Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Developing Resilience and Preventing Youth Depression with Restorative Practices

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Introduction

The focus of my study tour was to travel to USA and Canada to research and examine the implementation of restorative practices within educational settings as a whole-school pedagogy for building resilient, interconnected and emotionally intelligent communities in which students at risk of depression are identified and supported.

Restorative practices prevent youth depression (Hansberry, 2012; Weldon, 2008) by providing quality teaching and learning opportunities for students to:

* + develop positive relationships, feel connected and valued
  + have tangible problem-solving strategies
  + learn how to make affective statements that express their position / needs
  + decrease feelings of helplessness / isolation

The tour involved visiting schools, attending conferences and a symposium, as well as meeting key personnel responsible for overseeing and embedding restorative pedagogy. I was immersed in classrooms in which student mental-health outcomes are being significantly improved, and those at risk are given skills and abilities to express their needs as well as strategies to resolve problems. I found that restorative practices, implemented in schools, provided a forum for students to seek peaceful and emotionally intelligent resolutions to situations that have caused them harm, meeting curriculum outcomes and underpinning whole school wellbeing practices.

Applications of restorative practice provide students who are experiencing social or emotional difficulties with an alternative framework for articulating their needs, thus developing problem solving skills crucial for preventing youth depression, and central to fostering school climates in which students feel safe, connected and well understood (Hopkins, 2004; Mirsky, 2003).

Key Learnings and Observations  
Introduction to Restorative Practices Conference – Boston, MA, USA

Conference participants included teachers, social workers, counsellors, juvenile justice officers, judges, psychiatrists and psychologists.

Day 1: We began by discussing some of the fundamental hypotheses of restorative practice:

* + Positive relationships make the difference to people’s wellbeing
  + People are happier, and more productive, when those in positions of authority work ‘with’ them rather than ‘to’, or ‘for’ them.
  + A fair process is more likely to create trust and engagement.
  + The people most effective at finding a solution to a problem are the people who are most directly affected by the problem.
  + Restorative practices create opportunities for those involved in conflict to work together to understand, clarify and resolve the situation and work together towards repairing harm caused (Centre for Restorative Justice, 2008).

Informal - affective statement, affective questions.
Middle - small impromptu conference
Formal - group or circle, formal conference

Figure 1. The Restorative Practices Continuum (O’Connell et al, 1999)

Restorative practices can be thought of as a range of strategies, behaviours and actions spanning from informal affective statements through to formal conferencing, see figure 1.

Affective statements articulate emotion and impact, e.g. “I feel disappointed that you didn’t hand in your report on time”. Affective questions then build upon the emotional statements, e.g. “What happened? What were you thinking at the time? What do you think needs to happen to make things better?” Small impromptu conferences give students opportunities to talk through their problems with each other, and articulate their needs. Group processes, including classroom ‘circles’, provide a forum for developing emotional intelligence, resilience and connections. Formal conferences can be used to ensure that individuals who have been hurt by actions of another can voice their concerns, meeting their needs, whilst planning future agreements.

The concept of ‘fair process’ is particularly relevant for school environments. The three principles are:

* + Engagement — involving individuals in decisions that affect them by listening to their views and genuinely taking their opinions into account
  + Explanation — explaining the reasoning behind a decision to everyone who has been involved or who is affected by it
  + Expectation clarity — making sure that everyone clearly understands a decision and what is expected of them in the future (Kim & Mauborgne, 1997).

These ideas are valuable for school personnel to reflect on when responding to conflict or difficult situations. It was noted that student suspension meetings can be managed restoratively, using fair processes. Highlighted in particular were the importance of engaging all stakeholders whilst clearly articulating school values and positions as well as listening to and respecting all contributions. Fair process ensures that all involved in and affected by a problem understand why decisions are made, thus creating more empowered perceptions.

Day 2 of the conference focussed on the use of restorative ‘circles’. Restorative ‘circles’ can be implemented flexibly, including small group discussions, classroom meetings, and whole school staff meetings. It is theorised that communities are stronger and more positive when those involved are able to talk with each other about emotion and impact (Hopkins, 2004). Circles can be used to ‘check-in’ and ‘check-out’ with students, developing empathy and accountability whilst acknowledging goals and achievements.

Day 3 was spent discussing formal restorative conferencing. Initially, formal conferences were designed to support those that had been harmed by another, but it has been found that benefits also extended to the wrong doer in the course of the process. Formal conferences require a clear incident as well as willingness of all participants to take part. Preparation prior to the conference is of crucial importance to the facilitator. Formal conferences can be used in schools to respond to serious incidents. There are three phases of a conference:

* + Begin by asking the wrong-doer to talk about the incident, thus confirming ownership and responsibility
  + Encourage other participants affected by actions of wrong-doer, including supporters of the wrongdoer, to talk about the situation
  + Agreement phase – all participants decide how to repair harm.

