

Restorative Practices Impact Public Schools in Minnesota

AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY RIESTENBERG

Nancy Riestenberg is a prevention specialist with the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL), which oversees funding and programming for public schools in that state. She works with violence prevention education, restorative schools, safe and drug-free schools and coordinated school health programs. She was interviewed by journalist Laura Mirsky at IIRP's Third International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices in August 2002.

Q: How are restorative practices being implemented in public schools in Minnesota?

A: The whole range of restorative practices is happening in the schools: Family Group Conferencing, Restorative Group Conferencing, Circles to Repair Harm, Circles of Understanding, Victim Offender Dialogue. All of those practices are being tried to varying degrees in schools. The activity is at a relatively high level.

It's hard to keep track of it because people go to trainings and then they may do things that are difficult to see or to track. For instance, a teacher may go to a training and that may influence the way they conduct their classroom, or an administrator may go to a training and then handle discipline differently than what he or she did before. In some instances, school districts have taken a more holistic approach or a sort of institutional approach—they've actually changed some policy and decided to proactively train people. Activity is happening at all levels: at a kind of

grass roots level, at a building level and in some instances at a district level.

Q: How have restorative practices changed the schools where they're being used?

A: It's hard to quantify that. I would say that they've changed the way people do their job and their attitudes toward their jobs. It's



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not uncommon for me to hear administrators say, "I like my job more," "I feel more confident that I'm really getting to the root of the problem," "I feel as though by do-

ing this I make better connections between students and teachers," "I feel as though I have more connections with the students that I work with." The atmosphere in the building might feel better, more comfortable, more respectful. Others feel that their teaching has improved, that they're making connections with children, seeing children being empowered. It's always fun when a kid can ask for a talking piece and hold a circle in the corner of the playground with his friends and feel as though they have taken care of their problems themselves. When kids learn a problem-solving process and they practice it, it becomes their own; they figure out how they can do it themselves.

Q: What appeals to you about restorative practices?

A: I have always worked in the fields of prevention and education. I have dealt with social issues. One of the issues that intrigued me was bullying. There has always been a question in my mind about the school's response to this and how they might do it differently. If we suspend bullies or make them sit out from recess, how does that help them or make them change their behavior? How can you help people figure out another way of behaving so they don't hurt other people? I think a good restorative process attempts to get at that and gives people some ideas. It is also a place where people can begin to reflect on what they're doing and why they do it.

The other thing that appealed to me about restorative practices involves empa-

thy. I spent a lot of time working in the area of child sexual abuse prevention education. One of the things that struck me is that one of the reasons why offenders do what they do – this most horrific act – is because they either don't know how to or have decided not to empathize with someone. If they were to stop for a moment and think about what this would be like, they just could not go down that road. I know that the skills of empathy can be taught. The parts of empathy can be taken apart, explored and looked at, but you can't make someone empathize with someone else. With restorative practices, you create a safe place, people are prepared, they're supported, they're there with their friends or their family and they know that they can express their feelings. Everybody is part of figuring out how to solve a problem. I think it creates an environment where empathy can happen. So you can lead them to the water and hope that they will drink in the process. In terms of prevention, that is such a key element. If we can get people to be able to empathize with each other, they're so much less likely to hurt one another. It's a place where you can both teach it and hold out the possibility of people being able to actually practice it.

Q: You did a three-year evaluation of the restorative practices in your school districts. Could you tell us about it?

A: We had money from the legislature to evaluate the implementation and results of using restorative practices in four different school districts. We had an urban kindergarten through eighth grade building, a suburban school district with three buildings, and a consolidated rural district that had three buildings and a rural high school. This was an evaluation. It was not research, so we didn't have control groups and all those sorts of things. This was really about gathering information, about telling the story of how they went about doing this and what kind of preliminary outcomes they saw. There were a number of things that emerged from this evaluation. I think one of the most important, and for some people reassuring, things that we found out is that to make change happen in a school you need to have at least two to three years. Just because somebody



Sixth-grade students in a circle at Kaposia Elementary School, South St. Paul, Minn.

gets money in July they're not going to be able to implement immediately in September and then start testing it in January. Nothing happens that fast in a school. That's a very important thing for people to remember if they are going to sustain any kind of energy in trying to create change in a building or among people. It takes time. Even with people who have the heart, soul, energy, resources and desire, it still takes time.

