Transforming School Culture through Restorative Justice:

A Guide for School Counselors

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by

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Abstract

School culture and climate are often underlying themes in educational discussions today. A sense of belonging and contributing has been linked to positive change. This paper discusses the impact that restorative measures, school counselors, and an Adlerian perspective can have on the development of positive school culture. Current school environments are explored with such changes in place.
Transforming School Culture through Restorative Justice:

A Guide for School Counselors

School counselors can transform school culture by using techniques like restorative practices. The basic principles of restorative measures are built on restoring harm. Restorative practices then bring together the parties who caused harm, the parties who have been harmed, and community members who were affected by the outcome. Everyone comes together and is a part of figuring out how to solve a problem. It gives individuals the space to reflect on what they’re doing or have done, why they did it, and what is going to be different next time (Reistenberg, 2003).

In the last decades, three themes have predominated discussion on education in all the comparative jurisdictions. The first relates to school safety and student behaviour issues. The second is concern over the high numbers of school suspensions and exclusions and the hugely detrimental effect of disengagement with formal education both for the student concerned and for society generally. Thirdly, and more recently, is the debate relating to how best to educate for responsible citizens in a democratic society. An education system that embraces greater student participation in school decision making and restorative justice practices offers a perfect opportunity to work towards addressing all these concerns in a cohesive and holistic manner. (Varnham, 2005, p. 99)

The first section of the paper defines restorative justice and history of the practice. It describes the circle process as a structure for restorative practices and it provides examples of research that describe how restorative practices are currently working in schools. The second section provides information on the role of the school counselor in schools. It discusses the role of the school counselor as an educational leader by summarizing current practices and discussing the values of
a leader. Restorative justice and the role of the school counselor both lead to similar desired outcomes in education, an emphasis on building confident individuals, which in turn leads to stronger communities.

The third section discusses the impact of restorative work in schools as a process for change. School culture is analyzed from the perspective of school discipline, school safety, and school community. Restorative practices and school counseling lead to belonging and contributing, which are fundamental values of forming community, and transforming culture.

**Restorative Justice**

**Overview**

Restorative practices have their roots in many aboriginal and native cultures. North American aboriginal practices predate our current understanding by hundreds of years (Ross, 1996, as cited in Kelly, 2009). Restorative models emerged in New Zealand in the 1980s as an approach to youth justice and child protection (Wachtel, 1997, as cited in Kelly, 2009). It then grew with work by practitioners in Australia, such as Terry O’Connell, who developed the script for restorative conferencing, which guides the encounter between the harm-doer and the person(s) harmed (Kelly, 2009).

In the United States, practitioners Ted and Susan Wachtel developed their own model for working with youth at risk. Combining all previous works, Ted and Susan’s work, along with other practitioners in the United States such as Kay Pranis, Mark Umbreit, and Howard Zehr, was given the label *real justice* as an overarching concept (Wachtel, 1997, as cited in Kelly, 2009).
Subsequently, an international network, called the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), was formed and led to the term restorative practices, which is still in use today (Kelly, 2009). The IIRP identified five basic principles that guide exploration through practice:

1. Participation achieved with cooperation rather than coercion,
2. Face-to-face participation of those directly affected,
3. Those directly affected determine the outcome,
4. Fair process includes access and informed consent,
5. Best practices are demonstrated by our own practice. (Rundell, 2007, pp. 53-54),

Restorative practices in Western culture initially emerged within the criminal justice field as restorative justice (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Those within the legal system, victims, offenders, and the community often felt frustrated at the current system’s failure to meet their needs. Mediations and conferencing were introduced as a way to provide accountability for offenders and a place to address the needs of the victims. Restorative justice emerged as a way to emphasize collaboration and cooperative problem solving rather than making sure people got what they deserved (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005).

The concepts of restorative justice continue to grow and emerge in other fields including education. The overarching concepts are easily transferred between disciplines, as “a restorative approach is a philosophy or framework that can guide us as we design programs and make decisions within our particular settings” (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 4).

