

Implementing Restorative Practices in Israeli Schools: The First Step

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I would like to share with you my journey of implementing RP in the Israeli education system. It was Mao-Tse-Tung who said, many years ago, that even a thousand-miles journey begins with a single step. I believe that many of you – just like me - at some point took the first step, and then another step, and then another...

As for me – I am still there – at the first step.

This is why I want to share with you not only my first step, but also the road – both theoretical and practical - that brought me to take this first step, and I will go back and forth between the two.

Some words about myself: Professionally - I am a teacher. In the last few years I have been working for the department of social education at the ministry of education. In conjunction with my work at the ministry of education, I also serve as the education co-coordinator at KEDEM association, which facilitates Family Group Conferences, as an alternative for criminal-justice processes for juvenile offenders.

Like in much of the western world, the educational and the juridical systems in Israel are pretty much punitive. Unfortunately in the last few years, we are witnessing a growing tendency, mostly in the educational system, towards adopting **zero tolerance approaches** as a vehicle for managing wrongdoing and harm.

Three years ago I took it as a mission to try to bring into the Israeli education system something that is not only a short-time solution, which appears to be working in the short-run, but something that aims to make a fundamental change in the way people function in their community in the long-run. And that, of course, is RP.

In the 1990s, the idea of RJ first found its way to Israel. After checking and researching, it was decided to try to implement the restorative ideas in different settings. The approach was implemented in welfare, justice, education and other fields. The field where it caught on is the criminal Justice.

Family Group Conferencing is acknowledged today in Israel as an alternative for criminal justice processes for juvenile offenders, in particular cases. Some of the basic criteria for a case to be suggested for FGC process are: It is a first, or at least a single offence, a case of vandalism, theft, or in cases of physical harm – not an irreversible one. In the field of education – In spite of the grate efforts my colleagues in KEDEM and I made to hold FGCs in school settings – most of those processes were unsuccessful, namely - eventually the kids kept on misbehaving and harming the environment, or dropped altogether out of school. In some cases we found that the school sounded a double voice: while they were involved in a

restorative reaction towards a student's behavior, at the same time they went on treating that same student with the old punitive tools and punishing him, a tactic that didn't much help building trust. Since the cases didn't involve official law breaking and they were not about crime, there was no external authority to supervise the implementation of the plan that was put together. There were cases where we **did** reach a conference, the family discussed the problem and relating issues, and even came up with a plan.

Sadly, the ones who did not take on their responsibility - were the school staff and other professionals who made a commitment to integrate the kids in different programs and to make themselves more available for them – and they didn't.

A child cannot be expected to act responsibly or be held accountable, while the adults in his or her community shake-off their own obligations. We asked ourselves – why is this happening? Why is it, that in the educational system - of all settings - this doesn't work? It is well known that a school is a reflection of the society it is embedded in. The Israeli society is very diverse, and is characterized by many conflicts. For a long time I thought that the Israeli society is uniquely complex. Well – I still believe that Israel is unique, but listening to others I realize that the whole human society is dealing, at large, with similar issues. Ted Wachtel described this when he said in his inauguration speech at the IIRP Graduate school - never before have so many lived so far from their extended families... outside traditional neighborhoods, never before have so many families divided, elderly have grown old in unfamiliar surrounding and so many children left their home towns to live someplace else. Sadly we are also familiar with those. How is it possible, then, to deal with this complexity? How is it possible to build a community in such a reality?

I turned to the bible – the Old Testament – to see what it says about this. In the book of Isaiah, chapter 11 verse 6, I found the messianic vision:

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together”.

The messianic vision refers to brotherhood and sharing. It doesn't say the wolf becomes a lamb or the kid becomes a lion. My interpretation of this vision is that they become a **community**. Not only do they maintain their different identities, but also they find a solution to the innate impulse to struggle with each other, and to – so to speak - “eat one another alive”. What is needed, then, to allow the wolves and the sheep among us to live together as a community?

What I will argue next is based solely on my professional and personal experience, and on my own understanding, which may, of course, be disputed. I claim that in order for a group of people to become a healthy, functioning community, two basic components are required: **mutual trust** and an **interest**. Without these – it won't work. The interest doesn't have to be a common one – but it has to be mutual. Every person needs to have an interest of some kind, in order to invest in a relationship with another person. We all know that relationships are the

core and hub of a prosperous community. But we also know that relationships demand cultivation, and take up time and energy. Most human beings need to have a good reason to make such a meaningful investment, and live up to what it demands of them. But if **istrust** exists – no matter how big the interest is – it will never work.

