

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: AN EVOLVING JOURNEY

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Although most people in Canada still link restorative justice to courts, police and criminal matters, the area where it is taking a very strong hold is in school communities. In fact, in recent years it has been within schools and school systems that the greatest development in restorative practice has taken place. This is an exciting and interesting time for school leadership, staff and others as they look for different ways to make schools safer and more conducive to teaching and learning. What they are discovering is that not only is restorative practice effective in doing that, it truly enhances life for everyone who is engaged in that school community, including students and teachers. Restorative practice is being increasingly shown to be a powerful tool in building and sustaining schools that are safer and more connected.



Bruce Schenk

So what is the key to ensuring these developments occur in an effective and lasting way? How do we make sure that restorative practice is not just the “flavour of the year or month”? How do we support and challenge the restorative practice movement in schools in order that this become a way of thinking and being, not simply a behaviour management program? These are some of the questions the panel will address during the “Restorative Practices in Canadian Schools” plenary session.



Helen Fox

It is a great joy and honour to be part of this panel presentation at the 11th World Conference of the International Institute for Restorative Practices in Toronto. I am very pleased to facilitate this session as some of the key leaders from three different Ontario school-board settings discuss their perspectives on these questions, as well as have an opportunity to share some of what has been happening in restorative practices in their areas. As they share their views and aspects of their journey, we will get a glimpse into some of the ways that restorative practice is evolving in Canada.



Rusty Hick

It is important to note that there has been considerable growth of restorative practice in schools throughout Canada during the past decade. We need only look to British Columbia and the work of the John Howard Society in Nanaimo or the Community Justice Initiatives Program in Langley, the partnership that the Calgary Community Conferencing Program has with schools all across that Alberta city, to name a few, as well as many



Lynn Zammit

other examples from across the country, to see that restorative school initiatives are growing. Although the panel presentation on the first day of the conference focuses on developments in Ontario, it is important to recognize that what is happening there is only part of a movement to bring restorative practice to schools right across the country.

The part of Canada where the greatest number of advances has occurred over the past couple of years has been in Ontario. Recently, there has been a dramatic shift from a zero-tolerance approach, entrenched in provincial law a decade ago, to a much more restorative approach to issues of discipline and creating safer school climates. With the changes to the Safe Schools Act that came into force in February of this year, not only is there more openness to restorative practice, but it is increasingly being seen as a way to put the spirit and practicalities of that legislation into action. Although it is not absolutely necessary to have legislative support in order to develop restorative justice in various contexts, it certainly is a huge push and incentive when that occurs. In Canada we have also seen this dynamic in relation to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) that was introduced into law in March 2003. Like the new provincial Safe School Act in Ontario, the national YCJA has been a great impetus to the development of restorative justice programs for youth across the country. In places such as Ontario where both pieces of legislation impact young persons, the effect on the development of restorative practice in schools and the wider community can be significant. We will hear about some of these impacts from our panel presenters.

It is important to recognize that Ontario has a significant number of school-based restorative practice programs in development. One needs to only look to the listing of breakout sessions in the conference handbook concerning restorative practices in Ontario schools to get a sense of just how much is happening. During the panel discussion, Helen Fox, Lynn Zammit and Rusty Hick will share their experiences as three educators among numerous school leaders who are deeply involved in bringing restorative practices to their schools and school districts. Those of us who are dedicated to restorative practice as a way of thinking and being are excited about the changes happening across Ontario.

In York Region District School Board, where Helen is a superintendent of schools and responsible for that board's safe schools program, restorative practices has been in development for a number of years. Initially introduced in local schools a number of years ago by a few administrators and staff who saw the value of restorative justice, this has grown to a boardwide initiative under Helen's leadership. Known

as “Restorative Approaches in York Region Schools” (RAYS), since 2006 many schools and individuals have learned about restorative practices through a series of in-services and training sessions. This includes an extensive restorative-conference facilitator training program led by board and school staff, including Angie Dornai who has served as co-ordinator for RAYS. In addition to facilitator training, over the past two and a half years there have been numerous educational sessions on restorative approaches for administrators and school staff. This included a weeklong visit by Terry O’Connell in early November 2007 where he connected the “Restorative Practice Framework” to various student success and achievement initiatives as part of an “Integration Summit.” There has been a significant effort in York Region to link restorative thinking and practice into day-to-day activities in the classroom. In addition to these sessions, a number of schools have committed themselves to utilizing a restorative approach. A range of restorative resources also have been produced and made available to schools.

Throughout this initiative, the York Region District School Board has been engaged in the following:

- Embedding restorative approaches into the school board plan for continuous improvement and thereby connecting it directly to a focus on student achievement and success through their literacy focus;
- Creating a restorative culture that reflects and integrates board priorities including character development, cultural proficiency, social, emotional and academic learning, and special education;
- Having data that is demonstrating a decrease in the number of suspensions and repeat offences in schools that are using restorative approaches;
- Seeing a grassroots momentum to bring restorative approaches into all aspects of school practice, not just to solve problems, but also to prevent problems from occurring and to help create an inclusive and engaging learning environment for all.

During her part of the panel presentation, Lynn will speak about restorative practice development in Waterloo Region, which has been one of the pioneering efforts in Ontario utilizing restorative justice in schools. As part of these developments, the Waterloo Region District

School Board (WRDSB) received a grant from the Ministry of the Attorney General in November 2004. This grant was to be used for the training of school board staff, police and community agencies as part of a bullying prevention initiative. From November 2004 to October 2007, 453 board staff, 4 trustees, public health nurses, community agencies and 32 police were trained. This project was cited by the Safe Schools Action Team as a promising practice in their report to the Ministry of Education in 2006.