Ironically, as practitioners search for new answers to time worn issues such as the care and raising of children and youth, they find themselves going full circle and back to the roots of others who in their wisdom had, and have in many respects, what we need to restore modern communities and their citizenry. (Kelly, 2009, p. 20)
The Script

As mentioned previously, the foundation of much of the work in restorative practices comes from the development of “the script” by Terry O’Connell (Kelly, 2009). The script serves as a guide to all restorative practices. The questions asked are as follows:

For the one who has caused harm to others:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you did? In what way?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

For those who have been harmed:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has this incident had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?


These questions can be asked in a formal process or can become more informally imbedded in a culture. Restorative approaches are both a process and a structure and the script can be used as a guide (Kelly, 2009).

Peacemaking Circles

One such structure in which restorative justice practices take place is called “the circle.” Analogous to restorative practices, circles have their roots in native traditions. The circle, as referred to by the Navajo people is “a gift from the creator to keep us in harmony” (Meyer, 2002,
as cited in Boyes-Watson, 2005, p. 194). This gift has given harmony to many people and continues to do so today.

Circles are used in many different settings and for many different reasons. The circle process is a method for youth development, community organizing, emotional healing, conflict resolution, team building, collaboration, and much more (Boyes-Watson, 2005). Circles are used with children and youth in family conferencing, circles of care, circles of courage, classroom meetings, and peacemaking circles. “They are being used not only in cases of wrongdoing but also as a way of dialogue on difficult issues and for community problem-solving” (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 52).

The use of circles in schools supports meaningful development, organization, healing, conflict resolution, and collaboration. Typical classroom rituals, however, center on the hierarchical figure of the teacher who is in charge of the process and possesses all of the knowledge and wisdom. The circle allows a different kind of ritual. When people sit in circle, they not only practice a different ritual, but a different relationship and way to relate to one another (Boyes-Watson, 2005). In contrast with typical classroom rituals, circles provide no one leader and no place to hide (Boyes-Watson, 2005).

**The process.** To begin the circle process, chairs are placed in a physical circle. Everyone present in the circle participates in the process. All points of view are valid and valued and questions from *the script* may be used depending on why the circle was called. The process is marked by ceremonies that include opening and introductions, check-ins, creating connections and sharing stories, identifying issues and seeking solutions, and reflectively closing (Boyes-Watson, 2005). “The actual circle process is akin to the tip of the iceberg: The real force comes from the values embodied by the circle” (Boyes-Watson, 2005, p. 196).
For restorative dialogue to be successful it is important to remember all that is involved. Umbreit, Coates & Vos (2007) suggest for a restorative dialogue to take place there must be a safe environment, respectful interactions and positive energy. Every circle is different and many times the outcome is unexpected depending on the issues being discussed.

The circular process of Restorative Practices, which also focuses attention to the “now” and a specific critical incident, takes all affected persons from one particular place in time to another which is simultaneously the starting point, the end of the circle and another starting point. (Kelly, 2009, p. 30)

**The rituals.** The following rituals guide the circle process: opening and closing in a good way, a talking piece, guidelines, and keepers (Boyes-Watson, 2005). These rituals are consistent no matter what kind of circle is taking place.

The opening ritual helps people transition to a different kind of space (Boyes-Watson, 2005). Openings can vary from a poem to a meditation or a song. The purpose is for participants to come together to honor the space and time, to slow down, and to focus on the present.

The second ritual is a talking piece (Boyes-Watson, 2005). In the native traditions, an eagle feather was used, but today it is usually an object that has some significance to the people for which the circle is gathering. Participants pass the talking piece, usually clockwise, around the circle and only the person who has the object may speak. Everyone else in the circle has the opportunity to listen. Individuals are free to “pass,” or not speak when the talking piece comes to them. The talking piece gives each participant the chance to speak and, more importantly, the chance to listen. To take the time to listen is one of the many gifts of a circle.

The third ritual of the circle is the creation of guidelines, which initiates with the people in the circle. Generally, the process starts by sharing values and discussing what those values
would look like in the circle. For the circle to proceed, everyone in it must agree to the guidelines. This process gives way to the shared authority and responsibility of the circle.

