Cuts, Bruises, Mental Health and Restorative Practices: Meeting the needs of all students through a Restorative Approach

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Abstract

The negative state of a student's mental health can have adverse effects on their academic progress if left unchecked and unattended. Increasingly we are becoming aware of some of the negative effects of daily life on the mental state of students, and that in many instances, these students do not know how to manage their mental injuries. Restorative Practices, if used consistently and school-wide, can be one approach to give students a sense of connection with their school and class, gives students voice, allows for the safe discussion of feelings and concerns, and builds and maintains positive relationships that allows adults to better perceive student mental injuries, and gives students a caring adult to approach when needed.

Key words
relationships, restorative practices, mental illness, mental health, student voice, school climate, classroom climate, well-being.

Our students are telling and showing us that they are struggling. They lack resilience; many don't like who they are; people don't consider them important or think that they matter; they are bullied and treated disrespectfully; people expect them to be perfect - of greatest concern is the high number who don't know who to turn to, or have an adult who will listen to them when they have a concern or to whom they feel comfortable approaching. Students further tell us that the high levels of pressure put on them to succeed; what many would consider minor setbacks, are felt more deeply and they are not always aware of how to handle these stressors. School staff report seeing children with increased levels of anxiety, self-esteem issues, peer conflict issues, academic worries, peer pressure, gender identity and racism issues, and a general lack of confidence and skills in handling these problems.

Without a solid foundation of mental health, student achievement becomes much more difficult. The challenge for school staff is how to address these issues in a way that will help students to learn to trust the adults in their school, will allow them to open up in a safe, supportive environment, and will give them the confidence to speak about a myriad of personal and societal issues without fear. Further, we need an approach that will allow students to build the skills they need to deal with the daily pressures of school and the community in which they live.

Every child suffers cuts, scrapes and bruises at school. When they do, most know what to do - they seek help from an adult; secretary, teacher, yard supervisor. There is usually a procedure in place that is known and easily followed. However, do children know what the procedure is when they suffer social/emotional injuries? There are many reasons for these injuries: negative comments by peers and adults, poor academic results, stress imposed on students to achieve; any number of things that happen throughout the day (both in school and at home) that cause students to pause, think, and react. For those students whose mental state is a known quantity – students who may be on the autism spectrum, or have other identified social/emotional, mental illness or health issues – the processes are known, and in fact may be written into individual education plans (IEP), but for many, the "invisible social/emotional bruises" can alter a child's focus and concentration for the remainder of the day, or longer. "When students are preoccupied with emotional concerns they cannot participate fully in learning". (School Mental Health Assist, 2015, p. 12). Like physical scrapes and bruises, some children react differently than others in the same situation, and some take longer to heal. How they react and heal is both a reflection of their state of mental health at the time, as well as their knowledge of a way to solve their problem. When these injuries occur, those students who know where to go and get help appear to bruise less deeply and heal faster. Conversely, those students who do not know what to do when injured or who don't have the strategies in place to deal with either physical or mental injuries, the healing time is longer, and this adversely affects their learning in a profound way.

Restorative Practices may hold a key to helping students manage their mental injuries. Schools across Ontario have begun to implement RP into their school fabric, and have found that it creates "a safe space where social connections are strengthened as the dignity of each person is respected." (Moore, 2014, p. 11). Further, they have found that it reduces incidents of conflict and allows for positive relationships to be established and maintained.

> Restorative practices…is a new field of study that has the potential to positively influence human behavior and strengthen civil society around the world. Restorative practices builds healthy communities, increases social capital…decreases antisocial behavior, repairs harm and restores relationships (IIRP, 2017).

