

**Restorative Practices in the
Elementary Classroom:**
Memoirs of a 4th Grade Teacher

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Restorative Practices in the Elementary Classroom

The 8:25 bell sounds. I push my chair away from my desk. Stand. Stretch. Take a deep breath and pause, holding for a moment, and reaching for intention. Remembering why I am here.

My job description reads teacher, full-time, 4th grade. It says nothing about building a cohesive classroom environment, a community where every single child feels safe, valued, and honored as an amazing, unique, individual ... a young human being representing the cutting edge of evolution ... a seed with the potential to change the world with new thoughts and insights, the ability to manifest unimagined creative possibilities.

Likewise, my job description says nothing about the acute anger and pain many of these small, should-be-innocent nine- and ten-year-old children bring through the classroom door each morning, residual affects of sexual abuse, domestic violence, poverty, transience, homelessness; the abandonment of parents through divorce, drug abuse, incarceration and death.

My professional success is quantifiably measured by district and state standardized testing of reading, writing, and math. State tests are literally kept under lock and key, with only a sampling of publicized release items available for teacher preview; tests that change as much as 25% in one year, tests of questionable validity and reliability. When measuring and reporting my professional success there is no documentation of where a child registers on the "ready-to-learn" scale when entering my classroom. The system adopts a business model and assumes each little widget delivered to my teaching dock promptly at 8:24 a.m. walks through the door smiling and eager to absorb and assimilate information at a pace that matches the recommended curricular scope and sequence.

Standardized testing is a very serious matter in my profession. Pass through the halls of any elementary school in Colorado during the month of March and you will feel the tension among staff members tear at collegial friendships like a frazzling tightrope about to snap. Peek in the windows of the homes of nine- and ten-year-olds and you will see anxious, sleepless children who complain of nightmares and stomach aches.

My job description and measures of professional success do not account for the challenges of meeting children's needs for physical care, safety, belonging, or self-esteem. No curriculum is adopted, standards written, points awarded for the work required to elevate children to a place of being ready to learn; able to self-actualize. The current educational system presumes that laser-like focus on benchmarks and standards, and high quality bell-to-bell instruction will produce well-educated children, eager to become productive, cooperative citizens in our

democratic society. The factory is fired up and ready. The widgets are at the door. And the bell is ringing

So why *am* I here?

I'm here because my grandfather was a prison guard in a maximum-security federal penitentiary for 32 soul-crushing years, as much a victim of poverty, domestic violence, poor education, and self-limiting beliefs as the incarcerated men he guarded.

I'm here because my father dropped out of high school at 16. He'd been abandoned by his mother at 5 years old, missed most of second grade while hospitalized for polio, never really got the hang of reading while in school. It's hard to be a learner when your heart is broken, hard to be a good student when you can't read your textbooks.

I'm here because I was born to unemployed teen-aged parents who were scarred by sexual abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and the abandonment of their parents through divorce, substance abuse, and suicide. I'm here because I understand these angry, hurting children.

I'm here because I believe that every child deserves a school environment that recognizes and acknowledges the obstacles facing kids today, and values children enough to teach them how to manage their emotions, articulate their wants and needs, and resolve their conflicts **so that they can be engaged and interested learners.**

I'm here because I believe in the miracle of every child, the inspiration of innate passion, the power of choice, the wisdom of following your bliss. I'm here because I believe in the vision of a well-informed, literate democracy; and that without life-affirming education there cannot be justice or equity in our world.

Classroom as Microcosm

World peace begins at home. So do fear, suspicion, prejudice, and hatred ... the building blocks of domestic violence, terrorism and war. Children first encounter others of different beliefs, those who live by different rules and expectations, in the classrooms of public schools. Some enter these rooms joyful, thriving, and hungry for knowledge, bursting to share new ideas and insights. Many others come fragmented and hurting, dominating or sullen, unable to share much of anything but anger, pain, and violence.

The public school classroom is a microcosm of the world at large. Multinational corporations value profits more than human rights, more than sustainable resources. Our academic system value standardized test scores more than

children's sense of safety, belonging, and self-esteem; more than creativity and inspiration.

"If we want peace, then we shall have to begin with the children."¹ When we learn to care for *all* children as whole children we will begin to create wholesome communities. From whole communities we can expect people to self-actualize; we can expect neighbors to realize the dream of an equitable, just democracy.

I know why I'm here.

So the bell rings and ...

This is how our community works

Twenty-seven students queue outside the classroom door. Most grow quiet when I appear, the rest "lock their lips" as their peers and I form the letter "L" with a thumb and index finger held to an ear ... the American Sign Language symbol for "listen." As children file into the building I deliberately greet each one with words of welcome (*Good morning, Alex! Glad you're here, Taylor! Nice haircut, Morgan! Billy, we missed you yesterday. Are you feeling OK today?*). They "high-five" with me like a passing sports team and I notice the quality of touch each child offers. Some slap my hand like winners. Some meet my hand mid-air and hold on for a moment, silently acknowledging love and sanctuary. Some pat my hand as a simple greeting. A few, aware that some contact is expected, lift a leaden hand that barely brushes my palm before dropping quickly back into rhythm with a dejected shuffle. While other students' eyes sparkle, shine, or quietly hold a connection; these students, the ones with the heavy hands, choose not to make eye contact.

In less than one minute I've learned a lot about the emotional weather blowing into my classroom this morning.

Inside students scuffle about, greeting each other, hanging backpacks & jackets, designating hot lunch choices, dropping outstanding homework at my desk. All the while, Rogers & Hammerstein's "Oh What a Beautiful Morning" plays in the background and children who have completed their immediate morning tasks line up for a few bars of waltz with me or another waiting classmate. While dancing, we touch safely, and really look at each other, smiling, singing, and dancing together. We practice every morning remembering that we all matter, that we're all important, that life is good.

Often many kids join in to belt out an off-key chorus. "*I've got a beautiful feeeeee - ling everything's going my way!*" Whenever the opportunity presents, unsuspecting parents or staff members are lured in from the hallway to show off

¹ Mohandas Gandhi

their dance floor moves to wide-eyed, grinning students. Hold-outs, kids who sit back and watch, those who don't line up to dance, are coaxed to join in, reminded that I want to dance with everyone. (*Nicky! You gonna dance with me today? No?? Come on. I know you want to! You know it's gonna happen.*) This kind of persistence is hard to resist, even for a 9 year old wanna-be gang member.