The fourth ritual is that of the keepers. Each circle has at least one keeper, whose job it is to keep or facilitate the circle. This includes preparation for the circle to take place and then posing questions and overall facilitation of the process. It is not, however, the job of the keeper to bring people to agreement or find a solution, because the circle process is a shared responsibility. Boyes-Watson (2005) described experienced circle-keepers as individuals who have come to trust the process and therefore trust the circle. The result ends up just being what it is.

The outcome. The practice of open dialogue helps children to get to know themselves. Circles provide this opportunity to students in a nonthreatening way. Circles give students a space in which to say, “This is how I’m feeling. How are you feeling? And what are we going to do to work together?” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 8). It is important to take the time to stop and recognize each student’s position in the process of restoring harm.

Often people turn directly to what needs to be done to fix a situation, but an important part of healing for students is knowing their stories have been heard (Ashworth et al., 2008). The time spent in listening and restoring can help to prevent recurrences of the problem. This opportunity is important for not only the student’s growth but also for the growth of the community.

Often in American culture, people tend to immediately focus on problems rather than on what is going right (Boyes-Watson, 2005). Part of the role of restorative solutions is to draw focus onto the strengths of individuals involved. This helps to build connections with others involved in the process and give hope in sometimes difficult situations and conversations. “A
circular process . . . starts in one place and when returning to the start, the person who caused the harm, as well as everyone in circle, finds themselves in a very different place” than when the circle was formed (Pranis, 2003, as cited in Kelly, 2009, p. 30). This process brings solutions to individuals, communities, and systems; it sometimes returns balance and more often than not restores justice (McCold, 2008).

**Case Study**

Restorative practices transform communities and systems using collaboration, support, and relationships. The use of restorative practices in schools can have communal effects. Students, teachers, administrators, and the community as a whole benefit from the process. Such work has been done and continues to happen today.

IIRP developed a program called SaferSanerSchools (Mirsky, 2007). In response to American education today, the IIRP president stated,

Rising truancy and dropout rates, increasing disciplinary problems, violence and even mass murders plague American schools. The IIRP believes that the dramatic change in behavior among young people is largely the result of the loss of connectedness and community in modern society. Schools themselves have become larger, more impersonal institutions and educators feel less connected to the families whole children they teach.

(Mirsky, 2007, p. 5)

The staff at Palisades High School, the pilot program of SaferSanerSchools, and eventually other schools in the same district put in many hours of training to start their restorative programming. The IIRP staff teamed with administrators and teachers to experience the approach themselves so they could then pass on the wisdom and practices to their students. They did so over a 3-year
time period. As word spread throughout the school that those who used restorative practices were having success, as shown in Table 1, more staff wanted to become involved (Mirsky, 2007, p. 7).

Eventually the new system included a cafeteria committee and classroom circles. The school counselor helped devise a program in which a staff member was available every period of the school day to facilitate restorative conflict resolution (Mirsky, 2007). As described by Lewis (2009) the efforts of all involved can be seen in the Table below.

Table 1

**Disciplinary Referrals to Student Office in 4 School Years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998–1999</td>
<td>1752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>1426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–2001</td>
<td>1410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–2002</td>
<td>1154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Disruptive Behavior in 4 School Years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Incidents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998–1999</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–2001</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001–2002</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another SaferSanerSchool in Oxfordshire, England, also had success with restorative practices. The Bessels Leigh School is a residential school for boys with emotional and behavior difficulties. As described by Boulton and Mirsky (2006), overall negative incidents, negative physical incidents, and incidents of damage decreased significantly after IIRP practices were implemented at the school as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three-week period</th>
<th>Negative Incidents</th>
<th>Negative Physical Incidents</th>
<th>Incidents of Damage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First 3 wks. of Sept. ’04</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last 3 wks. of Summer Term ’05</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First 3 wks. of Sept. ’05</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A restorative program that uses the same philosophies but different organization was implemented in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The faculty members at Hawthorne Elementary implemented the Circle of Courage™ philosophy discussed in the book *Reclaiming Children and Youth: Our Hope for the Future* (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Buren, 2002, as cited in Ashworth et al., 2008).
Ashworth et al. (2008) described Hawthorne’s program and implementation. Hawthorne’s average daily attendance is 420 students, 87% of whom are on free or reduced lunch rates. The school has a high transient population, an English language learning (ELL) center, and many complex challenges as represented on its data profile.