As I see it, this is exactly what our restorative perception in Israeli schools was lacking – the **proactive** part. All the efforts we have made in school-settings were only reactive – and that restorative reaction took place in an all-punitive surrounding. No trust had been built and it didn't seem like the students had much interest in the process, nor in the school itself.

In their book “restorative circles in schools”, Bob Costello, Joshua Wachtel and Ted Wachtel emphasize that 80% of the restorative work in schools should be proactive, and only 20% reactive. Proactive circles are about community building. Proactive circles increase and deepen the acquaintance among the community members – acquaintance that achieves both required components – building mutual trust and identifying mutual interests. Only if I get to know the next person to some extent – some strengths and some weaknesses – do I know how much I am prepared to invest and how much I am prepared to risk in order to have that person be part of my community. Relationships need investment and maintenance. People must have a good reason to invest their time and energy in anything. If they don't have a good enough reason – they will invest it somewhere else.

During the previous school year, a friend of mine, who was teaching in a very small urban school near Jerusalem, told me about a problem they had been having with a 4th grade – in Israel those are 10 year-olds. The class was continually disruptive. During lessons the kids were shouting, playing and generally ignoring the rules. None of the teachers could teach in that class and everybody was frustrated. Nothing seemed to work with them. Knowing I am involved in RP, she asked if I can advise her what more can be done.

Without being in the class or knowing the school, I suggested that she would hold a circle in that class, and ask the children how **they** feel in their class – whether they are happy about it, and if not – what are **they** going to do to change that. Even though the kids weren't familiar with circles, they like being asked for their opinion, and they co-operated. It became clear that most kids in the class were very displeased with the situation, and that they were simply bored – because they weren't learning anything. Nothing interesting was ever going on. They acknowledged that the reason for that was their own behavior.

After trying a few times to pass the responsibility on to the teacher, and tell her how she should discipline them better, the kids understood that this is not what they were being asked for. They realized they, too, had a responsibility in this, and they came up with some ideas for changing the atmosphere and their behavior. They implemented those ideas, and two weeks later the other teachers came to ask what has changed in that class that suddenly made it possible to teach there?

This was the first experience. Following that, and another restorative experience involving violence among kids – the principal called me and said – this is what I want in my school! I want all my staff to acquire these tools and to learn this approach. This is how I want my school to function. And that is how we started.

Having no former experience in training a school staff for RP – My colleague and I did exactly what we asked the teachers to do – dive in. We invited everyone to join us in this learning process, try it out together – and see how we can make this work for us. And they agreed. Since this was the first school in Israel to make this brave decision to adopt RP as a whole school approach, the teachers were invited to train in something they have never heard of.

It is important to point out that this is not a regular school. It is a special elementary school for gifted children. It operates only once a week, when the kids leave their regular schools and gather there for a special school day. Gifted kids are considered special Ed. Although they are very bright intellectually, many of them have multiple dyslexics and, opposed to what is expected, many have low self-esteem. They are not well integrated in society and in many cases – they lack social skills.

For the first day of the Intro training, about half of the staff showed up. Some thought we had nothing new to offer them, because they are already doing circles. Others thought it was all nonsense, and one teacher claimed everything was going so well in her class – she didn't need to change anything. On the second day – for the circles training – some of the teachers from the first day didn't show up. On the other hand – a few new comers joined us, not knowing what went on the previous day. Tricky – but we went ahead as planned, wondering what will happen.

And this is what happened:

Two teachers decided to embrace RP immediately. With a full support from the principal and with her help, they did circles in their classes. Although they have encountered some problems, they heard from the kids things they didn't expect – What bothered them, what worried them, and also – what they were enjoying in their class. At the next meeting, one of the two teachers said it is important that all the teachers will run circles and use the restorative tools, in order for this to become a way of life in this school. During the remaining of the school year, more teaches tried to implement the restorative tools, and some remained resistant.

Every once in a while we met, to hear how it was going and to plan ahead what they are going to do next. At the end of the year, the principal said she now understands the importance of a class becoming a community. The norm in that school was that through the whole day - every child is free to choose any course she or he wants to take. The principal decided to alter that policy, and have every homeroom class study together as a group for at least two hours in the morning, in order to make community building possible.

It was important for the principal that the whole staff would be exposed to the RP and its tools. That is why a few days after the training, she gave a restorative-questions card to one of the teachers who didn't participate in the training, and told him to ask these questions when he encounters a problem in class. Later in the day, during the break, she saw that teacher standing in the Hall, surrounded by kids - running, playing and shouting, and in the midst of all that commotion, one very embarrassed kid standing in front of the teacher. The teacher had the question card in his hand, and he was talking and talking, and the kid was standing there - not saying anything.

