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**Creating Positive
Relationships with Youth**
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Restorative Practices: *Giving Everyone a Voice to Create Safer Saner School Communities*

By Laura Mirsky, M.F.A.

An art class at an inner-city high school is so chaotic the room looks like it's been ransacked. Students wear music headphones and ignore the teacher. There are frequent shoving matches. The young, inexperienced teacher is at her wit's end.

The assistant principal decides to hold a "talking circle" to address the problem. He tries passing around a ball as a "talking piece" (with only the person holding it allowed to speak). The kids jokingly toss it around the room. The assistant principal perseveres. When the students finally realize that he is trying to create an environment for them to solve problems, not just cast blame and mete out punishment, they open up and begin talking about what's happening in the anarchic classroom. Soon they're discussing their love of art and career goals.

One student, however, refuses to participate, goofing off and throwing the ball on the floor. Fed up, another student finally tells him, "Knock it off. Yeah, you're funny, but you do this every day, and you make class impossible." Surprising everyone, the boy asks for the ball and says, "OK, but when you guys laugh at me, you encourage me." Chastened by his peers, the boy now stops interrupting the circle process.

As the circle continues, the students tell the teacher they think the class is childish, not challenging. Shocked, she replies, "I tried advanced activities, but you destroyed the materials and refused to participate!" The students admit she is right. The teacher says she'll try more sophisticated projects if the students make a commitment to support each other to behave maturely and respect the materials. They agree to this.

In the circle, the students develop a plan to turn the class around, discussing how to help the "class clown" behave himself, and making a commitment to respect the art materials and take their work seriously. The next week, the class starts a sculpture lesson. Ultimately, the students keep their commitments and the class begins to function as an art class (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010).

The story above, which took place at West Philadelphia High School, in inner-city Philadelphia, depicts an example of restorative practices, an approach to positive school-wide behavior support that creates environments based on communication, mutual understanding, and respect.

This article seeks to familiarize readers with the philosophy and processes of restorative practices as employed in K-12 education. The author spoke to educators and students at schools where the practices are being implemented and relates their stories about how they are employing the practices, as well as their views on the practices' effectiveness. Although formal research is just beginning in this area, early indications and anecdotal evidence suggest that restorative practices, by intentionally promoting open communication, enhances relationships and thereby improves school climate, discipline, and safety.

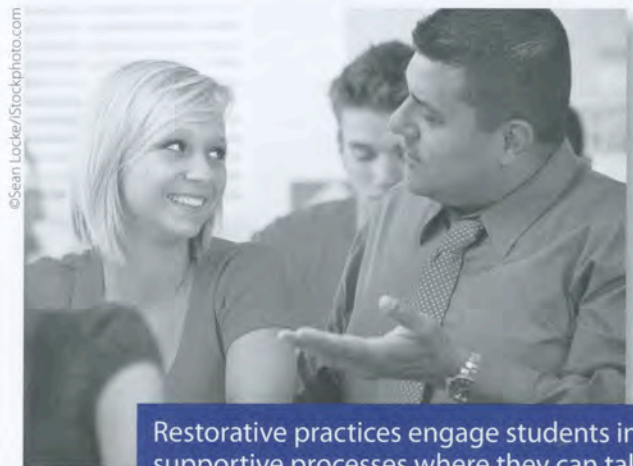
RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The restorative approach is comprised of an overarching philosophy and processes that build community in classrooms and entire schools (and other organizations and workplaces). 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" (Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010, p. 156). Restorative practices engage students in supportive processes where they can take responsibility for their behavior and also includes proactive processes that build relationships and community. Inspired by restorative justice—a way of responding to crime and wrongdoing that focuses on repairing harm between offenders and victims rather than on punishing offenders—restorative practices go even further than restorative justice to include proactive processes that aim to prevent wrongdoing (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009).

Restorative practices are an alternative to exclusionary and punitive zero-tolerance policies mandated in many schools today. Research shows that such punitive policies are ineffective at preventing misbehavior; they actually exacerbate discipline problems and lead to student involvement in the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). The Supportive School Discipline Initiative acknowledges the need for "positive disciplinary options to both keep kids in school and improve the climate for learning" as part of an effort to "address the 'school-to-prison pipeline' and the disciplinary policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the juvenile justice system" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 1).

The philosophy and techniques of restorative practices were developed over three decades by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), a graduate school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and its sister organization, the Community Service Foundation (CSF), which operates alternative schools and programs for delinquent and at-risk youth in eastern Pennsylvania (Mirsky, 2007). The IIRP has gathered data from approximately 40 schools since 1999 to evaluate the effects of restorative practices. These data are mainly discipline statistics, as defined and collected by the schools (e.g., "discipline referrals to the office," "disruptive behavior," detentions, suspensions, expulsions, and "serious incidents"). The data indicate that restorative practices implementation increased school safety and decreased discipline problems. For example, at



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West Philadelphia High School, which received its first formal training in restorative practices in fall 2008, suspensions decreased by half from April to December of that year. A year later it was removed from Philadelphia's Persistently Dangerous Schools list, where it had been for six years (Lewis, 2009).

