

# **Classroom Circles and the Art of Making Movies**

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*Taproot, Inc. in Bay City, Wisconsin, specializes in working with children who exhibit atypical behavior. Linda Flanders and Dorothy Halla-Poe have created a unique way to use the "movie making process" as a powerful educational/behavioral tool. They specialize in violence prevention/social issue video projects and the development of elementary school curriculum. Stephanie Haider has been a probation officer in Minnesota for over 30 years. She created the Dakota County Juvenile Restitution Program and is the coordinator of the Dakota County Victim Restoration Program. She is a national and international trainer and consultant for many correctional associations and restorative justice programs.*

Restorative Justice Video-Movie Projects are an innovative and media art-based educational tool based on experiential learning. They have been developed to fulfill three identified goals: 1) To offer a movement, art-based curriculum for elementary school children that incorporates all styles of learning so no student is left out; 2) To seek a "renaissance in juvenile justice" by teaching the basic principles of Restorative Justice in elementary schools; (i.e. classroom circles, accepting responsibility for our own actions and making amends for harm caused); and, 3) to show how important and imperative social issues can be addressed in a creative, positive and pro-active way. Video-movies are an excellent way to link the best in education through entertainment. Learning becomes fun, useful and memorable.

School violence is a concern on everyone's mind these days. The 2000 Annual Report on school shootings, prepared by the United States Secret Service, focused on the primary cause in over two-thirds of all incidents. It was revenge. It was revenge for years of torment felt by a victim; who then became an offender. Both the FBI and the Secret Service made it clear in their separate reports, that relying on law enforcement to prevent school violence, is not going to work. Their advice to schools is to focus on prevention and literally change the climate of the school.

At the beginning of the 2001 school year, a "Dear Colleague" letter was sent by the US Department of Education to educators across the nation. It declared that institutions are going to be held responsible for stopping incidents of violence, especially incidents of bullying and harassment. The letter goes on to say; "This type of conduct cannot be tolerated and must be eliminated from our schools." It is clear to all that violence must be actively addressed before it can be eliminated. It has also been made extremely clear that schools are going to be held accountable. There has not been a state or national program designed yet that has made a significant dent in the problem. Often, a *zero-tolerance* approach is used; stressing suspension, expulsion and/or incarceration. Yet, the latest *Youth Crime Alert Report*, dated April 2002, stated that violent behavior in school has been found to be associated with students' learning difficulties. A video-movie project can address all of these issues.

The creation of a "movie project" consists of several essential and interactive components: 1) Classroom participation; 2) The "movie-making process"; 3) Learning the basic principles of Restorative Justice; 4) Learning and using classroom circles; and, 5) The presentation of the "movie" to a variety of different

audiences.

One of the video examples used in this workshop, is to show a way to address the issues of "bullying and harassment" in school. 5th grade students in a Wisconsin school, as part of a pilot-project, created this video. The main goals of the project were to: Increase awareness of the issues; Reduce the frequency of the offenses; Build a cohesive sense of community within the class and the school; and, Heal the effects of harm felt by any of the students. The results exceeded expectations.

The primary goal of classroom participation is to give concrete form to the understanding of words; *community, harassment, bullying*, making a *stand*, and whether to be *mean or kind*. Young children may hear these words over and over, yet, most often do not understand their actual meaning. The terms; **bullying and harassment are now considered actual "crimes."** As crimes, they possess elements. Through a concrete understanding of the elements of bullying and harassment, students became objectively aware of them and could see these crimes played out within the classroom or school environment. Without having a concrete form in their minds about bullying and harassment, students may not realize: that they do it; are victims of it; or, may believe that it is simply the way life is. The critical necessity for having a concrete image in one's mind of the meaning of words is that it enables us to *embody* these words and be able to use them in our daily life. Discussion about being a bully or harassing another is simply theoretical talk if students cannot carry that understanding into real life behavior. The theory has to transfer over into the lives of these children so they are able to use it. To embody a theoretical concept simply means we are able to integrate it into our daily lives. Multiple learning styles are incorporated into the classroom instruction, to make sure no child is left behind.

"**Community**" is an essential concept for children to understand because it is *inclusive* rather than *divisive*. However, a community doesn't just "happen", it must be created. By using the principles of Restorative Justice, a goal of the movie project is to assist the students in creating a cohesive classroom community. By virtue of the definition of "community", the classroom is a community for the school year. The entire school is the larger community. Learning to create a classroom circle is one of the basics of Restorative Justice. This circle process allows the students to create a safe place to resolve issues. The problem, not the person, is placed in the center of the circle. Students who are affected by a problem can speak out and voice their issues, feelings and concerns. The student/s who have caused the harm find they are in a supportive environment where their peers hold them accountable for their actions. As a classroom community, everyone has the option to offer suggestions on how to "make amends" or *fix the situation*. The essential element of the Restorative Justice circle process is to heal human relationships.