My intent is clear and strong. The children bring their weather from home, but I manage the climate in this room.

It's 8:30 a.m. and the second bell rings.

The music turns off. School news plays on TV. I log attendance on my computer, then circulate the crowd: ruffle hair, pat backs, search for growing "angel wings" (scapula that poke out behind these small growing bodies ... more safe touch). I also distribute highly prized "blue notes" to students already on task, reading from a favorite book or working on warm-up math problems.

Individual Behavior Management

Like many classrooms, we have a behavior management system. Ours is called "ICMM" ... **I Can Manage Myself**. A pocket chart at the back of the room holds name card in four colored tiers. From top to bottom: blue, green, yellow, red. Every student's name starts in a green level pocket every day, because every new day offers a fresh start. A student who behaves in a way that makes our class a better place moves up to blue and takes a blue note home to share the news of his or her contribution. Students who break class rules, which are discussed and agreed upon by the class at the beginning of the year, drop their name cards to yellow (with no further consequence) on first offense, then to red if a second offense occurs. Dropping to red requires that the student take a red note home. This simply says, "I went to red today. Let me tell you what happened, and my new plan." The next days' afternoon recesses are forfeited until students return a red note with a parent signature. Receipt of frequent red notes might necessitate a parent-student-teacher conference, though by fourth grade most students can negotiate a school day without talking excessively during instruction, or coloring on desks.

Blue notes are important. They help me notice and acknowledge positive behaviors; they allow students to gain self-esteem through quiet leadership and role modeling. Red notes help shape behavior too, and are an easy communication tool between school and home.

I give blue notes freely, red notes infrequently, always striving to notice what is working well, talk about what I'd like to see more often, focus on what students do right. This system is effective when students come to school feeling socially and emotionally balanced, performing at grade level, comfortable with their ability

to achieve, and with their place in their world. In my experience, these students are becoming a minority.

Students who come from fragmented families and community are lacking critical social and emotional skills; skills that are necessary for managing themselves, and skills that are critical to negotiating the inevitable conflicts that occur whenever people live together. What students don't know how to do, and we have been inept at teaching them, is how to identify their feelings, ask for what they need, value others' perspectives, sincerely apologize, make amends, and negotiate agreements that respect and honor everyone. We've been so busy teaching reading, writing, and math that we've forgotten to act like caring human beings, and we've failed to notice that many children have nowhere to learn the skills of community.

Most schools and classrooms today operate from a paradigm of retributive justice. Break a rule: suffer the consequence. Break bigger rules: suffer bigger consequences. Get enough strikes and you're out. That's how my classroom used to operate. Fall semester 2004 saw a lot of red notes flying, in spite of my best efforts to look for the positive and reinforce the good stuff. From the beginning of that school year through December, the number and severity of conflicts among students grew at an alarming rate.

A Catalyst for Change

Then in January 2005, actions of 5 students changed everything. Actions that could fairly be characterized as malicious, predatory, and vicious, outraged, stunned and bewildered me so completely that I had to step back from everything I thought of as good discipline and best teaching practice and re-evaluate ... rebuild from ground zero.

Emily considered herself good friends with these five girls. One of them had been her companion since preschool (age 4) ... more than half her life. Even as nine-year-olds, Emily's friends knew life had been hard for her; harder than it had been for most of them. Emily never had a dad in her life. She lived exclusively with her grandparents now. Last spring she was still adjusting to the arrival of twin siblings when her mother abandoned them all in favor of a hasty marriage to a man she'd just met. Her great-grandmother, an important part of her extended family, had died just before Christmas. Emily needed friends. She needed them badly. She needed to be wanted and loved. She needed to feel secure. She stuck to these girls like glue. She was the shadow they couldn't shake.

Emily's new, glitter-laced red poncho was her most prized possession, a Christmas gift from her grandmother. It was high fashion for nine-year-old girls this season ... Hip. Happenin'. Now. Wow! Emily wore it to school every day, proud to be "in," joyful to have something that showed she belonged to her childhood tribe. Then one morning, less than three weeks past Christmas, Emily

left her poncho on her hallway coat hook and went off to math class. Two of her friends, carrying a pass to use the bathroom, snatched the poncho off its hook and stashed it in the lost-and-found at the other end of school, retrieved it during lunch recess, took it to the restroom (along with 3 more friends and a scissors snuck from class), cut softball-sized holes in the weaving, then returned it to the hallway coat hook where it had been hanging at the beginning of the day.

Emily's bruised and battered heart shattered. The five girls each received 2 days suspension for vandalism. Someone bought Emily a new poncho. ALL the girls were angry; everyone except Emily had justifications for their actions. Big broken rules: big consequences ... lots of animosity, lots of hurt, little learning.

Trust among all students in this class was devastated; their sense of community was shredded with the poncho. Children who had never had serious conflict with friends looked at each other with suspicion and apprehension. If these girls could so ruthlessly plan and execute such a deliberately hurtful act on *their* friend, what will *my* friends do to *me*? Tearful girls *and* boys voiced these concerns the next day during our first of many classroom circles ... circles that became known as peacekeeper circles, and valued so much by these students that they would sometimes forfeit recess to sit and talk with each other.

In retrospect this incident seems inevitable, this one or one like it. Conflict in this classroom *had* been frequent, severe, and escalating. Physical fights on the playground were happening weekly. Harsh words, gossip, and triangulated friendships kept emotions raw and broiling just below the surface. Kids came to school angry, treated each other poorly, became more angry and fought.

Regular pleas and admonishments from me, red notes, visits to the school counselor and the principal, detentions or suspensions were band-aid strategies that allowed adults to claim they'd done their part. In truth, we weren't teaching kids how to take care of themselves or their relationships with each other. We were telling them that they needed to get along so that we could get along with our business of teaching school; but we weren't teaching them HOW to take care of themselves or HOW to get along.

