beetle! --hang on for the ride!



Focused Lenses

Lent -- a time to journey with Christ as he makes his way to the cross, and out of the grave, conveying God's great love for us. At the core of God's heart is the desire to be in relationship with us. The whole Old and New Testaments is one big story of God pursuing us after we reject God's community of belonging, God weeping about the pain this causes that weaves its way in and out of our varied lives, and finally God defeating death, making way for the wonder of new life--*for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17).*

This *pursuing, weeping* and *defeating death* is really the action restorative justice seeks to mimic when we hurt each other. Recognizing the broken places where some belong and others do not, restorative justice seeks to make those places obvious. When exposed, there is hope for change. When we acknowledge the pain resulting from the harm caused, we can weep together instead of hiding away behind our defenses. Finally, sitting down together to share what has happened, how it has impacted us, and what we can do together to repair the harm, allows us to collectively defeat the bitterness that eats us up from the inside out. We walk out into new life.

This process is a deeply spiritual process, one we cannot complete individually or collectively in our own strength. This is why Christ says in Matthew 18, a chapter on how to deal with conflict and harm, "*where two or three gather in my name [to resolve conflict], there am I with them.*"

May all your Lenten journeys end in a celebration of new life!

A ripple effect...

After participating in a formal restorative circle a parent commented,

"The rj circle was an opportunity to clear up so many misunderstandings and bring healing to us all."



Restorative justice acknowledges justice as honouring the worth of all and being enacted through relationship. When something occurs that affects 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 contributing member of the community of which they are a part. (D. Vaandering, 2011)

Bullfrogs and Butterflies

VW as Metaphor for RJ in Schools

In January, the middle of the school year, I was invited to introduce restorative practices in a small, parochial, in elementary school in Minnesota. I was asked to work with the middle-school staff and teachers. They were all new to restorative justice and I was new to teaching restorative practices in a grade school.

My goal in introducing RJ was and is to invite everyone to embrace it as an on-going, relational, community-building and peace-building process that permeates all aspects of life, not merely as a disciplinary tool in the school.

I began by acquainting them with the circle process as a way of building or enhancing the relational culture of the school and of preventing violence. I suggested that, initially, they limit their practice to student talking circles five to ten minutes in length.

Most of my circle experience has been in what I call the *intervention* mode. For example, I've been in sentencing circles, family support circles and victim-offender circles. Harm had occurred and these circles were overt efforts at intervention. Inappropriate or otherwise disruptive behavior in a classroom might warrant intervention via a circle process – a *disciplinary intervention*.

One evening it occurred to me to use a small, recently-purchased replica of the 1967 Volkswagen Classical Beetle (cf. photo) as a metaphor to help the teachers and staff understand RJ and distinguish its various circle modes – *relational, intervention* and *teaching*. The car represents RJ as a philosophy and a way of life which uses restorative practices as a way of honoring one another as human persons. Teachers need to know how to drive this VW. They need solid training in the circle process. All cars need periodic maintenance as well as gas. A professional learning community of teachers and staff will provide the periodic maintenance and gas.

Since this little car is infinitely expandable you can invite everyone to get in. When you wish to have a talking circle or one of celebration or healing you get out the talking piece and “go there.” You are in simple *relational* mode. The day is sunny and mild. Life is good. The next day you must deal with some racial slurs or other conflict. That means an *intervention* or *disciplinary* mode is indicated. It is raining or snowing in relationships so you turn on the windshield wipers and intervene. You may also have to slow down because of poor visibility. The mode has changed but your RJ philosophy and way of life are intact.

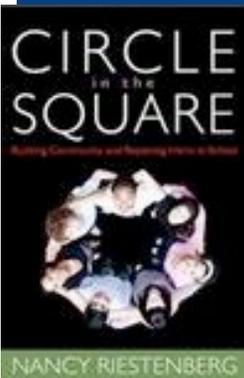
Finally the weather clears, the windshield wipers are off and its time to shift into *teaching* mode. At this point it is tempting to get out of the car, return to a traditional classroom mode and think the restorative journey is done. We need to stay in the car and learn to see schooling in a new way just as we have come to see relating and intervening in a new way. What we once took for granted about teaching may now seem dark, unclear or foggy. Greater illumination is needed, a restorative light that shows us how to use the same relational perspective in what and how we teach. So, we turn on the headlights and proceed.

The circle process is inherently versatile, adaptable to differing circumstances, hence the distinct modes. In my view, the purpose of restorative practices is the transformation of the minds and hearts of persons and communities in who they are and what they do.

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A New Resource!



“The stories and case studies...have been gleaned from my work with teachers, principals, behaviour specialists, and school liaison officers. In sharing them, I hope to stir your imagination to develop a restorative context and community in your own school—or anywhere that children and youth gather.”

