

Restorative Practices – Building Connectedness and Fostering Emotional Literacy.

Peta Blood, 2004
Circle Speak

‘Intrinsically, schools are social places and learning is a social process. Students do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families. Emotions can facilitate or hamper their learning and their ultimate success in school’. (Zins et al. 2004)

One of the biggest issues teachers face is how to manage the day to day difficulties and disruptions in the classroom or what we commonly refer to as “discipline”. Standard practices of discipline tend to rely on blame, alienation, exclusion and lead to disconnection from the school community. A study by Minnesota University found that students who feel disconnected from their schools are more likely to hurt themselves, hurt others, abuse substances and fall pregnant (2002). At the worst end of the spectrum, the one common denominator in all school massacres (committed by students) was that the perpetrators of this violence had become *disconnected* from their peers and their school community. Another common theme was that they had been bullied or ridiculed in some way by other members of the school.

Our standard disciplinary systems fail to address the core relational issues, based instead on the principle that an offence is a breach of the school rules and an offence against the school, akin to our judicial system. Our standard disciplinary systems ask 3 questions:

*Who is to blame?
What rule did they break? and
What is the punishment?*

Alternatively, Restorative Practices is grounded in the principle that when something happens, it harms and damages relationships. A different set of questions are asked:

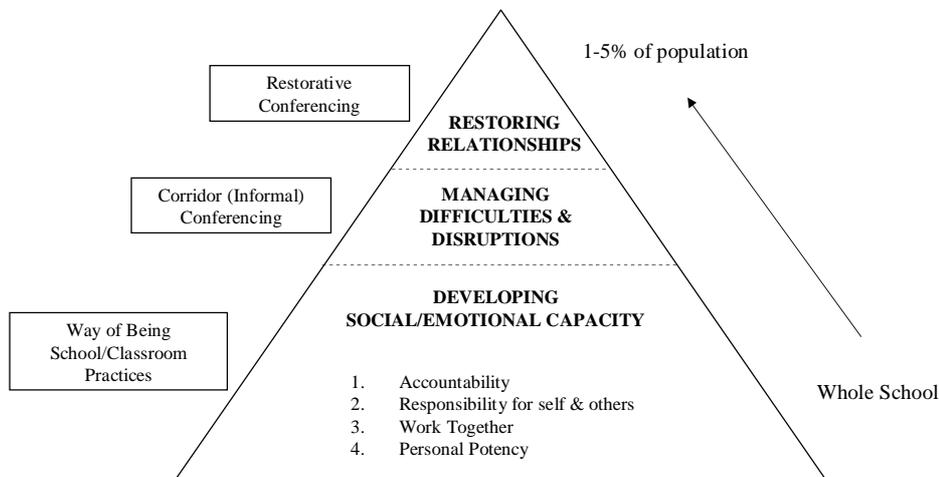
*What happened?
Who has been harmed/affected? and
What do we need to do to repair that harm?*

It is only when I can take responsibility for what I have done and how that has affected you, that you will feel safe enough to tell me how I have harmed you and together we can explore what needs to happen to make amends. Rather than stigmatising and excluding students, it is saying – you are part of our community, we value you, but your behaviour in this instance is not OK. So what do we need to do to include you back into our Community?

The term *Restorative Practices* describes a range of informal and formal practices that assist in the development of social literacy at three levels:

1. The informal preventative and proactive strategies and practices that build and strengthen relationships
2. Problem solving around day to day problems, difficulties and conflicts, and
3. Formal interventions to deal with significant issues of harm, with a focus on repairing relationships when something has happened to damage our Community.

Restorative Practices Building Social Capital



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1. The Informal Preventative/Proactive Level.

Dr. Louise Porter author of 'Children are People Too' suggests that we need to teach children to be **considerate**. To be considerate, children need to develop 4 skills:

- Personal accountability – an autonomous, independent understanding of right from wrong – in the absence of anyone telling them
- Responsibility for self and the ability to manage their emotions – using 'I' language
- The capacity to cooperate and work with others – even when they may not feel like it, and
- A sense of personal potency – that they know that they can make a difference for themselves, for others, make decisions that affect them and act on their own sense of right and wrong

How do we develop this ability to be considerate?

Through our classroom practices, the programs we teach and the way we facilitate learning through our children. We work with 100% of the school population to develop their social and emotional competence through Circle Time, programs such as the Rock and the Water, Help Increase the Peace (HIP) and various other classroom and school initiatives.

2. Problem Solving Day to Day Problems and Difficulties

The day to day difficulties, differences and conflicts provide a window of opportunity for us to assist children to problem solve. Rather than the adult attempting to determine blame, establish what rule has been broken, and hand out the appropriate punishment, the adult (or perhaps the peer) assists those involved to resolve their own difficulties.

3. Formal Interventions to Address Serious Incidents of Harm

At the top of the pyramid we have the formal range of interventions such as Conferencing, Mediation, and Negotiation etc. A conference might be held for a significant issue resulting in harm to others. The Conference brings together all those involved, harmed and affected and those who are significant in their lives, in a process that looks at what needs to happen to repair the harm.

The facilitator asks a number of key questions that are designed to assist others to take responsibility for their behaviour and to understand the impact it has on others.

What happened?

What were you thinking at the time?

Who has been harmed? In what way?

What needs to happen?

What would you do differently next time?

Together those involved look at repairing the harm and making things right, with the outcomes dependent on what the group needs and what they feel will make amends. It is often the starting place to repair relationships. It may expose problems that need addressing at a curriculum, classroom, school or family level. Conferencing assists in building responsibility, personal accountability, empathy and problem solving. At the core of this is the belief that you are OK, but your behaviour may not have been in this instance. It is inclusive, concerned with reintegrating those involved back into the community – maintaining and building connectedness.

Schools are social places and learning will be enhanced when we develop and strengthen relationships within the school community. Hopkins (2004) suggests this requires congruency: *'Is everything we do here at this school informed by this ethos, these values and a philosophy which gives central importance to building, maintaining and, when necessary, repairing relationships and community?'* p.38.

References

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The Author

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Circle Speak offers training and consultancy in the implementation or restorative practices in schools, workplaces and communities. For further information email: circlespeak@optusnet.com.au or check out www.circlespeak.com.au .