Building Safer, Saner Schools

In schools that use restorative practices, students learn to confront their unacceptable behavior, repair the harm they’ve done, and build community.

Laura Mirsky

A student gets angry and curses at his teacher, and she sends him to the assistant principal, who suspends him from school for three days. We lament the lack of civility, the loss of behavioral boundaries, and the irresponsible parents who have raised this child; and we justify the punishment as "holding the student accountable for his behavior."

Accountable? How so? The punishment is passive. The student doesn’t have to do anything. He stays angry with the teacher and the assistant principal. He thinks he’s the victim.
He doesn’t consider how he’s hurt others or how he might make things right. And he returns to the classroom with nothing resolved.

Punish—or Repair?
Restorative practices are an effective alternative to this sort of exclusionary and punitive discipline, which research shows not only fails to reduce negative behaviors but also actually exacerbates them (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). With restorative practices, students confront their unacceptable behavior and assume responsibility for it in processes that are supportive rather than demeaning.

This is not permissiveness. Wrongdoing is not tolerated. Communities that use restorative practices, however, arrive at solutions collaboratively, generating buy-in from the people involved and from others who have been affected by that behavior.

Restorative practices are related to restorative justice, a way of looking at criminal justice that focuses on repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than on punishing offenders. But restorative practices go well beyond restorative justice in that they’re both reactive and proactive.

The fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices is that human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to or for them.

We as a species require community bonds for our emotional well-being.

Three Practices That Work
Restorative processes range from formal practices—which require training, preparation, and time—to informal ones, which are simple and practical enough to become second nature. In fact, anyone can learn to use restorative practices. Here are three practices that can have a dramatic and positive effect in school.

The Restorative Conference
The most formal restorative process—the one that takes the most planning and is employed for the most serious incidents—is a restorative conference. Led by a trained facilitator, a restorative conference brings together those involved to explore what happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to make things right. Participants sit in a circle; one person speaks at a time. Sometimes groups use a “talking piece”; only the person holding this object is allowed to speak. The facilitator employs a script that includes questions that lead participants to think about the incident, whom it affected and how, and how they can repair the situation. (See “Questions That Can Make Things Right” on p. 48.)

Take, for example, an incident that occurred at Kosciusko Middle School in Hamtramck, Michigan, a municipality within the city of Detroit that has a highly diverse population that includes recently arrived black, Arab, Bengali, and Bosnian residents as well as those whose families have lived there for generations. The Hamtramck School District is in the process of implementing restorative practices at all seven of its schools.

In the incident that led to the conference, two 13-year-old girls stole $20 from a visitor’s purse. The visitor, a volunteer in the English as a second language program, had left her purse unattended in an empty classroom; when she returned, she discovered the two girls standing there with odd looks on their faces. One of the girls immediately took off for the bathroom, where she hid the money. Security later found it in the trash can.

After both girls admitted their guilt, the principal decided to hold a restorative conference (admission of guilt is usually a prerequisite for a conference). The conference took place within a week of the theft. Eleven people participated: the restorative practices consultant who facilitated the conference, the two girls, three family members, the volunteer, a teacher, the principal, the school superintendent, and the assistant school superintendent. According to John Bailie, director of continuing education at the International Institute for Restorative Practices, it’s best to make sure that both victim and offender have someone else there who was affected by
what happened and who cares about them personally. Typically the minimum number of participants is five.

During the conference, the visitor told everyone how the incident had affected her: Her husband was ill and unemployed, making her the sole support of her family, so $20 meant a lot to her. When the girls heard this, they cried. The girl who had taken the money said, “I never realized how what I did affected everyone!” Both girls were remorseful. The visitor cried as well.

Principal Nuo Ivezaj said the experience was powerful for him. In a case like this, he said, the parents would typically be defensive and then yell at their child. Instead of expressing anger, the girls felt shame and sorrow for what they had done, and the parents and grandparent were grateful that the girls received a second chance. Afterward, the girls wrote letters of apology to the visitor. There were no further behavior problems with either girl.