Nancy Riestenberg's new book is an excellent resource for educators interested in building restorative communities in school. It combines both the philosophy and the practice of restorative justice in schools. Throughout the stories she shares, Riestenberg acknowledges that restorative justice is about a paradigm shift away from rules and towards relationships. Recognizing that we each will read this book into our own contexts, Riestenberg doesn't try to be a “how-to” manual for restorative justice in education. Rather, there is a balance between practical examples detailing what people are doing and a thoughtfulness that explores why we do what we do. A very worthwhile purchase for your school. Available through Living Justice Press: www.livingjusticepress.org OR in Canada call: 651-695-1008.

????Wondering????

Can a restorative justice process go wrong?

This complex question is an important one that I have been asked in various forms many times. The short answer is 'yes'. The longer answer would fill books. For now we'll touch on one aspect of it and continue the ideas in future issues.

A significant problem in implementing and employing restorative justice practices in a school is our adult/educator tendency to need to be in control. Historically, schools were set up so that experts conveyed knowledge to young people. The adults *know*, the students need to learn. Though there is a need for transmission of this kind of expert knowledge at times, in this age of google, we know now how transformational education takes place when students and teachers engage together in asking and exploring questions and the mysteries of life. However, the hierarchy of teacher over student is firmly embedded in the relationships present in most schools.

When a restorative justice culture is being cultivated in schools, it is very difficult for the adults to sit in circle with students and listen authentically without making comments to reprimand, fix or encourage. Some examples:

***Check in/out circles:** as a teacher do you speak when you do not have the talking piece, praising some comments, asking clarifying questions, or encouraging someone who has passed to talk? Do you nod enthusiastically in response to some comments and not others? Students are very conscious of their teacher's responses. "If the teacher tells Joe his comment was great, then that means that my comment was not as good as his." Taking your turn to share a response helps students to value everyone's comments for what is said, not for the approval or disapproval the teacher gives.

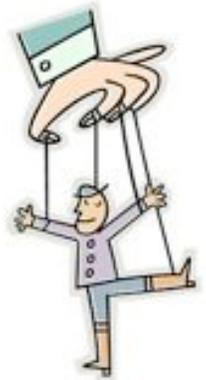
***Class meetings** in which students are invited to share high points and low points in the past week along with suggestions for how to move into the next week,

can feel very threatening to teachers. Though there is a structure, teachers often are fearful because they are not in control of what will be said. They can't anticipate student comments and as a result are not sure how they might need to respond. Recently, a teacher who had committed to having class meetings several years ago when she first learned about restorative justice and circle meetings, revealed she hadn't used them because she felt she couldn't be in control. She wanted to direct class activity, she didn't want to deal with ideas the students would suggest that she didn't like.

***In a circle to address harm** done between students where students, parents, administrator, teacher, and supporting peers meet to repair relationship, administrators find it very difficult to not become defensive or rely on school policy as a bottom line. A recent circle resulted in a principal, after listening to all the stories, contributing his own, and the suggestions for resolution, gave the final word. He turned to the offending students who had apologized and offered to make things right, and told them they had been incredibly irresponsible and future similar offenses would result in a suspension. The facilitator, having been invited by the administrator to lead the discussion, chose not to intervene at that point.

In each of these examples, the restorative justice process is used to encourage students to share because they and their ideas are valued. In trust, many do, allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Then suddenly with an adult hierarchical response, they discover, that the circle dialogue is not safe after all.

Circle processes go wrong when someone in power uses their power to benefit themselves or someone other than those directly involved. ---*More next time...*



"When children are loved, they live off trust; their hearts open up to those who respect and love them, who understand and listen to them."

Jean Vanier, Becoming Human

A bit of background ...

****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)****

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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 Edifide and the 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.

Need more support or ideas? Looking for an idea you read in past RJ Monthly DIALOGUES?

Back issues of the RESTORATIVE JUSTICE in Education Monthly DIALOGUE are available on-line at http://www.shalemnetwork.org/?page_id=243

WE NEED YOU!

This newsletter is unique because it carries your thoughts, questions, ideas, concerns. Thus to keep it going, we need your input regularly. Do you have:

- a story to share?
- a question you *wonder* about?
- a great *idea* for integrating rj into your curriculum and pedagogy?
- a quote or insight that will *focus* our restorative justice lenses?

If you do, email it to: dvaandering@mun.ca

Remember this is a *talking circle* DIALOGUE. Don't fret too much about format or style ... just get your thoughts down in writing and send it my way. If necessary, I'll edit it, ask for your approval, and add it to an upcoming issue. When necessary, it's possible to not have your name attached to it if identifying you will impact your school, colleagues, or students.

References:

- Vaandering, D. (2011). A faithful compass: Rethinking the term restorative justice to find clarity. *Contemporary Justice Review*, 14(3), 307-328.
- Vanier, J. (1999) *Becoming human*. New York: Paulist Press.

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