

## **Restorative Justice: Building Relationships, Building Communities**

Building trusting relationships and strong communities is central to the work of all school administrators. Key to this labour is the administrator's underlying philosophy on how students learn, acquire academic knowledge, build character and grow a positive affective perspective. A school's culture, or 'the way we (adults) do business around here', both explicitly and implicitly impact students in a variety of ways. This hidden curriculum has a profound influence on students, as a school's customs are powerful forces. Administrators utilizing a Restorative Justice philosophy in their school will have a dramatic impact on moving a school's culture from a traditional retributive (punishment) to a restorative (supportive) style of working with students.

Recently, the Ontario Government enacted two bills which demand a change in the way school boards work with students. Bill 52 "The Learning to 18 Act" requires students be enrolled in school until the age of 18 and schools to provide programming to engage and retain all students. Prior to this Bill, students were legislated to attend school until the age of 16. In addition Bill 212, which amends the "Safe Schools Act", requires school boards to demonstrate that they have utilized a variety of proactive measures in managing students' negative behavior. Parameters regarding suspensions were also changed in this Bill. The heightened responsibility for Administrators to demonstrate, document and program for all students, but particularly students at risk, is central to these two bills.

## **Restorative Justice: An Overview**

The origin of Restorative Justice is rooted in the aboriginal cultures of the Maori and First Nations people of Canada and the United States. Central to this philosophy is the notion of community. Using a restorative approach centers on how conflicts affect all members of the community: students, teachers and parents. Tony Marshall (1996) defined restorative justice as 'a process whereby all parties with a stake in a particular offence come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future' (Zehr and Mika in McLaughlin, E, et al. 2003).

Schools are notoriously retributive in their approach to managing student's behaviour. Schools have well planned progressive discipline policies where students' recurring negative behaviours result in ever increasing levels of punishment from simple discussions to suspensions and expulsions. Staff have historically relied on this process to deter and change student's negative behaviour. Yet these systems, suggests Wachtel (1997), provide little or no opportunity for students to properly reintegrate back to schools or cause students to change their ways. Administrators utilizing a restorative philosophy need to help staff make a paradigm shift in the way they view and resolve conflicts in schools. Zehr (1990) argues that a paradigm, a construction of reality, shapes the lens through which we understand, determine and resolve conflicts, as well as construct what we know to be possible and impossible. Moving a school from a retributive lens to a restorative leans means shifting the community from: (1)

focusing on blame-fixing to problem solving; (2) focusing on the past to focusing on the future; (3) focusing on punishment to focusing on repairing harm; (4) neglecting victims' needs to victims' needs being central; (5) neglecting offenders to offenders being given a role; (6) neglecting victim-offender relationships to victim-offender relationships being central (Zehr, *ibid.*).

### **Restorative Justice: West Ferris Secondary School**

Community is central to using a restorative approach in schools. Building a trusting relationship with all students, but particularly those who are at-risk, is imperative to ensure that the process is successful. Administrators must be sincere, respectful and void of an authoritarian stance when using a restorative approach. Pivotal to utilizing a restorative approach when managing a conflict is the use of these questions: What were you thinking at the time?; What have you thought about since?; Who have you affected and how?; and What do you want to do to make it right? (O'Connell, 1999). These questions are constructed to elicit a reflective response in students and place responsibility and ownership of the conflict back in their hands. These questions are used to guide discussions, generate ideas and negotiate what the student will do to resolve the conflict. These questions are used in an informal way while talking with a student in the office, or during more elaborate and formalized restorative circles where the entire school community is involved.

West Ferris Secondary School has conducted 17 formalized restorative circles since January 2007. On one occasion, and in replacement of a lengthy

suspension, the school conducted a restorative circle to resolve a conflict where a student threatened a teacher. The teacher who had been threatened and participated in the circle indicated that he felt the circle was a rewarding and useful exercise. The teacher also stated that the student made good reflections on the impact he had made on the teacher and other concerned teachers. In addition, he felt that there would have been little gained if the student had been suspended. In reflection, the student's mother indicated that she felt that the process was very beneficial to her son, as it wasn't a punishment process, but was more about rectifying matters and placing ownership on her son to solve the root problems and take accountability for his actions. Furthermore, her son agreed to anger management counseling which he had previously refused to consider.

The school also organized a circle which comprised of 25 participants including: police, school administrators, students, teachers, counselors and parents. A group of 10 students had skipped school and experimented with marijuana and prescription pills at a parent's home near the school. A teacher present during the circle reflected the following:

"Everyone had an equal part in the large circle. There wasn't a power structure and in this way it disarmed students, parents and the administration. All of the communication wasn't power-based it was much more open and students seemed to realize that they were surrounded by caregivers who had taken time in a vulnerable situation to express themselves and showed how much they cared. The next day I saw one of the students in the hall and there was an instant flash of recognition in her eyes that this (me – the teacher) was someone who had cared enough to express myself in a vulnerable way in the circle."

One student wrote the following poem as a way of expressing her remorse for what she had done in the parent's home:

### Without You

Watch as it takes over me  
Watch as it controls me  
Telling me what to do  
Sometimes I wish I never got involved with you  
You no longer ease the pain and right now I'm not winning your game  
Daddy always told me to stay away from you  
I guess he just couldn't see what I was going through  
Instead of holding my hand, you just brought me down  
With each puff, I could no longer fake the frown  
I will never be able to look at you the same  
You put my eyes to shame  
I wonder how you came over me  
Burnt my thoughts with your insanity  
I no longer need you  
I shall succeed without you  
So here's my final goodbye  
I would never be bale to forgive you, for all the things  
I put myself through on you

In addition, another student commented that she thought that everyone had a voice in the conference and that the presence of the adults really showed that they cared. She also said that a suspension would not have helped at all, as she would have been sent home and then returned without really dealing with the issue. The circle, she said, allowed her to look at different options that were available to help her such as counseling.

The success of the restorative process lies in bringing the school community together to support students. It is clear that those who have participated in circles at West Ferris have found great value in the process because it allowed all voice to share in the process of resolving the conflict. Victims (students, parents and/or the school community) verbalize their concerns, offenders

(students) listen to these concerns and the community negotiates a course of action on how the offender will give back and demonstrating what s/he is willing to do to reintegrate back into the community.

Simply put: a restorative approach leverages conflicts as a learning opportunity for students. It breaks down the autocratic face of authority in schools, places less emphasis on punishment and more emphasis on supporting victims and offenders. The process itself helps to build trusting relationship between students and adults in the school and a sense of community ownership of conflicts and their resolutions.

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