Restorative Practice in School: a Psychological Perspective
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What is restorative practice in school?
At its core lies the concept of a caring, inclusive community. When conflicts arise – as inevitably they will – restorative practices engage the perpetrators, their victims and significant others in the school community in a collective process of problem-solving whose aim is reparation of damage, restoration of the quality of relationships and facilitating the reintegration of participants in the conflict back into the school community. In schools the work is not only done with perpetrators and victims but with the whole school, through, for example, circle time, problem-solving, conflict resolution, peer mediation. In other words, this is for all members of the school community (Cameron and Thorsborne, 2001; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Hopkins, 2004; Morrison, 2003; Wachtel and McCold, 2001). In contrast to traditional punitive approaches to discipline, restorative practices place more emphasis on pupils themselves resolving conflicts and so in the long term build a stronger sense of community.

Zero-tolerance of school violence and bullying is often proposed as a tough deterrent. However, research indicates that this approach can be counterproductive. Skiba and colleagues (2008), in their report to the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (APA, 2008), concluded that zero tolerance policies actually fail to make school environments safer. In this study, zero tolerance policies predicted higher rates of misbehaviour and suspension among students; schools with zero tolerance policies rated lower on school climate and had higher school drop-out rates. Additionally, these schools had lower rates of academic achievement. There were other serious outcomes. They observed that zero-tolerance policies were construed as racist in the local community since particular ethnic groups appeared to be targeted. Children with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioural disorders, were suspended at rates disproportionate to their representation in the population. Additionally, the task force found that zero tolerance policies increased referrals to
the criminal justice system and created what they call ‘a school-to-prison pipeline’. Furthermore, these systems were more likely to be perceived as unjust by young people and their families.

Skiba et al. concluded that far more emphasis needs to be placed on non-punitive strategies to promote school safety, including restorative practices. Zero tolerance strategies, they conclude, should only be used in the most extreme and severe cases of bullying and even then applied with great thought for the needs and rights of all the individuals involved, including the perpetrators. They recommended restorative programmes since these actively promote a cooperative rather than a punitive process in which there is scope for reconciliation and some form of closure or resolution. Most importantly, they argue, restorative approaches in schools have the potential to create a safe and supportive learning environment that expresses positive values in the school community.

In the particular context of bullying, Smith et al (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of sanctions. They acknowledged that some sanctions will always be part of a school’s policy to counteract bullying. However, they found that when schools promoted an emphasis on positive relationships and created an ethos of care and responsibility, the need for strict, punitive sanctions declined. When sanctions were applied, the perpetrators were more likely to perceive them as fair and meaningful. The reason for this was that the students had been included in the process of creating the school rules and had been made aware that negative behaviour, such as bullying, had consequences.

Working with the relationship

The core principles of counselling psychology provide insights into how restorative practices work. Rogers (1955; 1965) proposed that people have the ability to find solutions to interpersonal difficulties through the support of a warm, person-centred relationship in which the focus is on problem-solving. The very process of problem-solving shifts the person away from introspecting negatively about the circumstances that are causing them distress or avoiding responsibility for their actions by blaming others. It is the quality of the relationship that is the catalyst for therapeutic change. The core conditions in this relationship are congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard, with the counsellor having a non-judgemental attitude. The person-
centred approach is in harmony with the application of restorative justice principles in
schools. For example, Braithwaite (1989; 2003) proposes the need for ‘reintegrative
shaming’ which means disapproval of the aggressive act but at the same time
respect for the person. This is in marked contrast to stigmatization – a form of
disrespectful shaming that leads to humiliation, hardening of attitudes and a
distancing of perpetrator from the pain caused by their actions.

Narrative therapy offers interesting parallels with restorative practice through its
focus on story-telling as a fundamental means for people to communicate and make
sense of experience (McLeod, 1997; White and Epston, 1990). Essentially the
argument is that people find it helpful to tell their story in a context where what they
have to say is accepted and valued by others. As McLeod (2000, p. 345) writes:

‘The basic experience of another person becoming a witness to one’s account of
troubles is meaningful and worthwhile’.

By being given time and space to tell their story in a supportive place, the person is
in the process given an opportunity to reflect on their story and to consider whether it
could be understood or expressed in different ways. Narrative therapists also
propose the concept of externalizing the story. From this perspective, the person
has a relationship with their own story and is in conversation with the issues that
feature in it. Thus, there is potential for editing and changing the ways in which the
story unfolds and for exploring the layers of meaning that are embedded within it.
The listeners too are in dialogue with the story. The experience of hearing different
accounts of the same episode provides an opportunity to understand why the
protagonists behaved as they did. This is a significant part of the restorative
process, with potential for change, including forgiveness and acknowledgement of
causing hurt. For example, when peer mediators are trained to engage in conflict
resolution with peers in dispute, each person tells their side of the story and the
mediator reflects back each account and, in the process, gives each an opportunity
to reflect on their story and consider whether it could have happened in a different
way.
Involving young people in improving their social context

But restorative approaches go beyond behavioural change for the individual and aim also to achieve a safer community. One way on which this can be achieved is by developing systems of peer support (Andrès, 2007; Cowie et al., 2002; Cowie et al., 2008; Cowie and Hutson, 2005; Cremin, 2007; Lane-Garon and Richardson, 2003; Smith and Watson, 2004). Andrès et al. (2005) report on a longitudinal study in two secondary schools in Spain, an experimental school which had developed a system of peer support to enhance the school’s ethos and a control school in the same catchment area. The study took place in a context of major difficulty with a large influx of families from different cultures and an on-going concern about rising levels of violence, both in the community and in the school itself. In each class of the experimental school the students democratically elected classmates to act in the role of peer helpers. The elected students were then given training that enabled them to intervene directly to resolve peer conflicts, with a particular brief to intervene in cases of bullying and the abuse of power.

Andrès et al. (2005) found that the peer support activity had a very positive impact on the social development and personal qualities of those who participated as peer helpers, with boys demonstrating greater gains than girls. The programme indicated how important it is to give young people a framework in which to develop pro-social behaviour, self-efficacy and emotional literacy. The greatest impact of the programme was on psychological or indirect bullying. Social exclusion decreased dramatically in the experimental school during this study and there was interview-based evidence that the whole ethos of the experimental school improved substantially. This restorative programme has been running for over eight years and has become an integral part of the school culture, so indicating that a whole community can change.

Conclusion and discussion points

Advantages of restorative practices from a psychological perspective are:

- School climate is improved by increasing young people’s understanding of rules and trust in how these rules are applied;
• There are fewer student suspensions and improved ratings on positive school climate
• There is a reduced likelihood of retribution or repeat offending, so preventing the escalation of violence
• There is a growth in positive relationships with peers and adults, with greater potential for enhancing pro-social behaviour and building up self-esteem
• Young people learn greater understanding of the reasons why perpetrators act the way they do
• Young people can be helped to feel better about themselves by placing emphasis on the emotional aspects of their experience.
• Young people develop greater empathy for peers in distress by engaging in some form of restorative practice
• Schools become safer learning environments
• Educators can learn how to remedy bullied children’s relationship difficulties by understanding more about their origins and by building up self-esteem.

References


