

The Restorative Vision for Schools

The restorative vision for schools is about cultural transformation. A big part of the transformation is the engagement of all voices in decision-making. The restorative philosophy asserts that there is wisdom in each of us and that the collective wisdom is always greater than the wisdom of any individual. Restorative processes are particularly effective at allowing voice for every person and at accessing the collective wisdom of a group.

Schools are nested communities. The classroom is a community within the community of a particular school, which is a community within the community of the district as a whole. At each level of community it is important for the stakeholders to engage in conversation about the values and principles of restorative philosophy – to talk about how we are going to live together. The specifics of implementation are designed to meet the needs of that particular community. Self-governance is a very important principle of the restorative framework. Sharing power happens at every level. Teachers share power with students. School administration shares power with teachers and parents. District administration shares power with schools. Sharing power is necessary to access collective wisdom!

Experience across the country suggests that the individual school level is the critical unit for implementation. Sustainable implementation requires grassroots engagement of staff, students, parents and administrators at the school level with support from district administration. Experience also suggests that training alone is not sufficient. A restorative culture in a school requires major behavior change of the institution. It takes time. It requires role modeling and coaching. It requires practice.

In my own journey with restorative justice I have had to pay more attention to how I show up every day. Am I bringing my 'best self' to my interactions with others? Am I listening with an open heart and an open mind? Can I stay in a place of curiosity rather than jumping to judgment when I do not like what I am hearing or seeing? I have had to pay attention to what is going on inside me. The circle process helps me to slow down and notice my thoughts, my assumptions, my judgments so I can then be more intentional about my actions.

The underlying concepts of a restorative approach are not new. They are indeed ancient and go by many names. Restorative practices are designed to allow us to live together as humans in a good way. For many people they are intuitive. The articulation of this philosophy and the development of specific restorative practices has given us a way to be more intentional about living together in a good way.

Mary Clark, a biologist, suggests that the two most fundamental needs of humans are meaning and belonging. Our culture thwarts meaning and belonging in many ways. Our schools reflect our culture and they hold the potential to change our culture. Restorative approaches guide us toward a pathway to cultural transformation that could start in schools and spread to all our social institutions. Together students, parents, teachers and administrators can create a culture in which everyone belongs and meaning is nurtured for everyone. – Written by Kay Pranis, 2016