A formal restorative conference like this one can have a dramatic effect, but informal restorative practices can actually have an even greater effect on school culture because they are cumulative and become a part of everyday life. In a school where restorative practices are the norm, teachers and administrators routinely use the questions in the restorative conference script to respond to challenging behavior and prompt students to reflect on how their actions have affected others.

Let’s say that a boy behaves disruptively in class. Instead of sending him to the principal’s office or suspending him, which will only make him angry and ready to repeat the behavior, his teacher might ask, “Whom do you think is hurt when you disrupt class?” The student may come to realize that he has affected not only his teacher by interrupting her lesson, but also his fellow students by taking away from their learning time. Young people may not be used to thinking this way and may need some coaching at first, but they catch on quickly.

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Affective Statements

Another informal restorative practice that helps students understand the effect of their behavior on others is the affective statement, a personal expression of feeling in response to others’ positive or negative behaviors. Affective statements humanize the person who makes them and immediately change the dynamic between the people involved, improving relationships in a school community.

For example, let’s assume that a student disrupts the class by banging her fist on her desk. Instead of saying, “Be quiet!” the teacher might say, “When you disrupt class that way, I feel frustrated and angry.” It may surprise some students to realize that the teacher has feelings and that he or she has been affected by the student’s behavior or remark. This kind of communication also builds relationships.

Some may consider it a “soft response” when a teacher tells students how a certain behavior makes him or her feel. On the contrary, this response compels students to become aware of the consequences of their actions. Alex DiBiasi, a 9th grade social studies teacher at Upper Darby High School in Pennsylvania, overheard a boy using threatening language toward another student in the hall. He told the student that it made him feel unsafe when students threatened one another like that. The student said he was just kidding around, but it did surprise him to learn how such words made people feel. DiBiasi said, “It stops them in their tracks and makes them think.”

At one public alternative school for disruptive and delinquent students, an English teacher used affective statements to encourage a class with several older male students to engage in rigorous academic work. Instead of insisting that the students complete the assignment, which they believed was just too hard for them, the teacher said, “I’m disappointed when you give up because you’re letting your frustration cause you to quit. I know you can do this. If you want my help, I’ll help you, but you have to try.” The students listened; one by one, they stopped complaining and asked for help. That one affective statement set the tone for the rest of the school year.

When children hear adults using affective statements instead of yelling or blaming, it can be contagious. This has been the experience of Deborah Martinez, a 3rd grade teacher at Warren Preparatory Academy, a K–5 public school in Brooklyn, New York, where 40 percent of students live in homeless shelters and 20 percent are in foster care. Although many of these students observe violence daily, a good number are resilient enough to not always react with violence when they feel threatened. Reinforcing this positive approach, teachers and students regularly use
affective statements to let one another know how they feel when someone causes them physical or emotional harm. Instead of hitting or lashing out at one another, students say, “You hurt my feelings.” Explains Martinez, “They didn’t have the words before.”

**The Restorative Circle**

Another fundamental restorative process is the circle, in various forms.

**Proactive circles build community.** Proactive circles provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences to build trust and mutual understanding. In a circle, as in a restorative conference, everyone has a chance to speak, and one person speaks at a time. Teachers might use the circle to get feedback on such issues as how confident students feel about an upcoming test or simply to ask students how their weekend went.

Teachers can also use proactive circles to help students with academic goal-setting and planning, set ground rules for projects and activities, and build or monitor understanding of academic content. Some teachers note that the format engages students in the learning process more effectively than lectures do. Circles can be powerful in that students who normally don’t speak in class as a result of shyness, indifference, hostility, or fear of appearing “uncool” are required to contribute.

Alex DiBiasi, whose social studies class includes a heavy concentration of special education students, says that before he started using circles, some of his students spoke only five or six times the entire semester. These students were able to relate to him one-on-one but were uncomfortable speaking in front of others. DiBiasi realized that his students needed a greater sense of community and connection to one another—and circles have made all the difference. These students now readily answer questions in class and get involved in classroom discussion.

DiBiasi tells a story about a student who was always quiet in class, fought with teachers, and didn’t want to work. 
During the first circle he held, DiBiasi asked what everyone had done over the summer. He permits students to pass the first time around, but he always comes back to anyone who passes.