The district has an after-school detention program, but students can be referred to the Restorative Justice Center (RJC) as an alternative, which is led by the trained adults. Much like the one at Palisades, the program started with adult training. Table 3 shows a typical RJC session.

Table 3

3:00 Preparation for staff (art supplies in place, display ground rules, review the Circle of Courage action plans in each student's folder).

3:15 Students report to the RJC room, hang up book bags and coats, enter quietly, and check in with the facilitator. Before arriving, an adult has assisted the child in filling out a form that provides information about the action that was destructive or dangerous and the victim's statement.

3:20 Opening the Circle. The students and facilitators sit in a circle on the floor and introduce each other. For example, "Hi, I'm Lisa." Next person says, "Hi, I'm Jordan and this is Lisa" and so on.

The goal is stated: To make things better for others, myself, and the school.

State the ground rules: This is a safe place; What is said here stays here; listen respectfully; you only share if you want to; we work to fix things that were broken through destructive, frightening, or dangerous behavior.

Sign confidentiality waivers (if the person is there for the first time).
Receive instructions: Students are grouped according to the type of behavior that occurred: either destructive or dangerous so that they can work together to develop solutions.

3:30 Expressions: Students may use art materials to assist in expressing what happened in the event, to explore their feelings, and to work out ways to fix the problems.

3:40 Group Work & Action Plan. Within small groups, students show or tell what they have determined will prevent future dangerous or destructive behaviors. The groups will generate ideas for "actions of apology" that will help restore the community (i.e., community service, expression of remorse, self-education). This plan is implemented the next day if possible.

3:55 Celebrations & Closing the Circle. Students may share success "of new beginnings" with the whole group. Facilitators and students stand in a circle and say for example: Lisa turns to Jordan and says, "I see you Jordan and I'm here to support you." Jordan returns the saying to Lisa, then turns to LeeAnna: "LeeAnna, I see you and I'm here to support you."

4:00 The room is put back in order, students line up, and are escorted to the exit.

(Ashworth et. al., 2008, p. 25).

The RJC is still in the beginning stages, but some success is evident when students ask to stay after school even when they do not have to (Ashworth et al., 2008).

Adlerian Perspective

Many of the values central to restorative practices are also important in Individual Psychology. Encouragement, social interest and a sense of belonging, goals of misbehavior, and logical consequences are discussed in relation to children and education.
Using Adlerian principles in relation to education, Dreikurs (1982, as cited in Pryor, 1999) used the term “democratic classrooms.” In democratic classrooms, children learn a sense of equality which then empowers them to take responsibility and make choices about what they learn (Creating Democratic Classrooms). With education and empowerment children can be responsible for their own behavior and learning (Gossen, 2007). Much like restorative practices, in an Adlerian environment, social interest and a democratic environment promote children to develop optimally both intellectually and socially (Pryor, 1999).

Educational programming is central to Adlerian child development, as this is where children spend much of their time. What educators do in the school setting can have an effect on how children grow and develop their potential (Pryor, 1999). Adler’s concept of holism, that is individuals are more than the sum of their parts, is crucial in understanding that one’s social environment and social interactions are a fundamental component of who they are (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). Further, human beings are inherently social creatures and must have a sense of community or social connectedness to feel fulfilled. Dreikurs & Soltz said the strongest motivation a child has is the desire to belong (1964, as cited in Edwards & Mullis, 2001). “Children can learn advanced social skills while belonging to a group, especially in an environment where individual communication is valued and acknowledged” (Pryor, 1999, Encouraging Maximum Potential, para. 2).