The principal didn't know what was said there, but she noticed the positions of both - teacher and student. She also noticed that teacher was talking way too much, and the kid was way too quiet. In private she asked the teacher to give her the card back, and on the next meeting she told everyone she now understands that in order to do this right - you have to be trained for it. Otherwise you don't exactly understand what you are doing, and out of good will - you just might do harm.

Toward the opening of the current school year, the staff decided to open every lesson with a circle. One of the teachers pointed out that if every teacher will use his or her own question - duplications might occur. So they assembled four common questions - one for every hour - that built a sequence.

In the first hour - in all the circles the question was to be - your name and a highlight from summer-vacation. In the second hour they were to talk about what they want to achieve in school this year. The third question was - what is worrying them in light of some changes the school went through and the fourth - a quick light circle game - to maintain the atmosphere. The teachers didn't all stick to those questions, but all in all - they did the circles. They reported that the kids felt a bit uncomfortable, since it was a first experience for them, but they respected the rules, they participated and there was a good atmosphere. The teachers enjoyed the circles and said they will use them again.

The other school we have started working with towards the end of the school year is a regional junior-high in the north, located in a Village - Kuffer Kara - and serves kids from all Arab villages in the area. The principal, a very young woman, has decided to make a meaningful change in the school climate. She inquired to know what methods are being implemented in the world, and found that RP are highly regarded. She decided that this is what she wants in her school. After collecting a lot of information about it, she found her way to me and we have decided to try implementing RP in her school.

Beside obvious issues emerging from the situation of two Jewish-Israeli outside trainers coming to teach an educational staff of Arab-Israeli teachers how to - so to speak - "do their job better", Other problems have surfaced. It should be pointed out that this school, out of the two we are working with, is the regular one - a mainstream school. This school is the one used to carrying out the formal policy, which is a punitive one, and unlike the other school - the

teachers are first and foremost – teachers. As opposed to the other school, the classes at the school in Kuffer Kara are regular size, which means they are inhabited by about 40 students each. They have all kinds of programs, formal tests and a curriculum ground to cover. They are liable to many pressures that a special school doesn't have to deal with. My guess is that what we have seen in Kuffer Kara is probably more representing the reality in the formal regular education system, than what happened in the special school in Maale Adumim.

Upon the principal's request, during the spring vacation in schools, my Colleague and I gave the intro- and the circle trainings in Kuffer Kara. On the first day most of the staff participated. It was clear that the principal and her deputy made the decision, and the teachers were obligated to attend. They didn't know exactly what to expect and what it is all about. As you know – the intro training is very intensive, and carries a lot of theory. It's not easily absorbed, certainly not for someone who didn't choose voluntarily to be there. And so – on the second day – for the circle training – only about half of the staff showed up.

In order to make people feel more comfortable and get into the simulations – we allowed them do them in Arabic. **Big mistake!**

We hardly understood what was said, and we had no idea how those simulations went and in what direction did they go. Eventually it turned out that some very basic issues have been missed. Since my colleague and I don't speak Arabic, there was no point in us observing circles done with the students. But we did see some translated footage of circles that were done with the kids, and for the first time we have actually seen how the same restorative powerful tool can become a most punitive tool – no less powerful and therefore – a harmful one.

In spite of the problems the fact remains – these teachers in Kuffer Kara have started doing circles, trying to work out problems differently. It is true that the beginning is difficult – but we are talking about a basic thorough change of an educational conception – the conception of the roles of teachers and students, and also – the roles of kids and adults in society – their rights and their obligations. And on top of all this stands the cultural differences – not only between the staff and trainers, but also among the staff and among the kids themselves, and between staff and the kids. The challenge is great!

What my colleagues in KEDEM and I see in RP goes far beyond the education system. We believe the Restorative ideas hold a potential for a real change in the Israeli society as a whole. We are a small society living on a small territory in a no-alternative situation. For us changing the climate and building better and proper relationships among the different groups and between them, is a matter of existence.

I believe that the most significant place for this change to emerge from is the education system. Not only do all the different groups shelter under its wings; not only do children, teachers and parents meet there and have a chance to strengthen the community and establish

a common language, make mutual acquaintances, build mutual understanding and respect,
But also – it may be a cliché, but there is a good reason it became one - the kids are the future.
They will soon be the decision makers, the policy makers, and they will determine the future
of Israel. Their minds are still open to new concepts. They still have a fair amount of
uncertainty that allows them to adjust more easily to new ideas and to make the impossible
be. Much is resting on their shoulders.

And if we go back to Isaiah and the messianic vision, we will read as well:

*“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together
and a little child shall lead them”*