Day 4: Engagement with families. It is believed that families are the most critical element of our social fabric, upon which communities are built. Thus, it is significant that schools engage and work collaboratively with families. A restorative approach recognises that often the best resource for a young person is their family, and thus, aims to empower families by respecting their knowledge and experiences. Fair process is fundamental when engaging families.

School Immersion - Bethlehem, Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA

I spent a week visiting schools, meeting with key staff members, and observing classroom applications of restorative practice. At Liberty High School I met with Mr Nick Tsamoutalidas, Assistant Principal. Nick showed me a ‘restorative handbook’ that is provided to all school staff. It outlines the philosophy of restorative practice, timetables meetings in which learning teams get together to review progress and details classroom ‘circle’ implementation. I observed a circle in Ms Nancy Lewis’ Art class. She used a ‘circle’ to check-in with students. Nancy said she felt comfortable implementing a ‘circle’ with her students but admitted that it can become a bit repetitive. To combat this she suggested a list of ‘check-in circle’ questions that could be presented, from which teachers or students themselves can choose. Liberty High School expects all classroom teachers to conduct at least one ‘circle’ per week and this has been carefully and formally timetabled.

In other classrooms I observed the skill and efficiency of teachers and students in their ability to move in and out of ‘circle’ meetings. Students clearly understood the ‘circle’ rules of behaviour, and displayed their capacity to talk about how they were feeling; discuss things that had happened on the weekend; and provide support for another. Teachers commented on how helpful it was to assess the emotional climate within their classrooms, particularly after weekends. They also noted how ‘circles’ have enabled them to identify students feeling particularly emotional or depressed, and refer them to student support services, including counselling.

I met with school counsellors and learnt how the restorative philosophy supports their work. In particular, they described the use of informal conferences to support small groups of students to resolve conflict positively. Teachers are also invited to take part in small group conferences, facilitated by the school counsellor to address concerns. Affective questions are essential to this process, and students have responded to this consistency. Specifically, the questions elicit deeper, raw feelings whilst getting to the centre of misunderstandings or misperceptions.

Youth depression is a major concern at Liberty High School, and therefore circles have become increasingly important to identifying those students at risk. At first, teachers were a little concerned about what could be disclosed during ‘circle’ sharing time, however they are now able to respond appropriately, and, most importantly, refer students to further support. A school counsellor talked specifically of situations in which students have disclosed feelings of isolation and suicide ideation, during a circle, and immediate support was actioned. The school counsellor spoke of how important the ‘check-in circles’ were for students, not only for identifying those at risk, but for teaching them how to recognise and express their emotions.

Liberty High School data indicates that since restorative practices has been embraced referrals for discipline matters have significantly decreased.

Buxmont Academy is a pioneering restorative school for socially and emotionally disturbed students. Referrals are often via the children’s courts or from school boards after expulsion proceedings. All learning and behaviour within the school is based upon restorative practice. Classroom ‘circles’ are used to plan learning tasks, reflect on knowledge, and share understandings. Every afternoon students participate in group meetings, in the ‘circles’ format. Issues of social, emotional and behavioural learning are common topics. A ‘circle’ also begins and ends every school day.

When a student enters Buxmont Academy, an individual education plan is developed in collaboration with students, families and school staff. Students also agree to a behavioural code of conduct. On day 1 of my visit I observed a re-entry meeting with a school counsellor and a student who had breached a major school behavioural expectation. The affective questions were implemented verbally, as well as being provided to the student on paper. He was given time to think and write his responses, then counselled before reviewing his restorative agreement. The student demonstrated responsibility and ownership of his actions, and also generated strategies to repair the harm he had caused others. This was documented and supports were put in place to assist him to meet his goals. He re-entered his classroom appearing settled and comfortable.

Restorative Responses to Grief, Loss and Adversity, Conference, Bethlehem, PA, USA – International Institute of Restorative Practice

This four day experiential conference, explored how the restorative philosophy extends to supporting those experiencing grief, loss or adversity. It is based upon the following hypotheses:

* + Society ‘likes to keep things shallow’ rather than get to the ‘raw centre’ of grief
  + People need to have a ‘voice’ to share thoughts and feelings
  + To be ‘real’ we must get to the ‘raw centre’
  + We have responsibility to ‘connect with humanity’

Again, we were reminded of ‘affect’ e.g. ‘affect’ is a part of our daily lives and, thus, we should talk about how ourselves, or others, are affected by things that happen.