The desire to belong not only relates to a sense of importance and significance; it also has a strong correlation with academic success. From an Adlerian perspective, if students are to be successful, they must set their own goals for academic success (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). Much like for restorative practices to be successful, everyone involved must be involved in determining the outcome. Edwards & Mullis, 2001, found that a sense of belonging in the
classroom was directly correlated with students’ expectations of academic success, students’ intrinsic interest in the school work, course grades, and teachers’ rating of student effort.

If academic success or another means of useful behavior does not result in children meeting their needs they turn to other ways to get what they need. “Misbehavior is the erroneous belief of a child that he can gain acceptance through provocative behaviour by pursuing the mistaken goals of behaviour” (Dreikers, 1972, as cited in Blamires, 2006, p. 186). Dreikurs calls this the Four Mistaken Goals of Misbehavior which are (1) to gain undue attention, (2) to seek power, (3) to seek revenge, and (4) to display inadequacy (Blamires, 2006). People act in ways that meet their needs because, according to Adlerian principles, all behavior is purposeful and goal-directed (Pryor, 1999).

Often after misbehavior is committed, adults want children to learn something from the behavior and therefore turn to consequences. The use of natural and logical consequences is another central theme in Adlerian child development. Logical consequences coincide with restorative practices because they are often determined collectively. If the logical consequence is contrived by the adult and not related to the misbehavior then power and control become the issue rather than correction of the misbehavior (Blamires, 2006). Hence, the consequence was illogical. Therefore, the consequence must be tied logically to the behavior. When children are involved in the solution they learn the power of their own choices (Blamires, 2006).

**School Counselor’s Role**

For restorative practices to have a meaningful impact, leadership and vision are required. Schools can be discouraging places. School counselors can be one of the very few encouragers in a student’s life (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). The values and leadership qualities of school counselors as educational leaders are discussed below.
School Counseling and Individual Psychology

As demonstrated, the goals and philosophy of school counseling and Individual Psychology have many similarities. The emphasis of Adler’s Individual Psychology on character building, cooperation and strengths are compatible with the goals of developmental guidance, early prevention and other treatment of children (Seligman, 2006, as cited in Ziomek-Daigle, McMahon & Paisley, 2008).

“Because Adlerian counselors see students as capable, creative and responsible beings, they are more likely to collaborate with students than to take a strictly directive approach” (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008, p. 456). Adlerian counselors help students develop the courage they need to make their own decisions (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). School counselors have the opportunity to do the same.

In a study by Dollarhide and Gibson (2008) they found that “motivation for program transformation may be found as school counselors engage in social interest for the improvement of their school and their program” (p. 478). The study also found that holistic systems thinking is becoming important for leaders. As school counselors move their programs to fit the ASCA National Model Delivery System, “thinking holistically about the entire system of a school becomes essential and is seen in the theme of Systemic Change in the Model” (pp. 476-477).

As school counselors and leaders, as proponents of Individual Psychology, perhaps we can best help by encouraging an environment of belonging. Teaching its importance in families and schools and giving practical suggestions on how to achieve it can be our most meaningful expression of social interest. (Edwards & Mullis, 2001, p. 201)
Intervention

As previously discussed, encouragement is a key component to helping students help themselves (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). The authors discussed how adults can encourage children and adolescents in ways that parallel the work of restorative practices.

Specifically, adults can focus on the following: (a) actions rather than performance, (b) present rather than past or future, (c) behavior rather than person, (d) effort rather than outcome, (e) intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic, (f) what has been learned rather than the lack of learning, and (g) more positive than negative (p. 456).

Claudia Vangstad is an example of a visionary who utilized many of these practices as a successful school counselor. As described by Littrell and Peterson (2001), Vangstad transformed an elementary school by demonstrating leadership and expanding her role and function in her school. She operated on a simple yet powerful vision: She foresaw a school where all children became problem solvers (Littrell & Peterson, 2001). She created several interventions, including the formation of clubs, building partnerships and collaborations within the school, and focusing on empowerment and encouragement.

Vangstad transformed her role and eventually her school by knowing herself and inspiring and challenging others. After studying the work of Vangstad for three years, Littrell and Peterson (2001) discovered six crucial components of an exemplary school counselor, including vision, core beliefs, and identity.