As educators, we don't do this because it's not part of our job descriptions. These skills are not delineated by state standards. These skills are not scored by high-stakes testing; nor are the results used to expose school environments that need to be improved, or advertised by others as proud badges of accomplishment. We fail to teach these critical skills because there's no supporting curriculum; and sometime we don't teach them because we don't possess the skills ourselves.

Still, in January, we were at ground zero. Like the fall of the World Trade Center, the "January poncho incident" became our point of devastation, our point of demoralization, our point of common reference, and our rallying point. As a

classroom community we were badly injured, *and* we had compelling, strong desires for things to be different.

Gathering Resources, Testing Strategies, Working Toward a Dream

Over the next three months I gathered resources, tested strategies, and slowly began developing a healthier, stronger, more affirming way for all of us to live together. We needed a system that would respect and honor the realities of our lives while moving us toward realizing the dream of living in a resource-rich, life-affirming school community, a sanctuary for self-actualization.

Restorative Justice theory written by Howard Zehr, and training from the Minnesota Department of Corrections formed a cornerstone to our new approach to conflict resolution. Work from David and Roger Johnson, *Reducing School Violence Through Conflict Resolution*; and insight from Marshall Rosenberg's *Center for Non-Violent Communication* supplemented and modified judicial principles and practices intended for use with adult populations. These works helped transform high-level principles and concepts into applications that are developmentally appropriate for children; relevant and meaningful in an elementary school environment. Additionally, child-friendly forms from the Indiana-based *Peace Learning Center* offered templates that with minimal modification served our needs very well.

So today things *are* different. Today in our classroom we have moved away from the age-old power-based retributive discipline process focused on rules, punishments and rewards. We are moving away from a system where adults have *power over* children to a system where adults share *power with* children. We are all learning how to understand and ask for what we want and need. Children are being empowered to negotiate resolutions to their own conflicts. Today we embrace Restorative Practices. We are learning to be a cohesive, caring community.

It's 8:45. Math homework is visible on most desks, ready for me to do a quick check. Students with delinquent homework have matter-of-factly added their names to the "Study Hall List," and while everyone works quietly on a 10-minute warm up, I quickly peruse a dozen "Weather Reports." Each morning all students who are engaged in a Peace Contracts (negotiated agreements to prevent further conflict), and any others with imposing emotional issues, find their personal "Weather Report" facedown on their desk, our means of communicating each day about how life is feeling. Students choose a weather number from 1 to 5 to describe their feelings as they walk in the door:

1	I'm having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day ☹️ I need lots of space & will do my best to count to 10 before I respond. I don't want to hurt others or myself by reacting thoughtlessly.
2	I'm not feeling good emotionally <i>or</i> physically right now. I need to be kind to myself and be with people I trust will be gentle with me. I am learning how to take care of myself today.
3	I'm not my best today. Something's not feeling quite right. I'm going to focus on positive self-talk, and look for things to improve.
4	I'm having a really good day. I'm patient and kind with others. It's easy to overlook people's mistakes and focus on what I'm doing right!
5	I'm having an absolutely WONDERFUL day! My good mood is contagious. I'm going to make this world a better place today just by being ME today. I am a wonderful role model. ☺️ YEAH!!!

Along with their number rating, students write a brief explanation for me of their weather this morning, then leave the form on my desk. In doing this, they notice and take responsibility for their feelings before the school day begins, *and* they begin to link their feelings with actions, behaviors, and habits.

These are actual student responses:

#	Note
1	My parents had a fight and my tonsils hurt today.
3	It's a school day.
2	Ate rotten cereal for breakfast.
5	My cousin gets out of jail today.
2	I think I lost a friend on Saturday.
5	Starwars opens in two days.
1	My friends are talking about me behind my back and it hurts my feelings a lot.
2	I didn't get to see my mom this morning.
2	Something happened to a very close friend. I want someone to talk to me.
3	Mother's day was not great even though I have my grandma. I didn't get to see my mom.
5	It's Wednesday. We get to play the Peacekeeper Game.
2	Trust with Chris is bad.
5	I slept till 7:30.
2	My dad keeps yelling at me.
1	I lost my coat. Darn.
5	I'm having a great day. I love everything!

Before beginning math instruction, I privately speak with students who have reported low emotional weather. I ask if they need to talk to our counselor or me

right away, or if they can wait until snack time (after math) to talk about a troubling issue. Rarely do kids voice a need for immediate attention. They understand we have serious academic work to do, and take comfort in knowing that their feelings are important. They register some relief just knowing that there will be time in our day to address their personal needs, and that their needs are important to me. My number one priority is my students' well being (not their test scores), and they know it. I show them every day.

I've learned over time to respect the silent red flag of an unreturned report. Kids who are really hurting often have a hard time asking for help. Without this system I have no way of understanding shifts in their unique emotional landscapes. The student who reported "I want someone to talk to me" had never participated in Weather Reports before the day she turned in this one. She accepted my invitation, offered only a few days prior, for students to help themselves to forms whenever *they* decided they needed them. When I followed up on her request for help I learned that a young family friend died in a tragic accident two days earlier. This child was so afraid of crying in front of her friends that she hadn't been able to talk to anyone at school about the death. It was only when we reached the privacy of the hallway that she tearfully shared what had happened and asked to see our counselor.

Later in the day, after math and reading, while the kids are away in music class, I write a line or two in response to each child's weather comments. I encourage them to notice patterns. What helps to make a good day? What precedes sadness and anger? I offer congratulations when things are going well and offer fresh perspectives, resources and support when they're not. To my amazement, this simple process of noticing and acknowledging feelings often defuses or de-escalates energy that in the past would have been a sure catalyst for conflict. When kids learn to own their emotions they have a much better chance of successfully managing their own behavior.

Conflict among all people is common. It's inevitable in groups of children. They have passionate impulses, strong desires for friendship and validation, and undeveloped skills regarding how to meet their many and varied wants and needs.

Peace Contracts

Historically children's conflicts have often been minimized, patronized, or punished. Today, in our classroom, when students are unable to solve their differences independently, they request time at the Conflict Resolution Table and ask their classmate to participate in a Peace Contract.