The actual "movie making process" offers a creative and action-oriented way of learning; essential for many of today's hyper-active children. The core elements of early childhood development are a part of the movie process itself: **1. Attachment and Bonding**. The classroom of students and staff become engaged and involved with one another, in an entertaining/educational project. **2. Circles of Communication**. Students act in their story using gestures and expressions. To be visually stimulating, these gestures and expressions need to be exaggerated. Through exaggeration, students learn the more subtle clues of body language. Most important, students "act in" alternative endings to similar situations. Students may be "acting", but they physically have to behave differently and literally use the scripted words that are healing in nature. Since students use their own bodies and words to act these new scenes, the experience is, literally, now within their awareness and imagination. They can draw upon it in future situations. **3. Pretend Play**. "Acting" is age appropriate play that incorporates the opportunity for students to learn awareness through their own movements. It's fun. When students have fun, they are paying more attention. When any of us pays more attention, we learn more and we learn faster. **4. Boundaries**. Students learn to "stop", "go", "move to a mark", or "act" a particular way when directed. Because making the movie is the goal, resistance to learning boundaries is lowered or non-existent. One major goal of the "movie making process" is learning impulse control, by teaching the students to "freeze." This technique is used literally because only one camera is used,

and filming is done in a very short amount of time. It's essential to have continuity in a movie. Students understand this and are therefore willing to learn to "freeze" while the cameraperson moves around the room.

This technique of filming, offers education something very valuable. To be able to "freeze" at a given moment; students must become *aware* of what they are doing, they have a few seconds of time for *reflecting* on what they are doing, and they must *control themselves* to be able to do it. As the filming progresses and students become more familiar with this process, the length of time the director has students "freeze" grows increasingly longer. This enhances the learning of self-regulation as a skill. Anything learned as a "skill" goes into long-term memory. This skill then becomes a method for teachers to use throughout the school year to moderate the sound level and behavior of the class. Classroom instruction and the filming of the movie, takes approximately 1- hours each day, for five consecutive days. The final movie project is edited, finished and returned to the students in approximately 4-6 weeks.

The finished movie project now becomes a tool for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders to use to teach the rest of their school. Students present their movie to others, from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade classes. As older students, 5<sup>th</sup> graders are role models and, as actors in a movie, they become "movie stars", which has a powerful and positive effect. They become the teachers. They teach using the same techniques they learned in class; including "freeze." Younger students have the opportunity to learn this skill of self-regulation at a much younger age, and the learning for the 5<sup>th</sup> graders deepens every time it is taught. Older students teaching younger students, expands the sense of community from the classroom to the school as a whole. While students present their movie in a simpler way to a younger audience, the 5<sup>th</sup> graders also present their movie to the larger community. They may participate in a Gala Premiere for their parents, answering adult questions about what they have learned, how they learned it, and how it has changed their classroom. A further presentation to the local Board of Education, or other community groups, presents a new opportunity for questions about how this project has changed the climate of their entire school. Each new presentation offers a hierarchal level of learning for the students.

These video/movie projects focus on the creation of a community; a classroom community first, then expanding out to the entire school as a larger community. The finished movie and its different presentations, enhances this sense of community or connectedness. A community is inclusive. The content of these projects teaches how to incorporate the differences found within classrooms so that no student is left out. Bullying and harassment, by their very nature, are at the heart of inequality, oppression and discrimination; the root of violence. The principles of Restorative Justice address this issue at its core; causing harm to another damages human relationships. Teaching the circle process in the classroom offers students and teachers a way to create a safe environment for dealing with problems. Within the circle, all are included and all have an equal voice. Those who have been harmed are able to define a problem they face and ask for assistance. They gain a lifelong learning skill in how to handle their own problems. The group as a whole holds the person/s who caused the harm accountable for their actions. Students learn how to make amends for their behavior and are offered fair, but firm, boundaries for future behavior. The goal of the circle is to heal the wounds between people and help each other work toward positive new behavior.

By working with students in an innovative and entertaining way it is possible to teach all students to understand abstract concepts. By teaching students and teachers the basic principles of Restorative Justice, and how they can use it in their classroom, it is possible to change the climate of the school and the thinking of an entire generation.

*Taproot Inc. has worked successfully with children and at-risk students since 1996 and has created video projects for; The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, The Dakota County Community Corrections, Goodhue County Health and Probation Departments and the Minnesota Department of Corrections. For more information about the creation of a*

*video-movie project contact Linda Flanders at Taproot, Inc. ([taproot@redwing.net](mailto:taproot@redwing.net), 715-594-3880) Taproot can offer suggestions about grant possibilities for schools, and assist with the narrative portion of the grant that explains the project design.*

*For information about what Restorative Justice trainings are currently available, or, to set one up in your own community, contact Stephanie Haider at [jwrappath@aol.com](mailto:jwrappath@aol.com)*