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Getting Started with Restorative Practices

Let's use practices that teach positive behaviors rather than punish.

Restorative practices are becoming increasingly common in schools—for good reason. Punitive discipline systems aren't changing student behavior in the long term and instead have resulted in increased suspension and expulsion rates for students, especially those from underserved groups, including students with disabilities and black and Latinx youth.

Conventional disciplinary systems don't help students learn positive replacement behaviors; rather they lead students to focus on not getting caught next time. The restorative practices movement recognizes that it's not only rules that are violated when students engage in problematic behavior. Relationships are also harmed. Whereas traditional, punitive discipline models rarely give students the opportunity to make amends to people they've harmed (and thus repair relationships), with restorative approaches, teams of educators help students see the harm they have caused and give them opportunities to make amends and learn from their mistakes.

Helping Teachers Reflect on Justice

As we've found in leading professional development sessions on adopting restorative practices, schools don't become restorative overnight. It takes dedication, honest conversations, and effort to change the culture of a school. That change starts with helping teachers gain clarity on their beliefs about justice. We often begin a session with the following lines, revealed one at a time:



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- When we encounter a student who cannot read, we teach that student to read.
- When we encounter a student who struggles in mathematics, we teach that student math.
- When we encounter a student who does not behave, we punish that student.

For many, these statements prompt cognitive dissonance and launches a discussion about our collective purpose for becoming educators. Most participants report that they have dedicated their professional lives to the development of children and youth. They often realize that teaching pro-social behaviors to students who don't know how to behave, rather than punishing them, accords better with that purpose.



**WATCH
the Video**



Watch a teacher have a restorative conversation with a disruptive student at www.ascd.org/el1019fisherfrey.

We then guide participants in our sessions to focus on the definition of justice. When teams of teachers have different perspectives about justice—or haven't clarified their thinking about it—they tend to focus on punishments. We ask teachers to think of a time when they were harmed by another person, either intentionally or unintentionally, and to journal about the following questions:

- How did you feel?
- What questions did you want to ask the offender?
- What else did you want to say to him/her?
- Who or what could've made things right for you?
- What would justice have looked like for you?

We then ask participants to discuss what they've written with a partner if they're comfortable doing so. We also ask people *when* the harm they wrote about occurred. We point out that most people recalled events from many years ago, noting that people hold onto events that aren't resolved and for which amends haven't been made. (We also note that the most common thing people say they'd like to ask the offender is "Why me?")

From there, we ask people to consider a time when *they* caused another person harm, intentionally or unintentionally (letting them know they won't be asked to share this) and to consider questions similar to those asked above, from the point of view of one who caused harm. We end by asking, "What would justice have looked like for you and for the victim?"

The conversation then moves to people's thoughts about what justice means. When one individual harms another, how do we ensure that justice is served as well as provide opportunities for that individual to make amends? How do we restore relationships? With most groups, we see an incremental shift in dispositions after just one session.

Moving to Restorative Practices

After such reflection, we introduce the continuum of restorative practices, discussed further in our book with Dominique Smith (2015).¹ The three foundational processes— affective statements, impromptu conversations, and class meetings or circles—mostly occur in the classroom. Victim-offender dialogue and restorative conferences are reserved for more complex situations. The skills needed for these two processes take longer to develop, so we recommend that a school's initial investment of time focus on developing the first three practices. Regular exposure to affective statements and conversations with peers and adults about the effects of negative behavior build students' capacity for restorative dispositions. Students gain experience understanding the impact of their actions.

We give teachers sentence starters to engage students in conversations about positive and negative behaviors. These are usually affective statements that focus on the impact of the behavior:

- I feel like the class is distracted by ____.
- I am so touched that you ____.
- I'm having a hard time understanding ____.
- I'm feeling irritated (upset, frustrated) by ____.

Affective statements are useful in the moment, such as when a student is disruptive or not engaging in a key task. Other situations—when student behavior is more serious or when students don't respond to an affective statement—require a longer interaction, usually a private impromptu conversation. We provide teachers a few scripts that they can adapt for such conversations:

- That's not the (student name) that I know. The (student name) I know is (positive attribute). Is there something I need to know?

■ The story I'm telling myself about why you are ____ is _____. Where am I getting this wrong?

As an illustration, the video accompanying this column shows an impromptu conversation that a teacher at the school where we work held with a student.

Don't Steal the Conflict

When the conflict occurs in the classroom, school administrators should avoid "stealing the conflict" by dealing with the misbehaving student themselves. Better to step into the classroom to supervise while the teacher talks with the student in an impromptu conversation. We understand this isn't always possible, but when the *teacher* works to resolve the issue with the student, all parties can move forward with learning. When administrators take over the conflict, there is often no resolution for the teacher; she might think that nothing really happened to this student and that the student got away with the behavior again.

There is much more involved in creating a restorative climate and practices within a school. We encourage schools to take the steps described here to start on the journey, refining their efforts as everyone learns. ■

¹Smith, D., Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2015). *Better than carrots or sticks: Restorative practices for positive classroom management*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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