The initial step to negotiating a contract is for all parties to complete a Conflict Report form independent of the other(s) involved in the dispute. Students have an opportunity to calm their emotions, state the nature of the grievance, and write

more objectively about their feelings, needs, and wants. They suggest three potential agreements that might resolve the conflict and reestablish good peer relations. They also articulate three things that they might try if this conflict happens again. All this occurs separately, before students join with me as their facilitator to begin to working toward a mutual agreement.

There are several goals to facilitating a Peace Contract. Initially students need to be able to articulate the nature of the conflict, stating their own points of view from a non-judgmental perspective: "I don't like it when Kelly interrupts me when I'm talking with my friends. I want her to stop interrupting me," rather than "I want Kelly to stop being such a brat."

Students need to practice active listening skills; really hearing another's side of an issue without interrupting, becoming defensive, or arguing. Contract negotiation cannot proceed until each student's perspective is understood. It is not required that students agree with the other's feelings or accept their intentions, but it's important that they listened well enough to repeat what the other person described.

With help, student usually *can* agree to a general description of the words or actions that precipitated the dispute. The next step is to brainstorm ideas for the Peace Contract. What is each person willing to do, or not do, to prevent this conflict from continuing or re-occurring? (Sometimes students' peace contributions are the same. At other times their commitments are totally unrelated.) What needs to be done to make amends?

Additionally, students must find a solution to another question. If someone fails to follow through on this new agreement and the conflict resurfaces, what is a reasonable and logical next level of action toward reconciliation? (Sometimes students agree to self-imposed consequences. Sometimes they agree to seek further support from adult resources: our counselor, parents, or me.)

It is critical that both the agreement and follow-up plan for a broken agreement are solutions that feel fair to each student. It is also crucial that the students, *not* the facilitator, determine what these agreements will be. This process allows students to collaborate in finding solutions that are meaningful, solutions *they* believe will be effective. They invest their emotions and time in articulating this solution, and in doing so, develop a belief in their strategy's ability to bring them success.

Our Day Continues

Conflict erupted yesterday afternoon, with no time free time left in the day to discuss what happened between two boys. They requested a Peace Contract with each other as they came in from recess. I told them that the first chance we'd have to work together would be during our next lunch recess. What could

they do to keep peace until we had a chance to negotiate an agreement? They said they'd give each other lots of space, and speak respectfully to each other if they needed to talk at all. They took copies of the Conflict Report form home and completed them there to minimize the amount of recess time needed to complete this process.

Now it's lunchtime. Josh and Cal bring their lunches from the cafeteria to our classroom. It's their choice to eat in the classroom with me. They really value their recess time and want to start their discussion as soon as they're seated. There's camaraderie in having a meal together in an intimate setting. It sets a cooperative tone, makes for a more relaxed environment, and reminds us that we have common needs, and enjoy common pleasures.

Negotiating a Contract

As we eat, we talk through their Conflict Report forms. With some help they're able to mutually describe the problem: Cal passed the football after the whistle blew yesterday, an understood signal for all play to end. He then claimed points for a touchdown scored after the game had officially concluded. Josh had harsh words to say about this. Name-calling, pushing, and tripping ensued. Cal immediately admits that he broke a rule by continuing play after the whistle. He agrees not to do this again.

What do we need to do about name-calling, pushing and tripping? What were they thinking when this happening? After more conversation between the boys they agree that they both have trouble controlling their tempers, and acknowledge that they both crossed a serious line when their feelings turned into actions that could have caused bodily injury. What to do?

We brainstorm suggestions to prevent this kind of offense from occurring in the future. We talk about the suggestions they'd written on their Conflict Report form:

- Be nice
- Don't fight
- Try to be friends

These ideas lack detail and specificity, though echo the very same words of advice that harried adults often offer when confronted with the same type of situation. These suggestions reveal that these kids don't really understand the emotional dynamics of this exchange. Without greater personal insight and strategies to improve interpersonal relationships, they have little chance to do anything but repeat their mistakes.

Facilitator Support

At the Conflict Resolution Table, I point out to the boys that these suggestions show good sentiments. They clearly like each other! They liked each other before they went out for recess, and even after fighting they still want to be friends. We talk about the difference between a reaction (not at all thoughtful) and a response (a chosen action that's in keeping with personal values). The hazard is that when strong angry feelings come up it's hard to *not* to react unless they have plans that reflect how they truly want to choose to behave.

The next part of negotiations is critical to the success of the agreement. With deliberate and serious expressions and gestures, I tell the children that *I* don't have any power to make this agreement work. The problem we're talking about is *their* problem, and *they* have all the power. The agreement they work out is *their* agreement. It needs to work for *both of them*. *I* don't get to decide what happens next. *They do*. As I push my chair away from the table, I tell them I'll be back in 10 minutes to hear what they have decided.

A Shift in Focus

When I return the boys tell me that their hot tempers are the problem. Cal reiterates his agreement to hold the football after the whistle blows. They both agree that they need to have a plan in place for the next time either of them senses that their anger is getting out of control. Josh says he plans to walk away from the playing field to a nearby bench and cool off till he's in control again. Cal's chosen a specific spot near the basketball court to cool off if he's feeling hot. If either boy breaks their promise they agree to a self-imposed ban from football for one week.

Over the course of negotiating this agreement the boys have shifted from focusing on a broken rule to talking about their emotions and their relationship. They've developed a sense of mutual understanding and empathy, and talked about their desire to remain friends. Rather than tear them apart this conflict, and its resolution, has brought them closer together.

I double-check with each boy to be sure that they feel the agreement is fair, that they're comfortable living with their commitments. They concur and sign the contract. I congratulate and thank them for their efforts to honor themselves and each other, and for doing their part to keep peace in our classroom.

Before they leave, I give them each a paper token that says "RTF." Redeeming an RTF allows a student to leave the classroom and run to (the) fence, provided they are not missing direct instruction, and that they return quietly, without interrupting others. Students proudly exercise this privilege when they need a quick break in their day. I give RTFs to honor the personal time students relinquish in order to work out peace agreements; and in recognition of good faith effort, a concept we frequently talk about in large group. Good faith effort is a

leadership skill; doing your best to do the right thing. It's a skill I want to reinforce in all students, especially those who may have low self-esteem.