A restorative approach is based on transparent, open, honest, considerate and caring dialogue. It focusses on making the effort to truly hear and understand one another in order to resolve problems by understanding events from others' perceptions and experiences and taking everyone's needs into account. "If we truly 'walk the talk', work together, learn about one another, respect one another and appreciate other voices, we will learn what we have in common and build on this to develop relationships and community." (Restorative Practices Consortium, 2017). A

basic precept of RP is that "human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them." (Wachtel, Defining Restorative, 2013). The Leading Mentally Healthy Schools report (2015) supports this, saying "Research tells us that communities are healthier when youth and adults work together."

Within a school that employs RP, a variety of approaches will be observed over time that embrace the restorative mindset. Whole-class and small group circles and meetings, affective statements and questioning, and informal and formal restorative conferencing. Sometimes it is as simple as asking a student 'what happened' (a neutral question), as opposed to 'why did you do it' (an accusatory question), that determines a positive or negative outcome to an investigation.

Restorative Practices is seen not as a program but:

·   Is a way of 'being' or 'acting' in everyday life.
·   Utilizes a philosophy and practices that strengthens relationships and fosters a healthy school community.
·   Provides a rigorous practice framework that involves teachers, students and parents, engaging them in a collaborative approach.
·   Is firm, respectful and incorporates fair process.
·   Is explicit and offers a common language and practice that is easily embraced and adapted.
·   Is the essence of good pedagogy.
·   Is the process that allows the integration of Character Education attributes at a personal, professional and [school] community level.
        (O'Connell, 2007)

Can a restorative classroom meet the needs of all students? Yes, I believe it can. PREVnet data concurs that all students have, at times, stress and challenges in their lives, sometimes without anyone else even knowing (Craig, 2014). While there are a certain number of students in any school that are identifiably at-risk, many other students deal with stressors that, while not debilitating long-term, can lead to short-term distraction from academic focus and learning. These emotional "bruises" need time and attention to heal.

We can't assume that only those with outward signs are in need of a restorative approach. Just as learning disabilities can be invisible, so too can many risk factors that can lead to school failure (Jensen, 2009, p. 11), such as violence in the home, relationship problems, mental health, or situational poverty, described as the sudden drop in income, possibly due to job loss, divorce or death of an income provider (Payne, 2005). A classroom is made up of a variety of types of students: students with a wide range of abilities, learning styles, backgrounds, challenges, and

stressors in their lives. "Students in any classroom differ in many ways…some differences could be cognitive… while other differences could be affective or behavioural" (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008). Teachers who employ a 'one size fits all' approach may find it difficult to reach all students (Beach, 2014, p. 74). Curriculum design and pedagogy today demand differentiated approaches to the students in any one classroom. "Differentiation is an organized yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning to meet kids where they are and help them to achieve maximum growth as learners" (Tomlinson, 1999). For example, identified special education students with IEPs are woven into the classroom fabric along with students from low socio-economic backgrounds, resulting in a patchwork quilt of challenges for a teacher. Using a restorative approach as a basis for classroom management allows for a differentiated approach to manage the social/emotional learning that needs to take place concurrent with the academic learning. All students, regardless of background, needs or challenges, can have a say, or voice, in how their classroom operates and the learning climate. We need to "help students to think critically about their attitudes and beliefs…a restorative approach supports this work" (Saufler, 2012, p. 4). Restorative Practices has the ability to reach all students, to meet many of their needs throughout a school year, and to help them deal with stress on a daily basis and in times of crisis.

At West Philadelphia High School there was an identified need for interventions, like Restorative Approaches, to give students a voice in their education. (IIRP, 2014) The building of social skills and attitudes so that students can understand the need for controlling their behavior is important for sustainable change. In order for this to happen, many students expressed the need to "talk", which would also imply the need to be listened to (IIRP, 2014). Student voice is the belief that students need to have a stake in their education, and that they "have the obligation to talk and to listen to others" (Wachtel, 2013, p. 27). "Youth are the primary experts on what is happening at school and on what works best to prevent peer maltreatment....We see authentic youth involvement as key to success …" (Davis & Nixon, 2013). In the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) "The Board is committed to ensuring that student voice that represents the diverse student body of the school, including the silent voices of marginalized students, is heard and considered in decision-making at all levels" (York Region District School Board, 2011). In the YRDSB, schools are to establish practices to hear those voices. In West Philadelphia H.S. this 'voice' was established through restorative approaches. Students were able to speak and to be heard and in so doing, build positive social culture and relationships with each other and the teaching staff. How important was this? As one of the teachers indicated, "content and material mean nothing without relationships".

