

## **The Practice of Restorative Principles: Creating environments for development**

*For schools involved with The Restorative Foundation, the practice of restorative justice has given way to the practice of restorative principles. In this practice social activities, informed by restorative principles, create opportunities for learning and personal development. Social activities include community-building circles, learning conversations and the development of partnership among young people, staff and families. Recognising the unified process of learning and development positions the practice of restorative principles firmly within an education theoretical framework.*

*This article includes a contribution from headteachers and staff involved in a Partnership of 21 Restorative Schools within Milton Keynes and Mid Beds.*

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### **Introduction**

Restorative principles are derived from the practice of Restorative Justice, which involves a focus on the social effects of wrongdoing and on the scope for restoring dignity and worth to those affected, including the wrongdoer. Naturally, when this approach was first introduced into schools, there was an emphasis on the individuals involved and on the skill of the facilitator in convening restorative meetings. An aspiration was to generate empathy through a carefully structured series of questions and an opportunity to hear first-hand from those affected.

From the feedback received, it became evident that by setting a different tone and context for these conversations, there were positive examples of development occurring for the young people and adults involved. What emerged was an appreciation that conversations both determine and are determined by relationships. As a consequence, the practice of restorative principles has involved a commitment to build relationships and environments where social learning and personal development may be supported.

This article offers a theoretical perspective that links and informs the range of activities being developed. In this respect, the perspective on learning and development described by Lev Vygotsky has a relevant fit with restorative practice.

### **Learning and Development**

Although the words ‘learning’ and ‘development’ are often bracketed together, in our present educational environment the focus for teaching tends to be on learning as demonstrated through assessments of knowledge and skills. Test results have become the currency used to grade individuals and schools. Demonstrating knowing in examinations is commonly regarded as the route to achieving financial and status rewards. It is small

wonder that pressure is put on schools to focus on a model of learning based on the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Development, on the other hand, tends to be regarded as driven by biology and a maturational process that is quite separate from the process of acquiring knowledge. The personal development of young people has been associated with extra-curricular activities and with the determining influence of family and culture.

Qualities such as open-minded thinking, compassion, empathy, perseverance and cultural sensitivity are at least as important as knowledge in any workplace, family or social group. Yet personal development has not been regarded as such a high priority in our education system – despite the growing concern being expressed regarding pupil wellbeing and the mental health of young people.

### **A key idea from Lev Vygotsky**

In contrast to the conceptual separation of learning and development, Vygotsky (1978) has described these processes as inter-related from the first day of a child's life. He argued that 'human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them'. In other words, we experience our lives socially and it is only subsequently that this experience is transformed into the learning and development of individuals.

In her recent book, Lois Holzman (2017) has helped to clarify some of Vygotsky's thinking. In particular, she has drawn attention to the way in which the interacting processes of 'imitation' and 'completion' bring about development, at the same time as building relationships and environments where learning and development may occur.

### **The role of relationships in development**

The process of developing spoken language is a vivid example of learning and development being created in social interaction. Babies and young children are always in the process of becoming – their development depends on how others relate to them.

By anticipating the meaning associated with sounds made by an infant, family members complete the infant's utterances by offering relevant language such as, 'Would you like a drink?' or 'Water?' The family provide sounds to be imitated and by providing or pointing to a drink they offer learning opportunities in the co-operative process of completing meaning together.

In restorative practice, the social nature of all learning is recognised and a common feature is the way in which relationships serve both to build the learning environment and build development for individuals.

## **How can this thinking be fostered in practice?**

- Community building
- Learning conversations
- Partnership

### **Community building**

Sitting in a circle and having a go-around where each person responds to a common question or prompt is an opportunity for individuals to learn by observing others. These are not occasions when children experience a sense of one right answer, or indeed of anyone necessarily being right or wrong.

Children learn that they can imitate the type of response given by others and add their own unique twist. They develop through their engagement in a social process. As the group develops its own identity with each person connected to others and to the group as a whole, so do individuals develop a sense of confidence that they will be valued both for who they are and who they are in the process of becoming.