Contract Retirement and Celebrations

When contracts are new I check in with participants briefly at least once a day to "see how things are going" and give kids the opportunity to reiterate agreements and strategies. After a week or so, I check in every 3-4 days. When I repeatedly hear that frictions have dissipated and hard feelings have subsided I suggest that participants let me know when they're ready to retire their contract. Contract retirement warrants another round of RTFs, a classroom announcement with applause and congratulations, a note to the office alerting administration of the new achievement, and – at the next school assembly - the receipt of Peacekeeper Awards (given to the Peace Partners as a team). After assembly, ALL students in class celebrate their peacekeeping achievements, those who received certificates for contract retirement, those currently working on contracts, *and* everyone else who kept the peace without even needing a contract ... congratulations and cake to all!

Looking for Patterns

During our first semester of implementing Peace Contracts there were several interesting insights that helped to modify and shape the process. Almost immediately it became apparent that students often did not have the vocabulary necessary to describe and articulate their feelings. A *Conflict Resolution Support Booklet*² was created to support these kids. This booklet displays simple pages and illustrations to help students through the process of discussing emotional aspects of a conflict:

- Name
- I feel ... (many happy face style pictures illustrating a spectrum of feelings)
- When you ...
- Because ...
- I need ...

Students use this support booklet to aid in their conversations with each other, and to help them develop active listening skills when trying to restate what a classmate has just told about his or her experience of a conflict.

Repeating Issues

Peace contracts create documentation of significant conflicts occurring within a classroom community. Frequent and independent occurrences of a similar type of conflict indicate an opportunity for group education and the setting of classroom norms. In a matter of only a few weeks gossip was identified as a catalyst for many disagreements, and from that realization sprang a class conversation about true friendships. As a community the class developed the following definitions, which were posted and revisited for the remainder of the school year to guide students to better relations.

² see <http://www.peacelearningcenter.org/upload/imessage.pdf>

True Friends	Pretend Friends
Are inclusive	Are exclusive
Give a real apology when they hurt you and change their behavior	Give a pretend apology when they hurt you and do not change their behavior
Talk directly to each other when they have concerns	Triangulate relationships and gossip

Gossip	Talking about someone who is not present, especially in a hurtful way, saying things that you wouldn't say if that person was listening
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Repeat Offenders

Tracking Peace Contracts over time also calls attention to repeating patterns of conflict experienced by a single student with a variety of other classmates. In this case a personal Peace Contract can be initiated as a preemptive measure against future offenses. Jimmy quickly logged a record of aggressive conflicts, which were often precipitated by flagrant name-calling. Examination of active and retired contracts clearly highlighted the advantages of changing this habit. Jimmy gladly wrote a personal contract to stop name-calling, including a specific strategy to constructively manage anger, daily check-ins, consequences for breaking the contract, and a detailed lunch celebration after 2 weeks of success. The contract was broken twice, and self-imposed consequences followed. Jimmy beamed with pride, empowerment, and a newfound sense of self-respect when he completed the contract 4 weeks later. Celebrating his success, sharing lunch and ice cream on a picnic blanket in front of school, Jimmy and I talked about his accomplishment. We still had 5 weeks left of school. I asked if there were there any other behaviors he'd like to improve?

An Evolving Process

It was then that he offered one of the many gifts I came to think of as small miracles, synergies that generously came from the hearts of students who felt the power and dignity of this process, wanting to expand and improve the spirit of this program. Jimmy said, how 'bout we let everyone make their own contracts to get better at getting along? Jimmy extended his "no name-calling" contract for the rest of the school year. In addition to this, he explained and promoted his "Be Your Best Peacekeeper Challenge" to all of his classmates. Each student wrote a personal goal to improve class relations and claimed an ice cream sundae component to donate to our Peacekeeper Challenge party at the end of the year. Everyone who successfully completed their contract was allowed to bring their favorite topping. Everyone demonstrating a good faith effort participated in the celebration, even if his or her topping didn't attend!

A Benchmark of Success

After 3 _ months of implementing restorative practices in our classroom, an amazing, spontaneous occurrence demonstrated that this Peacekeeper Program had been embraced and internalized by our students. It was a gorgeous

Colorado afternoon late in April, the kind of day that would make a principal yearn to play hooky and head off to the golf course. Eight minutes before the end of recess a dozen students stopped their soccer game and walked together toward the school building, as if ready to line up for class and come indoors. They seemed a bit subdued, but they weren't fighting, and I remember thinking "What's up? Recess isn't over! I didn't blow the whistle. *I'd* like to stay outside for a few more minutes."

The kids quietly walked straight to me and announced that there had been cheating in their game and they needed to call a circle. Nine of the kids had been involved, the rest were witnesses offering support. Without hostile verbal exchanges or physical fighting, the students had called off their game and come together to solve their grievances. While the rest of the class continued recess play, these kids sat in a circle on the grass, talked about the poor idea someone suggested and another followed to trip opponents in the game. Together all players agreed to sanction the two who had broken fair play rules. Everyone, including the offenders, agreed that the solution was equitable, and with an unwritten "gentlemen's agreement" that required no adult intervention or paper processing, this dispute was settled.

Building a Positive Community Environment

Restorative Justice conferencing empowers students. In our classroom, during the first semester that we implemented these practices, usually only the parties involved in a conflict participated in the conference. On a few occasions, when bystanders to a conflict felt invested in an outcome, they too participated in the resolution of a disagreement.

Occasionally parents were consulted during a process, kept abreast of developments in student relationships, and of the agreements students negotiated. They were considered backup resources, and because students successfully came to their own solutions, parents were not involved in conferencing. Family group conferencing, and circles involving families of victims and offenders would certainly be desirable if students were unable to navigate this process without family support. Under those circumstances, it would be preferable for the classroom teacher to participate as a school community representative and for an uninvolved, neutral party to facilitate the circle.