A key restorative response to grief, loss or adversity is ‘compassionate witnessing’. Compassionate witnessing helps meet the needs of grief by sharing and connecting with the event in a safe, non-judgemental, communal group. It involves a community coming together to bear witness to a dialogue between a facilitator and a traumatised person.

Further fundamental principles of a restorative approach to grief, loss or adversity include:

* + Common shock – vicariously experiencing an event that impacts personally, socially and interpersonally – e.g. witnessing an aggressive fight at a supermarket. ‘Common Shock’ is universal, widespread and affects us all but often goes unexamined or unacknowledged. If we don’t share and acknowledge how situations affect us, we risk becoming de-sensitised to violent or hurtful scenes (Weingarten, 2003).
  + The ‘Mourner’s 6 Reconciliation Needs’ (Wolfelt, 1997)
    1. acknowledging reality of loss
    2. embracing the pain of loss
    3. remembering the person
    4. developing a new self-identity
    5. searching for meaning
    6. receiving ongoing support from others
  + Disenfranchised grief – when a person’s experience is not openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned e.g. family members of an individual who has committed a terrible crime are often left with ‘disenfranchised grief’.
  + A restorative ‘remembering activity’ – create a visual, artistic display of thoughts and feelings that represent a personal loss
  + Transmission of harm – traumatic events, such as war, dislocation or abuse have been found to affect subsequent generations of families. Such trauma is often manifested in later generations psychologically, interpersonally, culturally or biologically (through addictions). This concept provides us with another layer of understanding when counselling clients, as often the ‘story’ has not been passed down, but the negative cycles or patterns are inherited.
  + Yalom’s group dynamic principles (Yalom, 1995**)**, crucial to successful group therapy:
    1. instillation of hope, faith that the treatment will be effective
    2. universality – demonstration that we are no along in our ‘misery’
    3. imparting of information – instruction and education
    4. altruism – opportunity to rise out of oneself and help another, a feeling of usefulness
    5. corrective recapitulation of primary family group – opportunity to ‘re-learn’ other ways to behave
    6. development of socialising techniques – social learning and development of interpersonal skills
    7. imitative behaviour – opportunity to adopt manner of other group members who function more adequately
    8. catharsis
    9. existential factors
    10. direct advice and strategies
    11. interpersonal learning – receiving feedback from others and opportunity to experiment with new ways of being

School Immersion – Ontario, Canada

My school visits in Canada were facilitated by Mr Stan Baker who is the ‘safe, caring and restorative schools’ resource teacher in this district. Mr Baker referred me to a number of primary and junior high school settings in which restorative philosophies have been incorporated.

I observed ‘circles’ being used to assess educational outcomes. In particular a ‘learning circle’ was demonstrated after a recent excursion. Students, as young as six, respected the circle guidelines and supported each other in recalling their knowledge.

‘Circles’ were routinely implemented at the beginning of every school day as a method for ‘checking-in’ with students and assessing wellbeing. This process also developed a sense of community within classrooms, whilst assisting the students to understand each others’ needs and feelings. Teachers described feeling empowered by the ‘circle’ format, in that they felt ‘connected’ to their students and able to guide conversations that were deeply meaningful. A Year 7 class provided me with the following feedback in regard to why ‘circles’ were an important feature of their school:

* + ‘circles’ give us a way to express ourselves, once we have learnt how to do so
  + we feel ‘free’ to share our thoughts because we have clear safety rules
  + ‘circles’ have helped us to resolve conflicts, by talking about how we feel, and reflecting on strategies
  + restorative ‘circles’ are good because we can say what we need, and what we would like to actually do about something
  + we can express our feelings
  + we get to hear other peoples’ feelings about things
  + we get to ‘see’ everyone in the ‘circle’ and learn about them
  + we can actually resolve problems
  + ‘circles’ help us to become closer
  + academic ‘circles’ have helped us to take learning risks
  + we have learnt more about each other and this has made it easier for us to trust each other
  + we can address issues that have been bugging us
  + ‘circles’ bring us together as a ‘whole class’, not smaller groups

Teachers demonstrated their comfort with ‘circles’ and ease of administration. ‘Circles’ had become a part of the natural routine within classrooms. Schools had also set up ‘restorative zones’ where students were able to access a facilitator to guide them through a small, group restorative process after experiencing a conflict or problem in the yard. Students demonstrated their skills and abilities when problem-solving, and individual children were provided with follow-up interventions, including phone calls home to parents when a problem triggered deeper feelings.

