

Can Restorative Practice in Schools Make the Difference? A Critical Reflection from Scotland Restorative School Project

Abiemwense Edokpayi Omoregie

Department of Curriculum, teaching and learning. Faculty of Education. G.A. Hickman Building Memorial
University of Newfoundland St. John's, NL A1B 3X8

Abstract

At the turn of the 21st century, the world has begun to witness an escalation of indiscipline and school violence in our public schools. Some have blamed indiscipline on family disruption arising from the aftermath of industrial revolution to be the cause of progressive rise in violence in our school today (Chant, 1994). Adam Smith foresaw good reasons at the outset of the industrial revolution for nations to educate their populations; “The more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition,” he argued; “An instructed and intelligent people, besides, are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one” (Kandel, 1933: 51), but little did he envisage the consequences the relationship between man and the factory will bring to family relationship, social order and school discipline. The context above underlines how the world of the factory impacts on our family values and those cultural capitals that integrate to bring about social cohesion and strong family life base on values, ethics and discipline. As a growing child in the seventies in Africa, the school system wasn't much divorced from the home. Teachers' duty of in- loco- parentis was an everyday experience in our lives as young adults, teachers could instil discipline at student's home with parents approving, our mothers and sometimes, fathers after farm work, stayed at home to nurture their children and the children of other families. Today, the life of factories and industries has overstressed and disconnected relationships. Children and young adult as a result, have been left on their own with scarcity of space to be nurtured in a restoratively just manner. The lack of space for relationship therefore, has impacted on school discipline and classroom behaviour of young adults. The traditional adversarial antidotes known to government and school authorities have not in any way addressed the growing scale of indiscipline and school violence among youths in our public schools.

Keywords: Restorative Practice, School Discipline, Relationship

1. Intervention to School Discipline (Scotland Approach)

Schools across the globe are turning to restorative justice (rj) practices in hopes of developing safe and caring school cultures that will effectively support the academic purpose of schooling Vaandering (2014),

Due to the rising scale of indiscipline, most governments have expressed concern over the trend and have mapped out action plans to intervene by implementing restorative justice in schools. A case in point is Scotland in the UK, McCluskey, et al (2008) where actions have been taken by the government to foster interconnectedness and break all barriers to learning that may be pedagogical, institutional and social. The need base approach had been a paradigm for addressing indiscipline and bad behaviour among students; it was hoped that addressing the specific needs of students, could change the way they respond to phenomena that trigger bad behaviour; the needs approach focuses on meeting the need(s) posing barrier to student's learning and behaviour difficulties. However, the needs approach to managing behaviour is only a stop gap initiative and does not provide for the total change of students by way of experience and a paradigm shift in the way they view relationships with others and honouring oneself.

According to McCluskey, et al. (2008), the tendency to focus on behaviour reveals a default position to change; in my life as young adult, I have seen students given special attention based on their needs. I have seen students given scholarships and all support tools after they are bereaved of their parents. Such needy students are well provided for so that their circumstances do not impact on their learning, school discipline and behaviours. Unfortunately, this special care does not make any difference in their later life.

While behaviour management approach may serve some purposes, it cannot serve as alternative to restorative practice. There are many studies indicating that restorative justice is a promising and effective practice (Braithwaite 2002; Rodriguez, 2005; Umbriet et al, 1992, 2002, 2004), especially within juvenile justice and education. Restorative practice is proactive and ahead of behaviour management. Restorative practice strategies can help schools prevent or deal with conflict before it escalates and provides ways to effectively address behaviour and other complex school issues offers a supportive environment that can improve learning, and safety by preventing future harm and offers alternatives to suspension and expulsion. As an intervention measure, behavioural change in students will require more than an expedient approach but a sustainable strategy that will influence students throughout their entire life. It is therefore not an add-on program for behaviour management, nor does it provide just another tool in the toolbox to be used by teachers and educators in dealing with student behaviour.

In contrast to behaviour based approach with focus on needs and adversarial mode of discipline, restorative school discipline calls for a school culture that permeates all aspect of school organization and relationships within the school as well as relationships between the school and its community (Meyer & Evans, 2012, P.5).

Realizing the futility of management style approach which prescribe supporting students with their specific needs to elicit behavioural change, and the important role restorative practice can play as a change pipeline towards positive school culture, the Scottish Restorative Practice project was set up in 2004 with funding provided by the Scottish Executive for a two-year pilot project on restorative practice in three Scottish Local Authorities (later extended for a further two years). The overall aim for the national pilot project in restorative practice was to learn more about restorative practice in school settings and to look at whether there could be a distinctive Scottish approach, an approach that both complement and offer something additional to current good practice (McCluskey et al 2008). In the pilot project in Scotland, the underpinning principles were:

- Fostering social relationships in a school community of mutual engagement
- Responsibility and accountability for one's own actions and their impact on others and respect for other people, their views and feelings
- Empathy with the feelings of others affected by one's own actions
- Fairness
- Commitment to equitable process
- Active involvement of everyone in school with decisions about their own lives
- Issues of conflict and difficulty returned to participants, rather than behaviour pathologized
- A willingness to create opportunities for reflective change in pupils and staff (Kane et al. 2007).