Restorative Practices involves more than conflict resolution, making amends, and healing harm. Restorative Practices encompasses a new paradigm, a new way of living together; it requires deliberate actions to build respectful relationships and results in the creation of a compassionate, caring, cohesive community. In our classroom the Peacekeeper Game, and the writing and sharing of classroom compliments proved to be powerful tools toward this end.

Peacekeeper Game

Once each week for 30 minutes students form a circle on the floor to play the Peacekeeper Game. As the kids settle into place, a box of wrapped candy is passed around the circle. In our class Jolly Ranchers® is the candy of choice. Each child takes three pieces, placing them within reach just inside the circle. There's a clear understanding that the candy must be still and quiet ... no fussing or fiddling with the candy! This circle is a sacred place for our community, and student-created distractions are considered signs of disrespect for this process.

The purpose of this game is to practice public acknowledgment of appreciation of others' kindnesses, and *in a safe environment* respectfully air small grievances and hurts before they grow to become grudges and catalyze full-blown conflicts. It allows everyone in class to hear how "popular" kids attract and keep friends. It also gives hurting students the chance to educate others about what feels bad to them, and opens the door for offenders to make things right and change hurtful behaviors.

Over the course of a semester, with student input, the game evolved to address complex and sophisticated social dynamics and moral issues. Through the repeated practice of this game, students demonstrated moral development far more advanced than what current theory in social psychology would deem them capable. They modified the basic game, guided by empathy and insights far beyond what one typically expects from 9- and 10-year-old children. This simple game empowers students, and over time allows them to develop their own set of norms, creating a unique social contract for their own small community based on common experiences and shared understandings.

The game is taught and practiced in stages.

Rules to the Basic Game

1. Everyone sitting in circle agrees to be honest.
2. Everyone understands that the speaker is voicing his or her truth, which is a point of view or perspective that others may or may not share.
3. You may always voice your truth, even if it is different from someone else's perspective, so long as you don't argue with someone who spoke before you. Arguing with another's point of view is not allowed.
4. In this game our focus is on current actions, those that have happened in the past week, or since we've last played this game. In this forum it is not allowed to bring up issues from weeks, months, or years ago.
5. When giving a compliment or airing a grievance, do so using language that describes actions. Avoid name-calling and words that generalize or are judgmental.
6. When giving a compliment or airing a grievance, do your best to look the other person in the eyes. If this is too difficult, practice getting closer to this goal by looking at the other person's forehead.

7. You may choose to pass when it's your turn, though you may not re-claim your turn later.

Playing the Basic Game: Stage I

When this game is initiated, and during the first month of play, students only give positive feedback to each other. Beginning in a randomly chosen spot in the circle each student has the opportunity to give away two Jolly Ranchers[®], each to a classmate who has done something kind or helpful; someone who has done something that helped the giver feel affirmed, happier, or more welcome in class. It's important to practice telling details, and making eye contact. In the beginning this can be challenging for students.

Example: Rather than saying "I'm giving this Jolly Rancher[®] to Kate because she's been my best friend since kindergarten," offer this: "I'm giving this to Kate because yesterday when I forgot my social studies book at home she offered to share hers with me in class." Other students can't change the history of their friendships, but they can learn that offering to share a textbook is a way to be a good friend.

The third Jolly Rancher[®] is for the giver to keep. It can be difficult for students to give away candy at first. Initially some kids will pass and keep all three pieces for themselves.

Playing the Basic Game: Stage II

When students have practiced stage I of the game enough to understand the concepts of giving details and making eye contact, the added component of airing grievances is incorporated. Now, in addition to giving candy away, students may take one Jolly Rancher[®] from one person who has hurt them.

Before beginning this phase it is important to explain that we're doing this to learn about others and how to get along better as a community. The emphasis here is on the person harmed and his or her feelings not on wrongdoing. Voicing hurt by describing actions rather than using words that label or judge needs to be modeled thoroughly and frequently, and it's very important to remind students that what is being said is the speaker's point of view. Arguing is not permitted.

Example:

An appropriate way to voice hurt: "I'd like to take a Jolly Rancher[®] from Jeff. At recess today when I missed a football pass he said I sucked, and that really hurt my feelings." If this hurt were voiced in a vague or judgmental way, "I want to take a Jolly Rancher[®] from Jeff because he's mean," the speaker is asked to try a "do over," and may need support in rephrasing what happened or how it felt.

Without practice, and a safe environment in which to speak, students often have a very difficult time telling each other that they've been hurt. Initially it's difficult information for the offender to receive as well. Over time though, these types of

conversations become more comfortable and students are able to have them in the context of everyday dealings, not just during game time.

If a student has offended more than one classmate and is called to give a candy away when s/he has none remaining, and additional piece is given from the class supply for the offender to share with the speaker.

When this game is in it's initial stages, and students have limited information about each other, it is not uncommon for a few students to receive most of the complimentary candy, and a few students to loose all their candy regularly. As time goes on, and students hear and see the impact of their actions, compliments are more evenly distributed and few pieces of candy are taken for offenses.

Student Feedback

The Peacekeeper Game continued for many weeks. Students became more adept at voicing both what pleased them about each other, and what hurt or annoyed them. At the end of every game I always asked the same questions. "What are you noticing about our community? How have things changed since January?"

Students commented on the more even distribution of compliments and appreciations. They were also strong in their feedback to a few students that were often at the heart of conflict in the past. They told each other things like this:

"Johnny, you have really turned a new leaf. I used to think I'd never want to be around you. You *were* a really rude kid. Now I'm really glad we're friends."

"Brett, you used to have a really hot temper, so I just stayed away from you. Now I know that you'll talk to me if you're angry and we can work things out. I really like playing basketball with you."

"Leah, I used to get really annoyed with you because you goofed off during math class and it was hard for me to focus. I really appreciate that you've stopped trying to be a class clown."

"Tom, I know it's hard for you to learn when you're sitting still, but it really bugged me when you'd rock in your chair. It was a good idea for you to move to the back row. I'm glad you followed Paula's suggestion."

