

## **Restorative Justice Practices: The Lever That Moves The World**

When the Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer and inventor, Archimedes stated: 'give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world' – one can see, in a simple way, how this may be possible. And as a secondary school vice-principal this image reflects our employment nicely, as moving the world of the school is our daily task. While Archimedes had the tangibility of a lever to work with, however, a vice-principal's labor is infinitely more challenging as it is through the vehicle of relationships with staff, parents and students that we facilitate change in the culture of our school community.

The complexity of building trusting relationships with staff, parents, students and the school community for vice-principals demands the intellectual brawn of Archimedes and the gentle artistry of a maestro to orchestrate. The most challenging aspect of this task, though, is that most secondary school cultures still expect that vice-principals will use a punitive stick as a lever when working with students. This expectation is galvanized in the historical notion of the vice-principal as strict enforcer. Yet the need to build relationships stands in contrast to this belief and lends a dichotomy to the position unlike any other in our schooling system. The old guard process of beating students down with penalizing measures in order to build them back up again is archaic and dysfunctional, yet persists in the eyes of the public, many teachers and secondary school cultures. The result of using this obsolete model of behavioral change is grounded in a Newtonian cause and effect lens, where precise amounts of punishment can be measured scientifically and distributed accordingly to affect change in students. This manner of working with students is built upon the ideas central to the Industrial Revolution and around organizational structures of managing employees.

In stark contrast, my colleagues and I, in partnership with [HANDSthefamilyhelpnetwork.ca](http://HANDSthefamilyhelpnetwork.ca), have found that using Restorative Justice Practices as the vehicle to work with students and facilitating their behavioral change is our lever of choice. Demonstrating care, kindness and working with students to support their academic and social growth is central to the role of vice-principal. How we speak to students and model our use of authority sends a clear message to them in the way we understand their needs and the type of culture we wish to build in the school community. The dialogue we engage in, the actions we undertake and the types of relationships we built represent the foundational cement of the organizational culture we model to students, staff, parents and the community and represents our thinking of effective school research. The relationship between all students, and especially at-risk students, and the vice-principal is at the core of this foundation.

My colleagues, Sean Ruddy, Bronwyn Sands and Julie Price, and I have found using Restorative Justice Practices *is* the lever to move a school towards what research is affirming about effective schools and strong organizational cultures. Our work in this respect has been guided by our Restorative Justice facilitators Jeff Thornborough and Steve Spack from HANDSthefamilyhelpnetwork.ca.

A quick glance at effective schools research, school leadership or business management texts will result in the emerging pattern of words like: trust, partnership, relationships and community as foundational ideas of building a strong culture in any organization. These ideas are reflected directly in what Restorative Justice Practices proposes. Zehr (1990), in his influential work 'Changing Lenses' said that:

*'Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligation to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation and reassurance.'*

The unique feature of this definition is that Zehr obliges us to 'search' for solutions. Searching together is the key to the concept of Restorative Justice Practices.

To date, I have participated in or facilitated more than 50 conferencing circles with students, parents, Child Development Councilors, Drug and Alcohol Councilors, and Police in a variety of schools in Ontario. What is most fascinating about the process of any circle is its unpredictably. The strength of the collaboration process of the circle yields a shared closure to conflicts by all parties. This collaborative process of the circle creates an environment which supports what Martin (2007) states in 'The Opposable Mind' is an important attribute that good leaders possessed:

*'The ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each.'*

The process of the circle creates this tension between opposing ideas and becomes a vehicle for communal leadership. As vice-principal, one is stripped of their perceived power and participates in the circle like any other member. Voice occupies a crucial place in the circle and time is given to each participant to share their opinion. The power of time is offered to everyone and the community's ownership of the conflict and resolution builds a stronger bond with all participants.

We have had many examples of successful circles where parents, students and teachers are impressed by this method of resolving conflicts. For example, a student who participated in one of our largest circles later indicated that the circle allowed everyone to express themselves and have a voice in the process. The teacher who took part in this same circle indicated that he had passed one of the students in the hall the next day and there was a 'flash of recognition' (as he put it) and connection on a deeper level with the student because he had participated in the circle.

We have found that teacher participation in circles is crucial in the process of growing the idea of Restorative Justice Practices in a school: for experiencing is believing. I was reminded of this on one occasion when we conducted what I had thought was one of our less impressive circles. A teacher had witnessed two students fighting and was invited to participate in the circle. During the circle, students did agree to apologize to each other and indicated that the issue that brought them to aggression was resolved. While debriefing the session with Jeff Thornborrow, we agreed that the restorative circle was not one of our best. Yet, the next day when I spoke with the teacher, he was very impressed and amazed how the students were able to articulate themselves and come to an agreement that the teacher believed they would honour. This teacher reminded me of how powerful it is for the uninitiated to experience the process.

