

Restorative Practices in Schools and Communities

Restorative action is used in communities that value conflict as a potential source of growth. It is a practice that can help children, youth, and adults understand the effect of their actions on others and build skills for resolving conflicts peacefully. Restorative action utilizes empathic listening, open-ended questioning, summarizing, paraphrasing, and identifying underlying needs and interests (Gillman and Bowler, 2004). A relationally-based response to undesirable behaviour (Bargen, 2010), restorative action is premised on the principles of restorative justice. Restorative justice is a more inclusive approach from traditional responses to unwanted behaviour. For example, it provides an opportunity for those most affected by an injustice to have a voice in the resolution process (Gillman and Bowler, 2004). Frequently, the victim, offender, family members, and a community member take an active role in the resolution process.

In contrast, traditional responses tend to be adversarial in nature; placing a central focus on the *rule* that has been broken, along with the consequent punishment that the rule-breaker must face. Traditional forms of justice are generally administered by an authority figure (eg. Judge or school principal) who ‘imposes’ punishment for certain behaviours. This suggests that the rule-breaker is not required to take responsibility for their actions. Traditional discipline methods can also be a more alienating response for all involved because they do not offer an opportunity for those negatively affected by another’s actions to have direct input in the resolution process. In effect, adversarial and alienating methods of problem solving generally fail to make use of real life opportunities where individuals can learn problem solving skills and practice them in the presence of skilled mediators.

This means that in school settings, name-calling, harassment, exclusion, physical fights, threats, and bullying can be responded to more effectively using restorative processes such as mediation, group conferencing, talking circles, and peace circles (see descriptions) in most cases. Not only is a restorative approach an effective tool for “granting justice, closure, restoration of dignity, transcendence of shame, and healing for victims” (Braithwaite, 2002: 69), over time, they are a more socially and cost effective way to prevent future crime (Strang and Braithwaite, 2001). Although the term restorative action is often used in place of restorative justice when working in school-based settings, this is done to avoid a negative association with law-breaking (Bargen, 2010).

Key Features of a Restorative Process:

- Participation should be voluntary
- The person who caused the harm must be willing to take ownership for actions
- Face to face mediation is not always appropriate
- When student mediation teams are used, adult support is important
- Staff/adult team must be used in more serious or sensitive cases
- All participants should feel empowered through the process
- The mediation environment must be one of respectful inclusion



Various Types of Restorative Processes

Mediation often occurs in a small group involving the main parties from the conflict. It begins with an introduction, followed by each person sharing from their perspective of the conflict, exploring the effect of the event, and brainstorming a resolution. Written agreements often result and may include tangible actions.

Group Conferencing is similar to mediation, but generally involves a larger group that also includes parent(s) and/or support person(s).

Talking Circles can be used to address a wide range of issues, such as drugs, alcohol, and violence. Circles focus on the harm caused to individuals or the broader community. A ‘talking piece’ may be used as a tool to ensure each participant has an opportunity to speak uninterrupted.

Peace Circles are similar to talking circles, but are often used in elementary schools. They are used to build a sense of community in the classroom or to address a specific issue. A circle may begin with an explanation of a theme being explored, followed by an opportunity for open questioning by students, an exercise or fun activity, and a closing question.

CSSC Library Online Catalogue – for ordering resources:
<http://www.ufv.ca/bccss/Centres/Library.htm>

CSSC Speakers Bureau – for training and workshops:
<http://www.ufv.ca/bccss/Speakers/Bureau.htm>

Links to useful websites about Restorative Action:
http://www.ufv.ca/bccssc/Resources/Web_Links/Restorative_Justice.htm

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What evidence is there that restorative practices work?

A growing international body of research demonstrates that restorative action-based practices in schools contribute to safer and more productive learning environments for both staff and students. In 2004, **The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales** evaluated a large-scale pilot restorative justice project designed to reduce unwanted behaviors (eg. bullying and victimization, poor attendance) and school suspensions. The comparison study utilized surveys and interviews with 5,000 students, 1,150 staff members, and 600 outside participants. Schools that used restorative action reported:

- fewer students who felt that bullying was a problem in their school, and
- fewer instances of racist name-calling and bullying, such as hitting, kicking, theft, verbal threats, and skipping class to avoid bullies.

When comparing staff and teacher survey responses between restorative schools and non-program schools, adults reported:

- overall improvements in student behaviors, and
- decreases in the number of staff who felt suspensions were the best way to deal with behavioral problems.

In addition, 89% of students who participated in the restorative process reported a high level of satisfaction, and 93% felt the program was fair and ‘just’. After three months, a follow-up study found that only 4% of the resolution agreements had been broken or remained incomplete. Further information about the National Evaluation of the Restorative Justice in Schools Program can be found [here](#).

In Scotland, a similar study reviewed 18 pilot schools two years after the initial implementation of restorative action programming (McCluckley, 2008). After surveying 627 staff members and 1,163 elementary and secondary students, conducting interviews and focus groups, observing staff, students, and parents, and conducting an analysis of school and government policy, the findings were substantial. All but one of the elementary schools, and the majority of the secondary schools, reported significant changes in their schools. The study reported improvements in morale among staff, and more positive views by students about their overall school experience. Additionally, attendance rates among students increased, while expulsions decreased. Many schools reported a reduction in playground incidents, referrals for discipline, and suspensions. For more detailed information, read the [journal article](#).

In both studies, schools noted that, although positive outcomes resulted from shifting toward a restorative action-based approach; the process of implementing this new approach required a significant commitment of time. It was also noted that larger gains were anticipated with continued commitment to the restorative action process.

In Canada, Nova Scotia appears to be making substantial strides in this area through government, community, and university partnerships. In fact, these partnerships and commitments have led to successes similar to those reported in England, Wales, and Scotland. A cultural shift is being enjoyed in which a “more positive and collegial environment among staff [is occurring], resulting in fewer staff absentee days, a higher level of student involvement in school life, and dramatic reductions in discipline referrals” (p.1). To read more about these developments, click on a [2011 bulletin](#) or visit the [Safer Saner Schools website](#).

To access a recommended reading list about restorative practices, [click here](#).