A Benchmark of Success

I was doing a quick weather check with a boy at the end of the school day a few months after implementing restorative practices. This student had frequent and serious altercations prior to this process, and was struggling with several difficult emotional issues, so to help him bridge this growth process I check his weather status morning, noon, and after class. In the morning, and at lunch this day he'd

reported #2 weather. He was having a hard time managing his emotions. He was having a tough day. At 3:05 he brought his weather report to me and I was surprised to see that he was reporting #5 weather. He was feeling on top of the world!

I always want to help students recognize what works for them, so with much enthusiasm I said, “Unbelievable! Tom, what happened? You started your day at 2. You were a 2 at noon, and now you’re at 5! Tell me what this is about!”

“It was the Peacekeeper Game!” he said.

I was stunned. Today, with tears in his eyes, Jim, a boy who was revered literally by all for his intelligence, kindness, and even temper asked to take a candy from a classmate for the first time ever: “I want to take a Jolly Rancher[®] from Tom,” he said. “When we were playing volleyball in PE today *every* time the ball came to me Tom stepped in front of me and hit it. I didn’t even get to touch the ball. I’m feeling really angry about that!” Jim had earned the respect of all of his classmates, and his words carried great weight. I anticipated that Tom might feel angry and embarrassed about what had transpired in circle today. To my amazement Tom was thrilled. I asked him to explain.

“Well,” he said, “ you know Jim is so quiet and kind and level, I didn’t know he even got angry. He’s a good person, and I’m really sorry I hurt his feelings. The thing that makes me happy is that now that I know *how* I hurt him I don’t have to do that again.”

“Ms. Ashley,” he said in a most earnest voice, “I can change that!”

An Evolving Process

After many weeks of playing, an unexpected development in the game caused an uproar that required a separate class meeting to resolve. During lunch one student publicly accused another student of stealing. Before the missing item was found later in the accusing student’s backpack, much of the class had taken sides, some supporting the accuser, others supporting the accused. The two students who were directly involved were aided in resolving their conflict and made amends, but when we next played the Peacekeeper game, three students wanted to take candy from the accuser to voice anger and hurt over how the innocent student had been treated. Again, the class was divided.

“Unfair,” cried the original offender. She had made amends with the person accused of stealing. No one else had been implicated. She only owed apology to the accused, and she’d taken care of that obligation! It felt outrageous to be asked to give candy to even one other bystander, let alone three of them.

“Not so,” said friends of the accuser. They were indignant that their friend, whom they’d known to be a very honest person since kindergarten, had been

embarrassed and under suspicion. Friends were very hurt and angry about the way an honorable classmate had been treated.

Strong emotions were apparent on both sides of this issue and after a heated class conversation came to an impasse, students turned to me wanting decisive resolution. On the spot, I was unable to give them an immediate answer. I told them that I could clearly see both sides of the argument, and would have to give this some serious thought before making a decision that would delineate a new rule for our game.

Even in the moment, I knew my challenge was to find a way to explain to these children that as hard as it is to hear, actions, intentional or otherwise, often have impact far beyond what's obvious. Real world examples readily came to mind. Witnesses to domestic violence are often severely traumatized. World War I began as a conflict between two small countries and grew to enormous proportions when allies joined to support friends. Children needed the opportunity to hear how hurting one person might hurt many others, might damage their community as a whole.

The next day when we reconvened our class meeting I asked my students a series of questions:

- Have you ever been bothered by another person's smoking?
Everyone responded affirmatively.
- Who is the person most harmed by smoking?
The smoker, everyone agreed.
- Does the smoker intend to hurt children when s/he smokes?
The kids conceded that s/he doesn't.
- Does knowing that the smoker doesn't mean to choke you it take away your discomfort when you're in a car or a room full of smoke?
Nope.

We were all heading in the same direction. Then we talked about how we felt when someone we loved was physically hurt or ill. We all agreed that those bad feelings were real, too, even though we weren't hurt or sick ourselves.

Amended Game Rules: Second-hand Hurt / Second-hand Helping

Through this conversation students came to honor the concept of second-hand hurt. Like breathing second-hand smoke, being present when someone else is being hurt can hurt the bystander, too. The rules to our Peacekeeper Game were amended to include a new rule:

8. If someone you care about is hurt *or* helped by another, and you are a direct eyewitness to this event, as a representative of our community you may take or give a Jolly Rancher[®] to voice your own feelings about what has happened.

As a group we agreed that students might benefit from hearing community responses to his or her actions. We also concurred that it was sufficient to hear two messages about a single event: one from the person harmed, the other from someone who represents our community. This proved to be a significant development that broadened children's perspectives and gave power to community to sanction anti-social behavior and affirm pro-social behavior.

Making Unsolicited Amends

One last development precipitated the addition of a final rule to our game, and added a new word to our lexicon. Everyone in class knew our "no sandbagging" rule ... no saving up hurt feelings and then bringing them into our dialogue weeks or months later. We stuck tightly to our rule that harm must be voiced in a week or dismissed.

At the end of a game circle one afternoon minutes before the last bell was to ring, Dee Dee raised her hand and waved it with imploring urgency. Reciting the one week rule, she then asked "What if you've hurt someone badly and you never had a contract, and they've never asked for a Jolly Rancher[®]? Can you just give them one to let them know you're really sorry? It's been more than 4 weeks, but I don't think I've made things right, and it's really eating at me."

This response was easy for me. The last rule to date:

9. "It's NEVER too late to say you're sorry!"

And so we had to wait an entire week to hear that Dee Dee accidentally knocked James' lunch from his hands a month ago. She'd helped him clean up the mess, but had been too embarrassed to apologize. James cried, and Dee Dee hadn't been able to forgive her self, until she apologized publicly.

Dee Dee's admission, her compassion and empathy had a strong impact on her peers. From that day forward, whenever the class played this game, at least a couple of students gave away candy without being asked to do so. They gave it away to say they were sorry. Sometimes they gave it away because they knew they'd be called on the carpet when a person they'd hurt got a turn. Motives were not nearly as important as the fact that kids began self-monitoring behaviors, and taking action to make things right *without* prompting from others.

One Student's Last Words

Johnny was a kid who often complained about having no friends during first semester. He was frequently in trouble for initiating fights and behaving disrespectfully to peers and staff. He already had a "reputation" by 4th grade. During second semester he participated in 3 separate contracts, and became a bit of a classroom expert in negotiating agreements, before the formal process became unnecessary and he worked things out on his own.

