

An Educational Perspective on Restorative Justice

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Introduction

Resolving hurt or harm through engaging in a restorative process has the potential to generate personal development. Successful restorative conversations have encouraged some schools to apply restorative principles to the wider remit of supporting the wellbeing and development of all their pupils.

If schools are to do more to support the mental health and development of their pupils, there is much to be learned from the process of engaging in practice derived from the principles of restorative justice.

Restorative principles and social engagement

Circle activities have become a foundational practice in restorative schools, modelling important principles such as respect for difference, an experience of listening to others and of being listened to by others, becoming a valued member of the group and appreciating the process of creating new understanding and new possibilities for development in collaboration with others.

Making connections among people involves a process of building the social environment. The practice of holding regular go-arounds in a group circle activity is one of the ways in which everyone's voice is heard and each contributes to creating something that is greater than the individual parts.

Everyone in a school community has a responsibility to help create an environment where individuals feel safe, where each person is valued both for who they are and who they are in the process of becoming. This will be an environment where individuals are able to take risks in learning and developing.

When children and young people come to school, they bring with them a rich network of relationships formed and informed by their history of relating in their families, communities and cultures. The same may be said

for all members of staff who come into school each day. From the process of connecting and engaging with each other, staff and children are involved in a continual process of creating the social environment of their school community.

The process of building the social environment creates opportunities for learning and development for young people.

The social nature of development

As proposed by the eminent educationalist, Lev Vygotsky, development is a social process – no one develops by thinking or doing anything that is unaffected by the involvement of other people. Learning and developing are two sides of the same coin, always in play at the same time. As Vygotsky pointed out, ‘we grow into the intellectual life of those around us’.

Children learn to speak the language spoken around them and they develop ways of thinking and acting that reflect the social and cultural assumptions shared by those who are important to them. One of the ways we develop is by creatively imitating the words and actions of others. How people talk and how they listen will be imitated. This perspective poses significant implications for institutions such as the school and the family.

As well as creatively imitating others, development is generated by the way in which individuals create meaning by completing each other’s thoughts and words. This is a process of actively building understanding through engaging in conversation made possible by social relationships.

Building supportive relationships

By their choice of particular words, staff in schools will influence the nature of the relationships they develop with young people. For example, two very different relationships will be proposed if a member of staff says either, ‘What happened?’ or, ‘Why did you do that?’ in response to a child’s potentially hurtful words or actions. An emphasis on the word ‘why’ suggests that a judgment has already been made, placing the child in a defensive and oppositional position. In contrast, the phrase ‘what happened’ conveys interest and neutrality, opening the way to engage in a collaborative conversation.

It is recognised that cooperative relationships provide favourable conditions for development by enabling individuals to respond to each other in a sensitive, accepting and additive manner. At times, the development of new meaning will involve the ability to improvise in the moment – development is achieved through acts of social creation.

Restorative dialogue is a process that invites all those involved to take part in considering what has happened, how others have been affected and what may be done to help put things right. In responding to a supportive relationship, and an invitation to look outward rather than inward, individuals are placed in a position of being able to learn and develop from the process of thinking and talking about the consequences of their actions.

Conclusion

Practices derived from Restorative Justice recognise that development is a social process through which individuals may actively create new understanding and new possibilities for acting differently in collaboration with others. In schools, members of staff have an important role to play in organising social environments where development may be nurtured. These environments will model respect for others both in community-building circles and in creative learning conversations.

Building personal development will go hand-in-hand with building relationships and social communities that are inclusive, engaging and fair.

If schools are to do more to enhance the personal development and wellbeing of all young people, the practice of restorative principles offers a relevant educational framework for action. This is a practice that will enable young people to learn that they are creators and builders in their lives and relationships with choices to make in the actions they take.

Tom will be pleased to respond to comments or questions on this article by email: tomm@restorativefoundation.org.uk