Schools were also conscious of communicating and educating the extended community about the restorative approach. Restorative practices were regularly referred to in a school’s newsletter. Emails with restorative updates were sent to families. Meetings and demonstrations were provided for families. One particular school holds a ‘corn roast’ each year, inviting parents to share food, and watch restorative role-plays, re-enactments and performances from every classroom.

School principals spoke of their use of restorative practices when working with parents to sort out problems. The affective questions were referred to as providing a structure or framework when responding to parents, whilst the values of listening, sharing, and working collaboratively to understand specific needs underpinned the construct.

School principals also described the importance of ensuring time is available to teachers to follow up classroom behavioural concerns. This is based on the premise that the most important people involved in a problem should be the ones to sort it out. After students are sent to a time-out area near the principal’s office, time is then allocated for the teacher and student to work through the problem restoratively, and this is facilitated by the principal. A key observation from my school visits in Canada, is the importance of leadership from school principal in facilitating restorative practices within their schools.

A Case Study

I was privileged to observe a year 9 class work restoratively to address and repair relationships after a serious breach of the school code of conduct. A student has used his phone in class to take a photo of his classroom teacher and post it on the internet. He created a quiz requiring students to ‘rate’ the teacher’s looks, and responses were collated in a graph. The situation quickly got out of hand as more and more students viewed the post. Eventually the school was alerted and intervened. A number of strategic responses were planned, including inviting a technology expert to educate the children further about the risks of social media; reviewing phone usage in the school; suspension of the student concerned; individual counselling; meetings with parents and, eventually, a re-entry to the classroom. The wrong-doer had clearly made a mistake in his actions, but was now in a position to return to his classroom, aware that his peers were all either vicariously involved or, possibly, supported him when he created his post. This student was clearly at risk of feeling anxious, depressed, excluded and disconnected. The situation could have serious long term ramifications for his future wellbeing if not handled sensitively. In collaboration with his family it was agreed that part of his re-entry to school would include his participation in a restorative circle with his teacher and classmates. The circle provided the students the forum to share their thoughts, feelings and suggestions for reparation. Significantly, students shared responsibility and concern with each other and spoke of their respect for their teacher. The teacher spoke professionally and sensitively about how the situation had affected her. The individual student listened respectfully, and explained what he had learnt as a result of this whole experience. The circle closed and the emotional climate was restored. I felt this process was an incredible example of the power of the circle to restore positive relationships, whilst acknowledging harm and producing positive strategies for the future.

Restorative Practice Symposium – Ontario, Canada

The symposium’s objective was to identify successful restorative practice currently used in eastern Ontario schools and from these indicators create a framework for implementation that includes objective measures of each of the restorative principles. Over 260 students, school principals, school administrators and teachers attended from a combination of public and Catholic school boards across Ontario. Circles were used as forums to facilitate sharing and discussion. Participants were asked to provide examples of what restorative practice looks like, sounds like and feels like in their schools. Some topics and key principles discussed included:

* + Relationships –building, strengthening and restoring healthy relationships in classrooms and across the school with parents and the wider community, in which all feel valued
  + Fairness / Justice – all staff and students have contributed towards standards of behaviour and understand their rights and responsibilities; responses to issues are equitable
  + Engagement – the entire school community supports and understands restorative practice, and is taught the skills needed to engage in active listening, empathy, social and emotional understanding
  + Embedded – core practices such as restorative questions, circles and restorative conversations are part of school norms and reflected in school Codes of Conduct.
  + Integration – restorative practices are woven into the curriculum, co-curricular and extracurricular activities

All information collected from these discussions is being qualitatively analysed and a critical pedagogy for implementing restorative practices will be published and provided to schools. This is significant and innovative research in the field of restorative practice and will result in an assessment tool that reflects successful practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I found restorative practices are being developed and embedded in school communities across USA and Ontario, Canada, supporting existing school policies, curriculum objectives and significantly enhancing student wellbeing. In particular, restorative practices:

* + resolve and prevent conflicts, crises and discipline problems
  + assist challenging students and families with recurring problems
  + improve communication among students, families and staff
  + decrease days lost to suspension and increase student engagement
  + provide students with forums to better understand each other’s views whilst articulating their needs
  + enhance relationships among students and staff, and
  + identify and support students at risk of, or experiencing youth depression

Restorative practices improve the emotional culture and climate of school communities, and provide a philosophical foundation based upon respect and engagement, upon which specific strategies, interventions and educational goals can be developed.

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