Evidence from the pilot project across all school types revealed a significant improvement in school culture, such as the use of restorative language by staff and pupils although, there still exist a minority of resistant staff. The findings also reveal that the atmosphere in most of the schools became identifiably calmer and pupils generally became more positive about their whole school experience; they described staff as fair and listening to "both sides of the story". (McCluskey, et al 2008)

2. Restorative Practice and Change

If you change the stories, you will change the culture.

Although the findings reveal that minority of the staff in schools chosen for the pilot project were resistant to change; according Thorsborne, (2014), it is important to realize that restorative initiative deals with human beings and the range of human emotions triggered by change. Change is an emotional process that requires patience and time, the continuum of practice with the right environment conducive to change will bring about the required change. Roger, (2003) explains that the innovation (Introducing RJ) creates uncertainty, and because it is such an uncomfortable state, individual seek information about the new idea and its capacity to solve problem from their peers. As Thorsborne, (2014) puts it, innovation takes time to implement and its rate of adoption is dependent on a range of factors which she referred to as the decision-making process where those considering adoption either accept or reject the idea. They must in the process of time go through knowledge, persuasion, decision making and implementation stage.

I was introduced to restorative justice at the beginning of winter semester in 2016 by Professor Dorothy Vaandering of the faculty of education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. During the introductory lecture, the concept of restorative thinking was received with trepidations and doubts; this is majorly due to my long-term internalization of zero tolerance policy being a dominant practice in Nigeria schools. Environment most often, determines what one construes as reality. Before my contact with restorative philosophy, corporal punishment was a vehicle for driving discipline. I must confess that I vacillated in the idea of restorative practice over some length of time before the conviction came upon me. Today, I do not only believe in restorative practice as a means of solving behavioural problems and instilling school discipline but as a way of life, I now see restorative justice as a "spirit" that brings out the humanity in me and enables capacity to change the world to a better place. The point being emphasized here is that, time is required to investigate, internalize and process the new thinking before it becomes the "way" or lens through which we see the world.

3. Does Relationship Matter?

Interestingly, it was also revealing that some teachers and administrators are in a compromising position about implementing restorative practice in schools. Some educators believe that the behaviour peculiarity of some students require that restorative practice and zero tolerance can go side by side. This form of thinking is a product of hasty decision making. Marshall, Shaw and Freeman in Hansberry B, (2010) advised that Restorative Practices require teachers to redefine their role in behaviour management to "relationship management" and that teachers need time and support to grapple with questions about the impact of punishment and potential alternatives based on a restorative philosophy; Marshal and Freeman remind us that teachers require

understanding and time to practice and refine new skills and to reflect upon their own style. This occurs best in an environment that is a challenging yet supportive, the onus is also on school systems to ensure that teachers have access to substantial professional development that allows for progressive skill development with the aim that teachers will be able to confidently apply and model effective relationship management skills.

Restorative practice represents an uncompromising paradigm shift which mirrors relationship as a window for interaction dealing with others in all area of life. This window of relationship is devoid of all forms of adult and authority control; relationship festers when adult work with children in a relational manner to make life more worthy and wholesome. Restorative justice, with its philosophical foundation, holds potential for success as it relies on a relationship-based, dialogic framework that contrasts with the more common hierarchical, power-based structure (Vaandering, 2014). Moving from a punitive rule based discipline system to a system underpinned by relational values requires a change in the hearts and minds of practitioners, students, their parents and the wider community.

The task of building a school culture that respond to change from zero tolerance and management style approach is a herculean task. Without understanding the enormity of this task a few good people in each school will be working very hard to make a difference, with limited impact (Hansberry, 2010). Restorative justice as a philosophy does not prescribe a specific model or approach; but rely on the context of the environment and situation under which it is to be practiced or implemented. To focus on individuals without considering contextual factors results in objectification that reinforces the wishes of hierarchical power relations stripping both the individuals and the institutional community of their humanity (Freire 1970, 44). Therefore, a “critical inquiry approach is important for extending and deepening the knowledge base of restorative justice” (Vaandering, 2010 p.7). Vaandering premised further that in order for restorative justice practice to be effective and sustainable it must be understood first and foremost through a critical lens that recognizes the systemic, institutional and structural dimensions of power relations in school communities. Through critical relational lens therefore, “it is possible to understand restorative justice in a broader sense, where all participants in a school—adults and youth—are respected for their humanity and effective communities develop where the well-being of all is sought” (Vaandering, 2010 p.8). Schools should stay true to the restorative values of: Those in authority doing things ‘with’ people, as opposed to doing things ‘to’ them, ‘for’ them or failing to do anything at all; creating, valuing and protecting relationships above all else; empowering those affected by harmful behaviour to be key stakeholders in the process of moving forward; addressing misbehaviour in ways that are supportive of relationships and not damaging to them; putting people and relationships before rules; ensuring that responses to wrongdoing aim to do no further harm to those involved (those harmed and those responsible for the harm) (Hansberry, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Certainly, there is no space for zero tolerance in a room occupies by restorative justice practice. Where this exists, it may become difficult to model the students and practice what we preach. To become a change agent, we must be seen to live our convictions.

There is no better way to conclude this reflection than to quote Martin Luther King (1968) in “Restoring Safe School Communities” (Morrison, 2007)

Cowardice asks the question: is it safe?
Expediency asks the question: is it popular?
But conscience asks the question: Is it right?
And there comes a time when one must take
A position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor
Popular – but one must take it because it’s right.

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