School counselors are in a unique position to use their vision to create change. “Programs in which students are provided an opportunity to be a part of a democratic just community and to actively engage in moral dilemma discussion have been positively affected behaviorally and psychologically” (Howard-Hamilton, 1995, para. 1). Piecing together everything that makes an
educational leader, the goals and vision of school counseling and the needs of students today can create powerful change.

Educational Leaders

A school counselor has many roles to fill. One of the most important roles is that of change agent. Most people think of school counselors as the people who change schedules or write letters of recommendation, but counselors are also in a position to influence the school as a community. The school counselor can be transformative in restructuring current school culture, which can lead to positive change for students (Howard-Hamilton, 1995).

Schools have traditionally been opposed to change. They make small changes, but overall systems that surround discipline, teaching, and counseling stay the same (Howard-Hamilton, 1995). “School counselors need to be willing and possess the abilities to challenge systemic homeostasis” (Shillingford & Lambie, 2010, p. 214).

As a profession, school counseling is changing. With the development of the ASCA National Standards there is now an outline for the knowledge, attitudes and skills students should achieve as a result of participating in a school counseling program (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). The new generation of school counselors are not only being asked to perform traditional responsibilities related to counseling and coordination but are now being called upon to become systemic change agents and educational leaders who perform the duties of advocacy and assessment (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). As a profession, school counseling has a history of evolving to meet the changing educational needs of society (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008).

The American School Counselors Association (2005) described school counselor’s leadership skills as important because in the leadership role, school counselors serve as change
agents, collaborators and advocates. “Leadership can be viewed as the foundation for the transformed school counselor” (McMahon et al., 2009, p. 117).

Ways for school counselors to transform into educational leaders include collaboration, building social interest, examining current policies and procedures, and including students in the process (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2008). Restorative philosophies and practices paired with the role of a school counselor create collaborative educational leaders. “Leadership for school counselors is not only a process to attain program transformation but also a product of program transformation” (Dollarhide & Gibson, 2008, p. 469).

Transforming School Culture

Cohen et al. (2008) list the five essential elements to educating the whole child as students who feel healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged. Utilizing restorative practices, the role of the school counselor and Adlerian principles in education leads to educating the whole child.

From an Adlerian perspective, Dreikurs, Grunwold and Pepper (1998) stated, “we are not interested in what a child is or what he has, but only what he does with what he is or what he has” (p. 5). And to help children and students become their potential, the American School Counselors Association asks of school counselors, “how are students different as a result of what we do?” (ASCA, 2005, p. 9)

To advise in the education of the whole child, and add the perspective of restorative practices, Palisades High School principal David Piperato said, “learning to be restorative is a lifelong process” (Mirsky, 2007, p.12). And to add to the process, the challenge to become an advocate and daily practitioner of restorative practices is a new frontier (Rundell, 2007).
Putting together the roles and principles of learning to be an Adlerian advocate, a transformative school counselor and a practitioner of restorative practices require courage, vision and change. Alone, each of the three are powerful, but together they create hope for the future of education.

When restorative practices and circles were first brought to Palisades High School, staff and students both greeted the new program with resistance. One of the key turning points was when the teachers recognized that they needed to put into practice for themselves what they were teaching. “They needed to respect their style differences, be honest, practice what they preached, and work on their issues: do all the things they were asking the kids to do” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 7). For restorative practices to be successful, everyone in the system of change must embrace them.

This way of doing things is a shift from the typical top-down approach of many systems. Varnham (2005) stated, “Such a system . . . requires a different mindset on the part of educators and makers of educational policy. Its implementation requires a cultural shift in the way in which providers of education perceive themselves and are perceived by others” (p. 99). This shift can produce beneficial results for many. A school community can be transformed from an adult-driven, externally imposed discipline approach to a collaborative and empowered vision (Littrell & Peterson, 2001).

The scenarios below illustrate the difference between a classic teacher response to a situation and a restorative response.