Another thing that we found is that it's easy to gather information about offenders, about what kind of an impact a restorative process might have had on them and whether or not they reoffended. It's a little bit harder to gather information about the impact on the person who was hurt or on the community. It doesn't show up as numbers, so you don't have it on the discipline track. "We had five victims last month and this month we only have two" –nobody keeps numbers like that. How would you define them anyway? That's kind of hard. That has to be defined by the person. Therefore, you have to use other ways of figuring out how to evaluate. You have to ask people questions and you have to go with their perceptions and feelings. That gives you

a richer piece of information, but it's more qualitative than quantitative. The other thing I think we learned from this is that you really need to put the two together. You have to have numbers and you have to have the stories. You need to have both of those things together to get a clear understanding about what happened and to figure out what you can learn from that.

In one building in particular there were very strong quantitative results. It appears that with the institution of Circles to Repair Harm, along with circles used in the classroom for building community, they went from about seven incidents of violence a day to around one a day in the course of three-and-a-half years. That was a significant drop. There was also a significant drop over three years in terms of overall behavior referrals to the office. They went from somewhere in the thousands to 450, like 1600 to 450 over the course of three years. That drop was an all school effort. It was not the effort of just one person. It was the administrative team making decisions to do things differently, as well as quite a number of staff people deciding that they were going to include this community-building activity in their classroom.

That was another key thing we learned from the evaluation. If you just have a restorative intervention, that will get you someplace. If you just have classroom management skills that are cognitively based and are about problem solving rather than using power and control over kids, you will get someplace. If you get the two of them together, you will go so much farther in a quicker period of time because the whole school then becomes congruent. There are lots of classroom management approaches that are cognitively based. They're about problem solving. They're about helping individual children learn how to make amends, use conflict resolution, etc. That's been around for a long time and there's been good research on it indicating that it's very helpful, useful and that it makes the classroom a better place. But when you have the inevitable fight, which is going to happen no matter what, then what do you do? Are you going to be able to continue to carry

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the philosophy that you built up so nicely in the classroom into the principal's office or are you going to have to go back to suspensions and expulsions? So restorative interventions help to complete a kind of circle of support, if you will, for children within the school. The message is: we recognize that people are going to make mistakes, but that doesn't mean that you have to leave the community. We have this other way to hold you accountable and help you fix the problem that you made. That was a very interesting observation—when you put the two together, you just got further faster.

Q: Do you have any particular stories that you would like to share?

A: There's one story that I like to tell about four third-grade boys: three African-American boys and one European-American



Passing the "talking piece" at Kaposia

boy. This was in a suburban district, so the African-American boys were very much in the minority, about 10% of that school were kids of color. The white boy called the other three boys a racial slur. In this district that was considered a bottom-line behavior, which meant it was racial harassment and he could have been suspended for probably two or three days.

The boys were familiar with the circle process and the administrators were willing to consider a restorative response to the offense. The boys all agreed that they wanted to sit in a circle and talk about what had happened. The restorative justice planner in that school facilitated the circle. The significant thing that came out of the circle was that the three African-American boys had an opportunity to tell the boy what that slur meant. For one boy, it was the word that a white man used when he shot his uncle in the head. The second boy said, "it's the word those men in the white sheets use in the movies when they go to burn down my people's houses." The third boy said when he hears that word, "it just hurts my heart so much I just have to leave; I have to get away." I think the offending boy knew it was a powerful word, but I kind of want to believe that in third grade he didn't know just how powerful it was. He does now. He certainly knows now.

I thought the boy received a gift from those other boys. They had the courage to share that with him. What they wanted from this kid, to make amends for what he had done, was for them to be friends. So for the rest of that year, they played together on the playground. Three years later, the woman who ran that group said that they still played

together. They were still friends. That's one of my favorite stories.

In another school incident, a fight broke out among about four or five boys. This fight happened, of course, in a context. It happened a couple of weeks after a boy in that school died in a tragic car accident. One boy made some disparaging remarks about the deceased—that what happened was probably his fault. Maybe he wasn't wearing his seat belt, or he was driving too fast, or he was impaired in some way. He was blaming the person who had died, in a way. Some of the friends of the boy who had died heard this and were incensed. It was very recent. Grief was still very high in everybody's mind and they jumped him. They all got into a fight.