In subsequent circles, DiBiasi would pose such questions as, “What would you do if . . . ?” or “What do you think about . . . ?” Once the student realized he had to share, he discovered he really liked it. Other students were interested in what he had to say because they knew so little about him. Now this boy is so eager to participate that he needs to be reminded that only one person talks at a time.

**Responsive circles informally respond to conflict.** Responsive circles engage students in managing conflict and tension by repairing harm and restoring relationships in response to a moderately serious incident or a pattern of behavior that affects a group of students or an entire class. Responsive circles use peer pressure to bring about positive behavior change. They’re less formal than restorative conferences, take less preparation, and don’t use the entire formal conference script.

A circle helped end gang violence at City Springs Elementary/Middle School, in Baltimore, Maryland, where 99 percent of students are from families with incomes below the poverty line.

Boys from two different gangs, the Slime Bags and the Crips, fought constantly, making the school atmosphere tense and frightening. Principal Rhonda Richetta wanted to get the boys talking together in a circle, but others were afraid to even have them in the same room. When separating the boys failed and a fistfight broke out in the cafeteria, Richetta called for a circle. Holding a talking piece, everyone had a chance to tell his or her part in the story, one at a time.

It didn’t go well at first. One boy lost his temper and had to be removed twice to the office. He was calmer when he came back the second time. As the circle went on, it became increasingly clear that the boys had been fighting over nothing: Things they had heard and believed about one another weren’t true. Suddenly one boy stood up and
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To address how they intend to coexist in the school building. The students have to believe this is nonnegotiable and that staff will stand firm.

Another important dynamic to consider is that such groups have natural leaders. It’s essential to build relationships with them, as opposed to demonizing them. Appealing to the leaders’ desire for influence and need for attention and belonging can bring them on board. Group leaders also learn that they can do positive things with their leadership abilities.

An Approach That Gets Results

Schools implementing restorative practices are seeing dramatic results in terms of reduced misbehavior, violence, suspensions, and expulsions. West Philadelphia High School was on Pennsylvania’s Persistently Dangerous Schools list for six straight years. Within one year of implementing restorative practices, the number of violent acts in the school decreased by 52 percent; the next year, the number went down another 45 percent.

City Springs Elementary/Middle School has seen a dramatic decrease in suspensions and office discipline referrals since implementing restorative practices three years ago. There were 86 suspensions in the 2008–09 school year and only 10 suspensions in the 2009–10 school year.

Some schools implementing restorative practices are reporting improved academic performance. City Springs principal Rhonda Richetta reports that the number of students functioning at grade level has tripled in the last three years, and Maryland state assessment scores have steadily increased. “When teachers are dealing with behavior problems all day, no one is able to learn,” says Richetta. She attributes the improvement to the change in her school’s culture brought about by restorative practices.

Restorative practices aren’t just for students, but for the entire school community. At many schools, teachers become isolated in their classrooms, left to struggle alone with unmanageable students and other problems. Staff meetings can become griping sessions. At schools implementing restorative practices, staff meetings are held in a circle, helping teachers and other staff members collaborate to solve issues.

The Community Connection

Considerable scientific evidence shows that we as a species are “hardwired to connect,” that we require community bonds for our emotional well-being (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003). Addressing this need head on, restorative practices build community in schools. They provide effective, straightforward ways to teach students that they are part of a community both in the classroom and in the school as a whole, that their actions affect others in the community, and that they share responsibility for making their community a place they want to live in. What better way to prepare students to be respectful and responsible citizens?

1 Developed over many years by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), restorative practices first evolved in programs for delinquent and at-risk youth and their families. Today, the IIRP brings restorative practices to schools through its two-year SaferSanerSchools Whole School Change Program. As of this writing, 22 schools across the United States are using the program. For more information, see www.iirp.edu/pdfs/SSS_Implementation_Overview.pdf.

2 For additional data about the improvements schools are experiencing as a result of implementing restorative practices, see www.safersanerschools.org/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate.pdf.

References


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