At times, however, we have had adults and students respond with great skepticism about Restorative Justice Practices and have had vigorous debates of the merits of this philosophy in our journey. The usual signpost of discontent is orated in the phrase: 'It does not work.' Yet when pressed to articulate a superior formative strategy, the individuals most opposed indicate that punishment is the way to motivate students to do good. They claim that the more severe the punishment, the more likely the student is to respond in a positive manner. Clearly, these individuals fail to understand the complexity involved in motivating change in others.

To encourage participation in the circle, we may negotiate with parents to reduce the number of days of a suspension. Inevitably, parents appreciate the opportunity to have a voice in the process of discipline in the school and being able to speak their mind to another parent. Parents supporting the harmed and the student who caused harm agree on many levels as to the consequences mapped out in the circle. On one occasion, I recall a parent disclosing that he had been bullied as a student and how this affected him in a negative way when speaking in the circle. The power of statements like this from caring adults makes an impact on students unlike any an administrator could accomplish. Alternatively, and depending on the students and parents involved, we may not suspend at all and organize a circle in a time sensitive manner. In addition, we use a circle following a designated suspension to reintegrate a student back into the school to restore any relationships that have been harmed in the wrong doing. In all cases, the process is absolutely voluntary and we have instances where students

refuse to participate and simply accept their suspension. To be clear, suspensions and expulsions are necessary tools that must be used to ensure the safety of the school community and to communicate the severity of adverse behaviour to a student and parent.

Orchestrating a circle is the most formalized way of manifesting a Restorative Justice Practices philosophy in a school. More often, we use the key questions: “What happened?” “What were you thinking at the time?” “What have you thought about since?” “Who have you affected and how?” and “What do you think you can do to make it right?” when working with students. The simplicity of the questions is the foundation of Restorative Justice Practices. Asking participants to reflect and consider their actions is paramount to ensure that relationships are repaired and the root of the issue is discovered. We also use a letter of apology assignment with the above questions outlined in paragraphs to elicit reflections from students and reconciliation between participants. At times – they may read this to those they have harmed or simply deliver it in person.

This ambiguity of destination during the search for resolution lends itself well to a shift in the power balance of the role of vice-principal from: punishment to understanding; focus on past to focus on future; power over to power with; isolation to community; blaming to understanding; talking at to listening with; authority to relationships; telling to asking; and from a Newtonian lens to a Quantum perspective. In the prologue to ‘Transformative Learning: Educational Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, O’Sullivan (1999) indicates that modernity has reached its limitations and believes we are experiencing the full force of the limitations of the rational-industrial mode which is now self-cancelling. Restorative Justice Practices, in my mind, represent the next step in how schools need to work with their community to manage and move the energy of conflicts to more productive ends.

Using a punishment model of behavioral change creates a relationship residue that is fraught with anxiety and suspicion in parents and students. Shifting power in using a Restorative Justice Practice philosophy yields great relationship rewards, as the vehicle is inclusive and inviting. At West Ferris Secondary School in the Near North District School Board suspension rates decreased from 382 in 2005/2006 to 77 in 2010/2011 (an 80% reduction in suspensions – noting that the student enrolment declined only by 11.2%) in five years using this philosophy. Last year, we reduced suspension rates at Almaguin Highlands Secondary from 230 in 2009/2010 to 111 in 2010/2011 (an 52% reduction in suspensions – noting that the student enrolment declined only by 7.9%). In isolation, the reduction rates are impressive, however, what is more inspiring is the trust in relationships we have built with our students - especially those who are at-risk that now view the ‘office’ as a resource of support rather than a place of punishment.

The power of positive relationships with students is critical in building a healthy school culture. One can hardly argue against Wheatley (1992) who stated in 'Leadership and The New Science' that 'even organizational power is purely relational...power in organizations is the capacity generated by relationships.' As adults we are charged with modeling a healthy way in which to resolve conflicts for our students who, inevitably, mirror our actions and construct and are the engines of the school's culture. Restorative Justice Practices *is* the vehicle which vice-principals can use to knit fragments of the community together for an optimistic school culture. Now like Archimedes, the vice-principal has the lever of Restorative Justice Practices to stand in unison with their charges to produce a dramatic positive shift in school cultures.

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