Scenario A: A teacher walks into his eighth-grade homeroom class early one morning and hears Jason call Sam an inappropriate name. He takes Jason into the hallway and talks to him about his language and how that must make Sam feel. He lets him know that kind of language will not be tolerated and the behavior must stop. Jason begins to tell
him what happened, but the teacher reiterates his position that the language Jason used was wrong and must not happen again.

They go back into the classroom and the teacher pulls both Jason and Sam aside and tells them he notices they are treating each other unkindly and wants that behavior to stop— from both of them. Class resumes. Sam and Jason continue to be angry at each other.

Scenario B: A teacher walks into his homeroom class early one morning and hears Jason call Sam an inappropriate name. He asks both Sam and Jason to come out into the hallway and tells them he would like to meet with them together immediately following lunch back in their classroom.

During that meeting he asks Sam and Jason what has been going on between them that seems to be causing such difficulties over the past two weeks. Jason talks about Sam taking his assignment book during homeroom and hiding it. Jason knows that Sam was joking, but when he kept doing it, Jason became irritated and asked Sam to stop. Sam continued with the prank, and Jason got in trouble yesterday because his English homework was in the book, and he could not find where Sam had hidden it. Jason felt frustrated and called Sam a name, which is what the teacher heard that morning.

Sam acknowledged that perhaps he had gotten carried away with his joking and did not know Jason had gotten into trouble. And Sam told Jason he didn’t think his actions warranted the name that Jason called him in front of everyone. Both boys apologized and agreed that things had gotten out of control and that they didn’t want the trouble to continue. (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, pp. 16-17)
School Discipline

One type of transformation can result from restructuring school discipline. “The enduring and emerging concerns with behaviour and discipline have lead to a smorgasbord of initiatives in schools” (Blamires, 2006, p. 186). Many schools seem to focus on solving bad behavior by eliminating the person who behaved badly by invoking detention, suspension, or expulsion.

Varnham (2005) noted that research into school expulsion, particularly zero-tolerance policies, has suggested that disengagement from school can lead to the “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” (Cavanagh & Foster, 2005, as cited in Varnham, 2005, p. 88). This is when a student never commits to or becomes involved in the school community, for various reasons, and therefore turns to a life that never commits to or becomes involved in their broader community as well. When students believe they cannot alter their status or influence the rules, they often react by withdrawing from school (Edwards & Mullis, 2001). If, after an offense has been committed, there is zero room for discussion and zero room for restorative measures, an approach that leaves zero room for reconnection and reintegration leaves everyone at a loss.

Rundell (2007) discussed restorative programming in terms of the criminal justice system and its lack of attention to individuals reintegrating into society. The same can be said of suspensions. Students leave school for a period of time and often are not fully reintegrated into the community on their return.

The assistant principal from another SaferSanerSchool uses restorative practices during in-school suspension. As chief disciplinarian, he sets the tone for the building, and has chosen to create a restorative culture (Mirsky, 2007). It is important for the culture of a transforming school to be saturated with people and practices that are true to this mission. It is also important
to give the offenders a safe space to say, “I did it and I’m sorry.” Important changes can occur with a safe space to be heard, take responsibility, and restore the harm they may have caused.

For restorative measures to be considered and eventually work, value must be placed on community. In contrast to an authoritarian, punitive, or permissive approach, the restorative approach gives students the opportunity to participate and build or rebuild community (Lange, 2008). Many school’s leaders say they want students to be engaged learners and participate in their own learning, but often the schools disregard the influence of the discipline process on the community. For instance, many schools identify wanting to build community, but their discipline practices isolate and exclude students from participating in the community (Ziomek-Daigle, McMahon, & Paisley, 2008). The reintegration of students’ voices shows students that they can have some control over and responsibility for what happens to them.

When students are not truly held accountable for their actions, there is a high risk that they will repeat the behavior, which may be detrimental to the community (Varnham, 2005). The shift happens when students are held accountable to their community and the community is part of the solution. “The term ‘restorative justice’ describes a response to wrongdoing which focuses on people and relationships rather than on punishment and retribution” (p. 91).