It would be easy to focus on at-risk students as the only students that are in need of emotional learning, or "relational literacy" (Saufler, 2012). Jensen (2009), Saufler (2011), Craig (2014), and Clinton (2017) speak of effects on the brain and

strategies that are common to all learners, not just those with at-risk markers. Jensen (2009) outlined that while there is no specific optimal type of enrichment mindset that will bring about positive changes in at-risk students, he did indicate what wouldn't work. Of those listed, several were the antithesis of what restorative approaches are, such as: maintaining order through a show of force; increasing or intensifying classroom discipline; decreasing interactions among students; and delivering more heavy-handed top-down lectures. (Jensen, 2009, p. 64) Certainly, a restorative program that opposes these actions that could be found in many classrooms would be seen as building positive changes in at-risk students. Jensen, and many others, have shown conclusively that the brain can change (Jensen, 2009, p. 48). While the thesis of his work in *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* was on the study of students with low socio-economic status (SES), frequently this work indicated that what worked for some, worked for all (Jensen, 2009, p. 142).

Developing a classroom climate that is supportive, safe, inviting, and engaging is important if we are to make positive changes in students and teach them the social skills they need. "A 20-30-minute morning meeting…goes a long way towards building a classroom community" (Sterrett, 2012, p. 73). Saufler talked about the "feel" of a school when you entered – what do you see and hear that gives you a positive feeling about being there. "This "feel" we experience is indicative of the school's climate. School climate has a direct effect on whether or not a student will develop a positive connection to school". This same feel can be said about each classroom. What activities give us a positive 'feel' when we enter? What do we see and hear that tells us this is a safe and inviting place to learn? This is the feeling that students get each day. Will they be greeted with a smile or downturned eyes? These "myriad of small and seemingly unimportant things" can determine the success of a child's day. (Saufler, 2012, p. 1). Will children feel connected to their classmates and teacher? This sense of connectedness was explored by Maeroff (1998) and Payne (2005). The sense of connectedness that students need with the school, peers, and with caring adults, can be met through a variety of restorative means – circles and individual conferences to name some.

While attempting to meet the needs of all students, teachers and educational staff too often try to walk down the center of the road; they try to aim for the middle or average. In doing so, students on the shoulders of the road can be missed. Students who struggle with identified learning disabilities can access support through special education programming and this support is noted in the student's IEP. Children who struggle with 'invisible' disabilities, the myriad of at-risk factors that can many times go unnoticed and un-challenged, can get lost along the way. There is a need to understand and learn about each child in a classroom, and this can be difficult for any teacher. How can they meet the challenge of differentiation? Restorative practices in the form of class meetings, circles, conferences, or simply in the type and frequency of daily interactions, allows for staff and students to learn about each other, determine what specific needs are, and to develop a plan to meet

those needs. Student voice is heard, relationships are developed and maintained, students with hidden or overt stresses and at-risk factors are addressed, and a positive classroom climate, the intangible, yet very important factor that allows students to feel safe, secure, valued and welcomed, can be established. "Staff must also ensure that their relationships with *all* students are positive and supportive as well" (Beach, 2014, p. 63). Clinton adds "if learning happens through relationships, then how do we develop, improve, and cultivate relationships?" (Clinton, 2017). Children and students who have strong relationships and a positive sense of self are in a better position to reach their full potential (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). All students can benefit from a classroom that uses restorative practices, as "fostering learning environments that contribute to our students overall sense of self, spirit, and belonging promotes well-being" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

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