Restorative practices are now used in a variety of ways across the board. The circle process is used in lieu of suspension, as part of re-entry from suspension, as part of progressive discipline during the 20 days pending expulsion and as part of the expulsion re-entry process. At the classroom and school level, restorative practices are used in classroom meetings, as part of bullying prevention initiatives, as part of progressive discipline approaches and are linked to character development.

The restorative practices project teamed up with the Waterloo Public Health Department through the creation and delivery of an elementary-school program called “Imagine A School Without Bullying,” which has been rolled out to all elementary Catholic schools in the region, as well as most public elementary schools. Another interesting partnership occurred with Waterloo Region Police Service, who sent all their school resource officers for training so that when called to investigate a school-related incident, police and school administrators would all have an in-depth understanding of how restorative practices could be used either pre- or post-charge. WRDSB also received a grant from the Ministry of Education for an “Intensive Bullying Prevention Initiative” that was allocated to a family of schools who wished to implement restorative practices in grades K to 12. That project was also supported by a Ph.D. student from the University of Western Ontario who was doing a thesis on restorative practices in schools. (During the same time period, this individual did similar work in Kawartha Pine Ridge District Board with a school engaged in restorative practice as part of her thesis study.)

The Waterloo Board decided in January 2008 to model restorative practice by placing their suspension programs within school so that they could keep students within the community in order to support them.

Lynn was asked to write a curriculum document for those programs based on restorative practice that could be used at both the elementary and secondary levels. The focus of the suspension model was to hold students accountable in meaningful ways by offering them a circle process, as well as the development of social and emotional learning skills that would support behavioural change. The expulsion program, “Choices For Youth,” followed a similar model for seven years as part of a provincial Ministry of Education research program in best practices.

Rusty will speak about the extensive restorative practice development work that continues to occur as a systemic approach across the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPRDSB). In the summer of 2004, the Kawartha Pine Ridge Board began its unique and groundbreaking restorative practice journey. They have moved from a few individuals exploring and testing the concepts of restorative practice within their schools to a systemic approach, including boardwide in-service, and the establishment of board policies and procedures. Over this journey they have collected significant data to support the use of restorative practice as an effective means of both dealing with and reducing inappropriate behaviour and, indeed, as a way of strengthening school communities. The present status of this initiative is that all school staffs, except one, have received in-service, all principals and vice principals have been trained, and as a system we continue to encourage this approach at all levels. They have seen significant reductions in suspensions, particularly at the elementary level, as well as other indicators of healthier relationships and community building, supported by research from Trent University.

The key component of KPR’s initiative is the Restorative Practice Framework. All staff in a school spent an in-service day learning about this framework and discussing its application to their school community. In addition to this training, when a school is introduced to restorative practice, all students attend age-appropriate assemblies based on the framework material. Parents are invited to a two-hour workshop where the application of restorative practice to school and home is discussed. As a way of thinking and being, the Restorative Practice Framework provides a construct for acting restoratively in a “community.” With application in a variety of settings, such as schools, facilities, community programs, workplaces, faith groups and families,

the aim of the framework is to focus on strengthening relationships and repairing harm as a way of building community. In schools it is meant as an integrated and proactive approach.

Utilizing a Socratic engagement style of question and answer, the framework is a clear and consistent practice, which is both firm and fair. There is a continuum of restorative practice, fair process, the restorative questions, a restorative practice checklist, founded on a theoretical basis. By engaging in this framework, schools build on existing practices that already work; it is not meant to replace what is deemed effective but rather to enhance those good practices. It is a rigorous framework that involves teachers, administrators and all school staff, students and parents, engaging them in a collaborative approach. The framework integrates character education attributes at a personal, professional and school community level. It promotes respect, responsibility and accountability by encouraging students to “make things right” and teaching them how to “fix their problems.”

Now that the framework training in schools is complete, more work needs to be done to fully embed restorative practices in schools and across the school board as a systemic approach. For the future, KPR officials see this initiative as going deeper into their schools and classrooms in a number of ways, such as circle training, core team development, curriculum development and student training, as well as its application to staff relations and issues. In order for restorative practice to really take hold, it must be understood as something far more than behaviour management. It needs to be accepted as an integral and necessary part of setting the context for teaching and learning, as well as creating and maintaining safe school environments. Although KPR is well on its way with this journey, more needs to be accomplished in order for it to become the way of thinking and being.

In addition to the work in the school boards represented by our three panel presenters, as mentioned earlier much is happening across Ontario with schools and restorative practice. A quick reading of the breakout sessions attests to these developments. Some of these areas include the Catholic and public school boards in Durham Region, the Kingston area and Hastings and Prince Edward counties. Other examples include the Upper Grand School Board, which is in the midst of implementing restorative practice in some of their schools and in their

suspension/expulsion programs, including linking progressive discipline and character development; the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board, in partnership with the Hamilton Police Service and the John Howard Society, focusing on the use of restorative justice within the three organizations; the Bluewater District School Board, which has been involved in restorative practice for some time. Also, the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario and the Peterborough Victoria Northumberland Clarington Catholic District School Board currently are developing restorative practices in their schools.

This is just some of what is happening with schools and restorative practice across Canada. All of the panel presenters are honoured to be part of these exciting developments and look forward to what the future will bring!