Restorative justice restores relationships and shifts the emphasis back to learning. One of the principals from Palisades High School stressed, “You cannot separate behavior from academics. When students feel good and safe and have solid relationships with teachers, their academic performance improves” (Mirsky, 2007, p.6). This fact alone gives hope for positive transformation.

Instead, schools systems adopt “Band-Aid” initiatives to stave off problems. “Traditional forms of discipline such as school exclusion are failing both in preventing serious misconduct,
such as bullying, and in protecting victims” (Varnham, 2005, p. 94). Further, restorative practices renounce the antisocial act and support both the victim and offender. The protection of all involved and a proactive stance are the foundations of transformed school discipline and improved school community. Figure 1, from Kelly (2009) is an example of different approaches to discipline in a restorative context.

School Safety

If one person or piece of the community is out of balance, then the community is out of balance. To right these imbalances and feelings of insecurity, school systems use approaches created with the intent to convey greater stability. Varnham (2005) stated that there are indications that, in an attempt to make schools safer, pre-emptive measures, such as drug testing, may in fact be harmful to the school community. By isolating incidents and creating a climate with a lack of trust, students will often respond by not trusting. This can affect the school climate and the school safety.
School safety is a large concern in education today. Creating of a sense of belonging helps to strengthen a feeling of community and to keep schools safe. Edwards and Mullis (2001) discussed belonging and school shootings: “Although the socioeconomic status, family background, and geographical setting of these school shooters are diverse, they have one thing in common—a lack of belonging” (p. 196).

School shootings are only one aspect of school safety. Bullying and a climate of disrespect can produce feelings of insecurity in students. When asked about talking with students about harassment and other types of behavior, the school counselor at Palisades stated, “Kids feel safe reporting it because they believe it will be addressed” (Mirsky, 2007, p. 8). The knowledge that the problems will be addressed helps both victims and offenders. It sets up expectations and guidelines. Everyone benefits because everyone is valued and involved.

Creating Community

Cohen, Pickeral, and McCloskey (2009) found that students who feel safe, connected, and engaged in school are more likely to learn well. This sounds like common sense, but some ideas are harder to make reality than others. It is possible to restructure school discipline and reframe what keeps schools safe only with a sense of community and connection.

To make this happen, the transformation needs to be a priority. “A particular challenge in improving school climate is how to affect students so that an atmosphere of justice and support is of primary concern for all” (Howard-Hamilton, 1995, para. 2). When the transformation is a priority and it does happen, community is formed and changes happen. When students, principals, teachers, and others in the school community work together to understand school climate, prioritize goals, and create an action plan, they take part in a democratically informed process for school improvement (Cohen et al., 2009).
Evaluating Programs

In modern American education, schools are evaluated on much more than academics. Today, more schools use school climate data to help define school success (Cohen et al., 2008). As shown in Tables 1 and 2 above, some formal, data-driven evaluations of restorative programming have been conducted. Another way that restorative programming has been evaluated is by less structured forms of change. Mirsky (2007) stated, “Restorative practices are not new ‘tools for your toolbox,’ but represent a fundamental change in the nature of relationships in schools. It is the relationships, not the specific strategies, that bring about meaningful change” (p. 6).

Places such as the RJC currently evaluate change by creating a place for healing which in turn creates positive school climate and culture. Other programs and individuals assess success by measuring personal growth and feedback. Discussing changes in the students of her district, the Palisades School District assistant superintendent reported that they consistently hear from people who visit the schools from the outside that their students are confident, happy, and articulate (Mirsky, 2007). This is a powerful statement about a school or district.

Students at the schools that use restorative practices gain from the experience and take with them the skills that they learned in the process. Lange (2008) said of a student in a restorative model school, “He feels confident that the coping mechanisms he has learned there will help him take time to think through any given situation before reacting, to take time to talk to others and openly express his feelings in appropriate ways” (p. 29).

The fact that these schools are raising confident individuals to go into society with personal and social reflection skills will help us all. Restorative programming has made a
positive impact in SaferSanerSchools. The hope is that more schools benefit from restorative practices.
References


Kelly, R. (2009). Draw a circle and be sure to include me in it. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice, 22*(1), 18-32.


