

Restorative Justice: What it is and How to Implement it into the Classroom

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Abstract

Research indicates that zero-tolerance policies in schools lead to high suspension and expulsion rates as well as more disruptive and deviant behavior from students. One way to remedy this is through the use of restorative justice practices in schools. I will first look at a brief history of restorative justice and explain what restorative justice means in the classroom. I will also analyze various restorative practices that have been most successful in implemented school-wide programs, including peacemaking circles, community conferencing, peer mediation, and informal restorative dialogue techniques. Finally, an opinion on restorative justice and its use in a classroom versus school-wide is provided.

Keywords: Restorative Justice, School Discipline Policies, Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative Justice: What it is and How to Implement it into the Classroom

A teacher's dream student is one who arrives to school on time, ready and excited to learn whatever is planned for the day. They rarely act out and have impeccable social skills that allow them to engage in activities done in groups as well as individually. While teachers can dream about having all their students act like perfect children, it is far from reality. Often times, students act out and teachers respond in a variety of ways, from asking them to leave the classroom to go to an in-school suspension area, all the way to receiving a suspension from the principal. Often times, suspensions come from zero-tolerance policies, yet students could be asked to leave school for an infraction anywhere from an act of disrespect to getting in a fight. The question is, do zero-tolerance policies work?

The answers are direct. The Advancement Project reports that, "The American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force, after evaluating school disciplinary policies for 10 years, concluded that zero-tolerance policies fail to do what they were designed to do: they do not make schools safer" (p. 4). Because zero-tolerance policies lead to higher rates of suspension and expulsion, students feel less safe and attend school less frequently. Zero-tolerance policies also can leave the root of disciplinary issues unaddressed, which leaves students feeling misunderstood, and overall hurts teacher/student relationships (The Advancement Project, 2014). One alternative to zero-tolerance policies is *restorative justice*. It focuses on addressing harm that a student's action imposes rather than the action itself. Restorative justice works to repair this harm through holding the student accountable, all while resolving conflict and repairing hurt relationships. (The Advancement Project, 2014). Through the many pieces of restorative justice, schools that implement restorative practices can expect to see fewer school suspensions, expulsions, and a safer, more positive school environment overall.

Defining Restorative Justice and its History

While restorative justice practices share main themes and ideals, there is no exact definition for what restorative justice looks like in schools. One definition comes from Ashley and Burke (2009) who state that, “Restorative justice is a philosophy based on a set of principles that guide the response to conflict and harm” (p. 6). Restorative justice is not one thing, but a philosophy and approach to school management and discipline. For a restorative justice approach to be in place, students must understand their rights and responsibilities as a student who is contributing to a community (Davidson, 2014). If students do anything that disregards the values of the community, restorative practices can be used to repair the community and the people affected.

When looking at restorative justice used in schools, the approach was first used in an Queensland, Australian high school. Overall, students were satisfied with the different practices and felt the restorative approach to discipline was fair. Restorative justice was adopted across Australia, New Zealand, European nations such as the United Kingdom, and Canada before being implemented into the United States after the mid-2000’s (Fronius et al., 2016).

Restorative justice practices were first established in many premodern native cultures as ways to deal with conflict in the community (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Specifically, peacemaking circles originated in North American Indigenous peoples’ practices. Community conferencing is based off of how Maori families approached conflict and was first adopted by New Zealand in the late 1980s. Finally, peer mediation is based off of Mennonite community practices and developed in Canadian schools in the early 1970s (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Restorative Justice Practices

Because restorative justice is a framework, there is no one set way to implement the philosophy into schools. However, the content I researched offers many practices that align to meet the goal of restorative justice, which Payne and Welch (2018) define as, "... to build positive emotions, such as empathy and excitement, and rid the community of negative emotions, such as anger and humiliation" (p. 226). While restorative justice has been used to mainly focus on righting the wrongs of student behavior, certain restorative justice practices can even be used in everyday classroom management. Keeping in mind an overall goal that focuses on character outcomes rather than outcomes only in relation to the incident is important in supporting safe, happy students. A few of the main restorative justice practices are explained below.

Peacemaking Circles

Circles can begin as a response to conflicts and negative actions, as well as proactive action to build classroom community and support positive relationships (The Advancement Project, 2014). In these circles, members speak to each other in what is defined as a safe space. Before members discuss an event or conflict, they often describe their values so that ideals are present throughout the circle process (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). In a circle, each member affected by an event explains their perspective of what happened and what they believe could be a possible solution. Ashley and Burke (2009) write that, "By offering opportunities for safe and open communication, circles help resolve conflict, strengthen relationships between participants, emphasize respect and understanding, and empower all parties involved" (p. 14). This practice specifically can be used in a classroom where the teacher leads the circle and two students are describing their perspectives. Teachers can also use circles to build community during morning meetings or to end the day.

Community Conferencing

Community conferencing is similar to peacemaking circles in the aspect that parties affected by a student or students' actions meet to discuss what happened, what the impact was, and solutions that can remedy the situation (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Community conferencing does not have one specific format, which leaves much interpretation as to exactly who is included. Some research mentions including a variety of administrators, while others discussed that conferences can simply be with just a student and their teacher. In Jill Davidson's (2014) article, "Restorative Justice", she discusses how a student himself initiated a conference with his teacher after he had been asked to leave the room. The conference was a simple conversation that discussed what happened and what solutions should take place so that he can reenter the class.