WHOLE-SCHOOL CHANGE

The IIRP's current restorative practices school implementation strategy, introduced in February 2010, is the two-year SaferSaner-Schools Whole-School Change (WSC) program. In the spirit of restorative practices, the WSC program trains everyone in a school community—including non-educational staff—and involves all staff members in implementation. "By giving everyone a voice and a role in the change process, you give them a reason to buy in," said IIRP director of continuing education John Bailie. "You can't coerce people to grow, learn, and change" (Mirsky, 2011, p. 1). As of this writing, 22 U.S. schools from New York City to San Francisco are in various stages of WSC implementation.

The WSC program is "an explicit road map to achieve proficient and consistent use of restorative concepts and practices throughout a school," which instructs schools in the use of 11 "essential elements" (IIRP, 2010, p. 1). These elements consist of a continuum of processes ranging from the informal to the formal. Table 1.1 lists the essential elements necessary for successful whole-school implementation of restorative practices. All members of a school's staff should be aware of these elements and understand what they are; the table spells out which groups within a school are expected to be proficient in which elements.

Table 1.1
11 Essential Elements of Whole-School Change

School-wide Elements:

Used by all staff members who interact with children.

- 1) Affective statements
- 2) Restorative questions
- 3) Small impromptu conferences
- 4) Restorative staff community
- 5) Fair process
- 6) Reintegrative management of shame
- 7) Fundamental hypothesis understanding

Broad-based Elements:

Implemented by instructional and administrative staff members

- 8) Proactive circles
- 9) Responsive circles
- 10) Restorative approach with families

Targeted Element:

Implemented by a selected multidisciplinary team

- 11) Restorative conferences

Affective Statements

The most informal restorative practice—and the one that underpins all of the Whole-School Change elements—is affective statements, defined as "personal expressions of feeling in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others" (International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2010, p. 6). Understanding and using affective statements can help foster an immediate change in the dynamic between teacher and student. When teachers tell students how they feel, they humanize themselves to students, who often perceive teachers as distinct from themselves (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). Many people are accustomed to thinking of restorative practices as a response to wrongdoing or conflict. But the most basic and informal restorative practices, like affective statements, form the bedrock of whole-school culture change, because of their potential to enhance communication, build relationships, and foster mutual respect between members of a school community.

At City Springs Elementary/Middle School, in Baltimore, Maryland, 99% of students are from families with incomes below the poverty line (R. Richetta, personal communication, June 6, 2011). City Springs began implementing restorative practices in 2007 but began the Whole-School Change program in fall 2010.

Restorative practices go even further than restorative justice to include proactive processes that aim to prevent wrongdoing.

In fall 2010, City Springs began concentrating wholeheartedly on affective statements. Principal Rhonda Richetta said that affective statements are now evident throughout the school. She explained how they work: "Typically, we would have said: 'Stop teasing K.' Now, with affective statements, we say 'When you tease K., I feel uncomfortable.' Instead of 'Sit down and shut up!' teachers say, 'I feel angry when you talk during my lesson'" (personal communication, June 6, 2011).

City Springs's restorative practices facilitator, Brendan Lee, said he values affective statements because they motivate children rather than scolding or belittling them. "If you see a child who has his head down on his desk and is unmotivated to work who yesterday was working hard, instead of saying, 'Pick your head up and work,' you say, 'It makes me upset to see you with your head down, because I know you can do it.' It works out great" (personal communication, June 6, 2011).

Since implementing restorative practices, City Springs has had considerable success improving school discipline and overall school culture. According to principal Rhonda Richetta, in school year 2008–2009, there were 86 suspensions; in 2009–10, there were 10; and in 2010–2011, there were 9 (personal communication, August 2, 2011).

When staff sets an example with affective statements, everyone begins using them—staff and students alike—and the whole climate of the school begins to change. Christina Adamczyk is restorative practices coordinator at Kosciusko Middle School, in Hamtramck, Michigan, an independent municipality geographically surrounded by the city of Detroit. Hamtramck is one of the most economically disadvantaged and diverse communities in the state, with Yemeni, Bengali, African American, Bosnian, Polish, and other residents, speaking 27 languages. All Hamtramck's seven schools are in various stages of restorative practices implementation. Adamczyk said that two girls recently told her, "We were going to have a fight, but instead we used affective statements and decided not to" (personal communication, June 14, 2011).