Early on Johnny often lost Jolly Ranchers[®] in circle, and was reluctant to give any away. At the end of the school year he received repeated compliments from new friends who sang praise for his new social skills and generosity toward others. Johnny's feedback was revealing: "When we first started this game I didn't want to give any candy away. I wanted to keep it for myself. Now I'd give 10 pieces away to hear that kids really like me."

One Last Component:

Now We ALL Practice Looking for What is Right

It is all too common in our culture at large, and in our schools that we focus on what is not working. Educators deserve some pardon for this pervasive habit, in that it is our charge to ferret out the challenges facing each individual child, and customize instruction to address deficiencies. The net result, however, both in our society and in our classroom communities, is that we correct more often than we affirm, and critique more often than we compliment. While this might sometimes serve to advance learning, it does little to enhance self-esteem, and offers even less toward building community.

Community Compliments

At least a couple of times each week, upon entering the classroom in the morning, students find "Community Compliments" forms on their desks:

Community Compliments to YOU!
From an admiring classmate

_____ you have earned a compliment. Please take this with pride and accept it! Here's what we like about you!

Date _____

Students practice noticing admirable things about each other. They work at being inclusive; writing to classmates that they don't always play with, to kids other than their very best friends. Compliments are anonymous. This isn't about "sucking up" I bluntly tell them. This isn't to make the author look good, it's to give recipients positive feedback for things they've done well. Again kids practice describing in detail actions they've observed and correlating feelings. During the day as we transition from one subject to another, and at the end of the day before leaving for home compliments are shared with the whole class.

Jim and Bobbi, when I was alone I asked to play and it was my first time I played with you. You made me feel safe and special!

Tom, thank you for letting me play BUMP at recess! You are cool, smart, funny, and a good friend.

Amanda, thank you for being a good friend. And for telling me you're a good friend but not in those words but showing me. Thank you!

Jim, I want to compliment you for catching a bunch of hellmarys.

Susan, you are my best friend. You are like nachos smothered in cheese surrounding me with friendship.

Jean and Tina, you played with me at recess when one of my best friends wouldn't play fair. Inclusive people are really cool.

Michael, when I have hard feelings you help me out and let me tell you my excitements and hard times. You are Boom Boom Boogie Great!

The power of our attention cannot be overestimated. Focus on what we don't want, and don't like and we are overwhelmed with the negative. Focus on what feels good and makes us happy and we blossom with goodwill. Investing only minutes each day to compliment each other, students build a positive community culture where children are valued for who they are, not just for what they know or how well they learn.

Taken as a whole; integrating Weather Reports, Peace Contracts, the Peacekeeper Game, and Community Compliments; a classroom is transformed into a nurturing, empowering, affirming culture where safety, belonging, and esteem needs are recognized and addressed as foundational blocks necessary for academic learning to begin.

Teacher Precautions and Encouragement

Restorative Practices are not a quick fix to classroom conflict. It is a process that takes time, and it's a process that requires a hard look at standard policies in behavior management and discipline.

A teacher who commits to implementing Restorative Practices in the classroom will need to let go of old beliefs about rule breaking and consequences and put faith in the power of children's innate sense of fairness and strong need to bond with their community. Implementing Restorative Practices means letting go of doing things to or for kids, and learning to do things *with* kids. In the beginning, it's as much a learning process for the teacher as it is for the children.

Other staff members might meet this approach with disapproval, judging that time used to talk things through with conflicting students is wasted instructional time and view it as a "soft" approach to discipline. Contract negotiation in our

classroom typically happened before and after school, during recess and lunch breaks. We invested 30 minutes each week in our Peacekeeper Game and a few minutes every day to share compliments.

Jim Haessly is executive director of student services and special education in a Waukesha, Wisconsin school district that's participating in a restorative justice experiment. Mr. Haessly would agree that restorative practices are not soft. He describes this process as "... kind yet strict. If I had to give our approach a name it would be zero tolerance with compassion, common sense, and service."³

Really listening to kids takes time. Before creating a system to implement restorative practice, when students had conflict my heart would sink when I saw them coming my way. I had no tools to effectively help them, and I viewed taking time to talk about their problems as a kind of dereliction of my duties. When I was talking about kids' problems I *wasn't* teaching content, and I wasn't really helping them learn how to get along better either. Conflicts erupted and simmered during class disrupting instruction, and drawing energy and attention away from academic pursuits.

Now when kids come to me with issues I am sincerely delighted. When we collaborate to solve conflicts we learn more about each other and strengthen our sense of safety, trust, and community. We learn that we can solve our own problems. We put strong emotions to rest and come to our desks ready to learn, with a new sense of empowerment and self-respect.

I manage conflict, so it doesn't manage me!

It's 1:00 p.m. Like other elementary classes across the country, we've gone about our business of teaching and learning reading, writing, and math. These content skills *are* essential to students' success in their world. Equally important, however, is their sense of safety and belonging, their self-esteem, their ability to identify and ask for what they want and need, and their skills in negotiating solutions when these wants and needs are in conflict. And so we have a place in our day to address emotional issues and negotiate conflict. I've accepted that these are inevitable and just as much part of my teaching responsibility as the "three Rs."

We manage these *opportunities* on my schedule. They do not spontaneously combust in the middle of my instructional time. They do not smolder, unaddressed, taking away students' hearts and minds, leaving only their bodies in the classroom. Weather reports are read, contracts checked, new issues negotiated, compliments shared.

We're all looking forward to the Peacekeeper Game tomorrow.

³ National School Board Association, *School Board News*, May 17, 2005

We are all present, and we're together!

Let's talk about science!

Recommended Readings

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Zehr, Howard. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Good Books, 2002.

Recommended Websites

Center for Nonviolent Communication

<http://www.cnvc.org/>

International Institute for Restorative Practices

<http://iirp.org/>

Peace Learning Center

<http://www.peacelearningcenter.org/default.asp>

NOTE:

See separate posting “Peacekeeper Program Forms and Game Guide.”
Forms and instructions may be reproduced for noncommercial classroom use only.

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