For conferences to truly involve the school community, the entire school must implement a restorative justice model for school discipline. If administrators require teachers to follow a zero-tolerance policy, it is much harder to encourage students to be accountable and feel safe enough to call their own conference. The dialogue that occurs during conferencing can, however, be used by teachers even in a zero-tolerance policy school. Information on this dialogue is provided in the "Informal Restorative Dialogue" section below.

Peer Mediation

Peer mediation practice is similar to the previous practices mentioned because the same restorative process of defining what happened, that specific impact, and brainstorming solutions all occurs (Payne and Welch, 2018). However, in peer mediation, students are directing discussions and guiding themselves through the restorative process (Ashley & Burke, 2009). This practice works best in a school that has implemented restorative justice because a trained

peer mediator is needed to direct the discussion. This benefits students by giving them responsibilities and ownership of the discussion. Ashley & Burke (2009) state that, “More importantly, peer mediation gives students a set of skills that can be applied to future conflicts” (p. 15). While this restorative justice practice has many strengths, it would be difficult to implement in a classroom setting. In elementary grades, conflicts can easily happen with students in different classrooms. If only one teacher implements restorative justice, peer mediation may not be a fair approach to the student who is in the classroom that is not normally taught restorative justice practices. In middle and high school settings, it takes time to train students with peer mediation techniques. This could be done school-wide, but for a classroom setting, time from content learning would be taken away.

Informal Restorative Dialogue

Using *informal restorative dialogue* techniques offer a way for classroom teachers to introduce the ideals of restorative justice into their classroom. Informal restorative dialogue is an umbrella term and can include a variety of techniques that help influence positive and supportive conduct (The Advancement Project, 2014). The Advancement Project (2014) highlights the use of affective statements and questions. Affective statements are used to communicate feelings while affective questions are used to prompt reflection about a behaviors impact. Davidson (2014) similarly refers to using restorative inquiry questions which fall under the categories of social restoration and self-restoration. Some question can fall under both categories such as, “What can we [as administrators and/or classroom teachers] do to support you?” (p. 21). Understanding how to use restorative dialogue can help students feel safe and respected. This practice is easier to implement into classrooms simply because restorative dialogue can be used

in any conversation with a student to better understand a situation and to help them open up and feel valued.

Evidence of Success with Restorative Justice

Because restorative justice is still a relatively new idea, most research about its success is when it is implemented as a school-wide practice (Fronius et al., 2016). In 2016, Fronius and colleagues who work for WestEd.org did a literature review of over fifty research articles, implementation guides, etc., that looked at the use of restorative justice in schools. While many programs are different due to no set definition for restorative justice, Fronius et al. (2016) write, “Nearly all program descriptions and case studies discuss some type of restorative circle, restorative conferences, and offender-victim mediation as forms of RJ being practiced within the school” (p. 18). Peer mediation is typically implemented school wide and has shown great results. Ashley and Burke state that, “A study of eight Canadian high schools found that peer mediators can peacefully resolve conflicts, are trusted by students, and are exemplary student leaders. Furthermore, peer mediation teaches life skills, provides leadership, and provides an alternative to suspension” (p. 15). Schools with previous zero-tolerance policies see changes in the behavior of their students, as well as less students receiving punishments such as suspensions and detention. Ashley and Burke (2009) reveal that, “Schools in Peoria, Ill., implemented circles and experienced a 35 percent drop in referrals to detention, and a 43 percent drop in detention referrals of black students, who are often disproportionately give detention” (p. 14). Overall, restorative justice practices also improve school climate and student attitudes. Positive relationships are encouraged as well as accountability and engagement of students (The Advancement Project, 2014).

Conclusion

Restorative justice is an approach to student discipline that includes a variety of restorative practices. The main theme of restorative justice is conflict resolution that holds students accountable for their actions. While restorative justice has been implemented into schools around the world since the 1990's, it is relatively new in the United States. Because there is not one exact definition for what restorative justice is, schools or teachers who want to practice it with their students must do thorough research to decide how to best implement it into the school environment. Restorative justice practices include peacemaking circles, community conferencing, peer mediation, and informal restorative dialogue. All of these practices require students to take full responsibility for their actions, even if these actions had a negative impact on others. The Advancement Project (2014) state that, "Taking full responsibility requires understanding how the behavior affected others, acknowledging that the behavior was harmful to others, taking action to repair the harm, and making changes necessary to avoid such behavior in the future" (p. 2). Successful restorative justice practices incorporate all of these guidelines into their procedures. Most importantly, restorative justice practices foster healthy relationships between students and teachers, as well as create students who are accountable and have conflict resolution skills for life.

Many restorative justice practices are best implemented with the support of an entire school. While there are practices I can implement into my classroom, they will not gain the same results compared to if they were used as part of a restorative justice school-wide program. However, understanding the power of restorative justice practices does promote the use of practices such as informal restorative dialogue. Supporting students voice and encouraging

accountability is enough of a success for me to justify using ideals of restorative justice in my future classroom.

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