Restorative Conferences

At the other end of the restorative practices continuum is the most formal practice: the restorative conference, “a structured protocol used in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of less serious incidents” (IIRP, 2010, p. 13). In a conference, all those affected by an incident come together to explore what happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to make things right. Conference participants sit in a circle with no physical barriers. One person speaks at a time. The conference is run by a trained facilitator—someone who was not involved in the incident—who asks participants (those who have committed wrongdoing, those who have been affected by wrongdoing, and supporters of both parties) a series of scripted questions that lead participants to think about the incident, whom it affected and how, and how they can repair the situation. In a restorative conference, the person who has committed wrongdoing hears directly from the people they have affected. This has an emotional impact on both offenders (who can express remorse, apologize, and make amends) and victims (who can directly express their anger and fear) (Wachtel, O’Connell, & Wachtel, 2010).

Although the restorative conference is “not a routine class process,” it plays an important role in whole-school change. Conferences, because they “develop empathy through understanding of each participant’s experience and perspective” and are “consistent with the belief that deterrence must be linked to relationships, personal accountability and repairing harm rather than on punishment and blame,” embody the basic principles of restorative practices. Their use therefore helps ensure that even serious incidents that happen within a school setting are handled in a restorative manner (IIRP, 2010, p. 13).

Christina Adamczyk facilitated a restorative conference at Kosciusko Middle School in May 2010. Two girls had written a “hit list” (so-labeled) naming 25 fellow students and signing their own names. Confronted by the principal, they tearfully admitted their deed. The situation upset the entire school community: students, staff, and parents. The administration decided to hold a restorative conference. Adamczyk held separate preconference meetings with the girls, the students on the list, and everyone’s parents. They all attended the conference, along with teachers, administrators, and translators; every participant spoke (in Bengali, Bosnian, Arabic, and English). Parents with children on the list said they’d been terrified, thinking that someone wanted to kill their child. The girls hadn’t realized the impact of their actions; they apologized and were very remorseful. Tears were shed all around. At the end, everyone agreed that the girls would not be expelled, but would not be allowed to attend the 8th grade trip and would work in the school office all summer to make amends. “It was very powerful. Everyone shared food afterwards, speaking different languages. Parents with kids on the list went out of their way to speak to the parents of the kids who wrote the list” (C. Adamczyk, personal communication, June 14, 2011).

Kosciusko Middle School began phasing in restorative practices in 2009–2010 and stepped up implementation in 2010–2011. The practices impacted bullying and other discipline issues. In 2010–2011, bullying decreased 50% from 2009–2010 and 75% from 2008–2009. Discipline referrals to the office in 2008–2009 (1st–3rd quarters) numbered 1,024; in 2009–2010 (1st–3rd quarters) it was 858; in 2010–2011 (1st–3rd quarters) it was 380 (C. Adamczyk, personal communication, June 14, 2011).

Restorative conferences may seem more dramatic than affective statements, yet the latter have an important cumulative effect when they become part of everyday life in a school or organization where restorative practices are the norm. The “sharing of emotions or ‘getting real’ involved in affective statements is what makes it possible to improve relationships in a school community,” thereby helping to achieve whole-school culture change (IIRP, 2010, p. 6).

Student Interviews

West Philadelphia High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

“Before we had circles, kids felt like they couldn’t share out loud because they were afraid of being picked on or teased. But now, because we do have circles, kids aren’t so afraid. They listen to what one another has to say now.”

Female, age 18, African American

“Before we had circles at our school, there were a lot of fights and problems and riots—just too much conflict.”

Female, age 17, African American

“I like circles because you get to talk about what you’re feeling on the inside; you don’t have to hold it in. You get to talk about stuff you think is wrong, stuff you think is right, and stuff you think people should do to help you.”

Male, age 15, African American

City Springs Elementary/Middle School, Baltimore, Maryland

“I like circles because they get our thoughts in the air. When people share what they think it makes us more cooperative. We recently had a big circle with all the seventh- and eighth-grade girls because there was a conflict between them. We all expressed how we felt and we found out that we had a lot of stuff in common” (IIRP, 2009).

Female, age 14, African American

“When I was new here I didn’t know what to do. I learned we could be open, and I didn’t have to hold back, and I wouldn’t be judged. City Springs is much better than my old school: There was fighting and it was violent. I’m learning more now” (IIRP, 2009).

Male, age 13, African American

“I used to be shy. Now I know I don’t have to be. Most kids are shy. Circles help them express their feelings. And bullies have stopped their bullying ways. There used to be 15 bullies in one class. Now I don’t know any bullies” (IIRP, 2009).

Female, age 9, African American

Kosciusko Middle School, Hamtramck, Michigan

“In circles you all get to know each other. You can say anything that comes into your head, from your heart. I felt shame at other schools. I feel good here. I never saw a school before where there was no bullying.”

Male, age 15, Bengali

“I got into an altercation with another boy. We did a circle on how to restore the problem. We talked about what happened, then apologized and shook hands. Teachers and students and brothers and parents were there. Me and the other boy are friends now. Other schools just kick you out. Kosciusko helps you with problems.”