The boys would normally have been suspended for at least three days for a fight. But, in this particular instance, they all agreed to go to the restorative justice planner in the school. They wanted to have a circle to talk about what happened. As they talked about how their behavior had affected themselves and other people, they all came to the conclusion that the person they had harmed the most was the boy who had died. To make amends for this, they all got into the restorative justice planner's car and they went to the graveyard and apologized to the gravestone. It's that kind of creativity that is so compelling for me, where you can have a connection

With restorative practices, you create a safe place, people are prepared, they're supported, they're there with their friends or their family and they know that they can express their feelings.

between the true harm and the consequence. That is profound. Not only is it profound, I'm sure that it was also therapeutic for these boys. I bet it was probably healing for them. I think that it helped them to appreciate more what they had lost. That's the kind of connection we need as human beings. That's what being a human being is about. It's not about

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the recipe of the student conduct book. Those are some of my favorite stories.

Q: What advice would you give someone who wants to bring restorative practices into their school?

A: I guess the first thing that I would advise people is that if they are in a position to do it and they believe in it, they should just do it. There's a lot of autonomy amongst the adults in a school, and wherever you can find it, even if it is just with the low-level stuff, it is a good way to operate. In doing that, you can do that grassroots kind of building where people hear about things and they become intrigued. They come because of their own

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interest to try to find out about something. If you are a person who does have a position of power, then maybe what you want to do is try to go at the top end. I think that you just need to decide what your sphere of influence is and start there.

Another piece of advice is part of the restorative philosophy: This is a process that should be voluntary. Just let go of the idea that everybody in a school is supposed to do this and that every incident needs to be handled this way and everybody needs to be a believer and everybody needs to participate. That's a road to exhaustion. Look for people who are friends. Look for people who are compatible. Look for people who would be advocates with you. Go where the strengths are. Do that in a respectful way. That's what the philosophy calls people to do.

I think the other thing that is important in trying to do something in a school is that if you get to a position where you can do training, involve kids in the training. It makes

a big difference. It gives people a different perspective on kids to see them in a different setting. They offer an enormous amount of wisdom and perspective.

Q: What do you see, hope, dream is the future of restorative practices in schools?

A: I hope that this is not a fad like a lot of other things. I'm concerned that people don't co-opt the term just to appease people, that they don't just call certain things restorative when they're not. I think a good example of that is community service. Community service is a wonderful thing. It can be an extraordinary way for kids to learn. It's a great way to teach people. It can be part of a restorative agreement where you use community service as a means to make amends. But when you tell somebody to do community service, just because it's community service doesn't mean it's restorative. You're missing those steps of coming together, talking about who was affected and then deciding together what would be some ways to repair this harm. If one of the things that they figure out is, "Oh, it would be cool if you did community service. You took time away from education, so why don't you tutor in the classroom? You're good at math." That's very different than saying, you took time away in the hallway, so now I want you to go to community service.

I hope I come to a point where I will be able to ask school people if they have policies attending to the needs of victims in their school and they will be able to answer yes. They will be able to articulate what those are.

In one building in particular ... they went from about seven incidents of violence a day to around one a day in the course of three-and-a-half years.

There will be things offered to kids when they have been harmed, harassed, bullied, or part of a fight—the opportunity to talk to someone, to get education, to be able to ask for a restorative process. I would hope that we could come to a time when the school is



A celebratory moment

not just focused on the person who did the harm, but is equally focused on the person who was harmed. Pairing punishment with restorative processes is perhaps problematic. People do it because it satisfies both sides. Certainly, even if you suspend the child, doing the restorative process pays attention to the victim, but I hope that we would get to a place where we would not have to do the two of them together, that people would be satisfied with restorative consequence.

I hope that people make the connection between restorative interventions and the way the staff is trained to talk to kids, to manage their classroom and to try to help the kids with their behavior. I would like to see them make the connection between restorative interventions and the health curriculum they teach about problem solving and decision making. I would hope for school people to have enough time somewhere in their lives where they can stop and breathe and see the larger picture. ☺

If you would like to download the official evaluation report as a PDF file from the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, go to: http://cfl.state.mn.us/prevention/leg_report.pdf

This interview and others will soon be available on video for purchase from the IIRP.