Male, age 14, African American

“Last year I pushed a teacher and was facing expulsion. We did a restorative meeting with three teachers. My parents came. People asked what happened, what I thought about at the time, what I thought about since then, what I should do to make things right. I was nervous and scared but grateful. It was a wake-up call. I’m doing a lot better. My grades are better. I haven’t had any more problems.”

Female, age 14, Caucasian

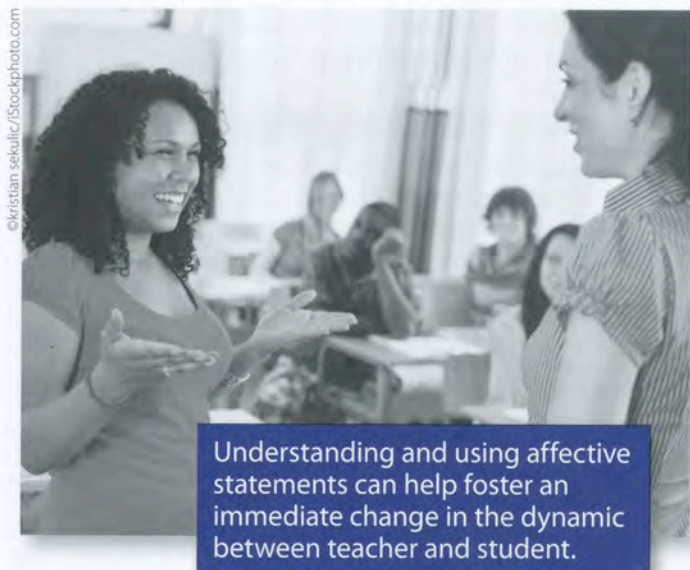
Hamtramck High School, Hamtramck, Michigan

“Last year there was a split between African Americans and Arabs. Now we can see that there are a lot of ways to communicate with each other. Now people sit together and walk down the hall together.”

Female, age 15, Bosnian

“Before we had circles we didn’t feel like our voices mattered. Now the violence and fighting have stopped. Circles make you feel safe. We all come together. A lot of us want to change the world.”

Female, age 15, Bengali



Understanding and using affective statements can help foster an immediate change in the dynamic between teacher and student.

Circles

In the center of the restorative practices continuum—and fundamental to the Whole-School Change program—are circles. In all types of circles, as in restorative conferences, one person speaks at a time, and everyone has a chance to speak. The power of circles lies in giving a voice to even the shyest or most diffident students. Circles change the classroom dynamic: Students who might normally behave obstructively are integrated into the classroom when given a forum to be heard, and assertive students who might dominate discussion can no longer do so. Teachers also participate in classroom circles, sharing their views and becoming further humanized to students (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010).

The 11 essential elements include two basic circle types: proactive and responsive. Proactive circles “provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors” and build community in the classroom (IIRP, 2010, p. 9). When proactive circles are first introduced in the classroom, topics are light and undemanding. Later, topics become more advanced and in-depth, focusing on issues of importance within the classroom or the outside world and even academic content (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010).

When students are accustomed to proactive circles, they’re ready for responsive circles. These “engage students in the

management of conflict and tension by repairing harm and restoring relationships in response to a moderately serious incident or pattern of behavior affecting a group of students or an entire class,” and can be a “vehicle for using peer pressure to get positive change in behavior” (IIRP, 2010, p. 11).

FUTURE RESEARCH

More formal research on the IIRP SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change program is in development, said IIRP director of continuing education John Bailie. “[As of this writing], the first cohort of schools just completed the first year of the formal two-year program, and we don’t have much hard data yet. But initial reports look really encouraging, even more so than they have in the past [before the creation of the SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change Program]. City Springs is a great example. They’re seeing vastly improved results, even in a building that had already seen big gains in previous years. We’re also excited about designing new research protocols around implementation support.” Bailie added that future research would ideally involve randomized controlled groups, comparing discipline data, as well as investigating why restorative practices work. He concluded, “The field is ripe for research into social and emotional learning, and the development of social capital and leadership models in relation to the implementation of restorative practices” (personal communication, September 15, 2011).

STUDENTS TALK ABOUT RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Students are sometimes the most enthusiastic proponents of restorative practices, embracing them more quickly and easily than school staff. According to Christina Adamczyk of Kosciusko Middle School, “Kids can figure this stuff out more quickly than we can. They are taking it upon themselves and asking for circles” (personal communication, June 14, 2011).

The author conducted numerous interviews about circles and other restorative processes with students at schools where restorative practices are being implemented. Their remarks clearly express their appreciation of the opportunity that restorative practices provide to be heard, to learn about each other, and to solve problems collaboratively (See sidebar: Student Interviews on page 5).



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