In the circle, children experience ‘thinking together’ which develops openness to others and the potential to perform in new ways. By contributing to the group, individuals are building their own development in an environment that is respectful of individual difference and supportive of creativity and innovation.

In recognising the vital importance of imagination in learning and development, it has been helpful to integrate more use of games, improvisation, and story discussion into restorative practice. These learning opportunities generate developments such as: listening and participation, co-operation, awareness of social responsibility, development through activity, and sensitivity regarding social and cultural differences.

### **Learning conversations**

‘How people talk with each other’ develops both the relationship and the shared understanding created in the conversation. Learning conversations are distinguished by curiosity and by respectful collaboration in developing thinking together. An example in practice has been the disposition to respond with ‘yes....and’ rather than ‘yes....but’ or ‘no...because’.

‘Yes...and’ conversations acknowledge that talking is a creative process in which new meaning is constantly being built between people. Central to this way of thinking is Vygotsky’s insight that speaking completes our thoughts and thinking completes speech. It follows from this perspective that if thoughts are completed in the social process of speaking, the responses of other people will have a significant impact on our thinking.

‘Yes...and’ responses create conversations and relationships in which each person is a valued participant. By respecting and valuing each child regardless of their actions or

achievements, adults help provide the vitally important experiences of safety, security and connection. These are basic restorative principles and they are favourable conditions for all learning and development.

When hurt or harm has occurred, learning conversations create new ways of looking at things. These conversations are not concerned with making judgments or discovering a truth. Restorative questions introduce a consideration of how others are affected and invite thinking to be completed differently.

While the word 'behaviour' describes the actions of individuals, the word 'performance' conveys the notion of a social process in which others are involved as participants and audience. Performing in new ways is key to on-going human development, and the suggestion of a 'take two' is a good example of completing a learning conversation with the possibility of creating new actions.

## **Partnership**

In developing relationships of collaborative partnership among young people, staff and family members, the following principles will be relevant:

- Everyone has the right to be treated equally as a valued individual
- We all have a voice and a right to be heard
- Our development depends on taking risks; mistakes are an inevitable part of learning
- The source and substance of all development lies in human relationships

A key requirement in developing relationships of partnership with young people and with family members will be transparency in sharing information about the practice of restorative principles.

For some young people, there may be an option of taking on new performances of responsibility as 'pupil leaders'. This is a role in which young people receive support to hold learning conversations with other pupils. In this process, they will be developing their abilities at the same time as they are creating learning opportunities for others. Young people may also take a lead with community building circles, or adopt a role as school representative.

For families, the opportunity to learn about restorative practice will be supported by an experience of being treated according to restorative principles and values in every contact with school staff. Family members will be invited to be collaborative partners in supporting the learning and development of their children through a shared understanding of restorative practices.

A recent addition to the practice of restorative principles has been the creation of a partnership mentality among schools. Possibilities for development will be enhanced by visits to other schools, by creatively imitating practice and by completing ideas in

conversation. Staff members from 21 schools are working together to create a shared resource bank of useful ideas and activities.

## **Principles for building relationships and social environments for development**

Restorative practices such as community building, learning conversations and partnership are relational activities that create environments where learning and development may occur. In creating these environments, and in performing their role within these environments, members of staff will be informed by principles and values derived from Restorative Justice.

Headteachers and staff recently described the following principles and values that form and inform the restorative practices being developed in their school communities. These principles included:

- The primacy of dialogue: the right to be heard and the responsibility to listen
- An outward-looking receptivity to difference and to appreciating the experience of ‘the other’
- An imperative to create safe, secure and caring environments where individuals may reflect on their actions
- An unconditional positive regard for each person; not judging the person – but having a view on all actions
- The conviction that an experience of hurt or harm is an opportunity for learning and development
- An imperative to model respectful, fair and inclusive responses
- An emphasis on asking questions that generate new connections and new possibilities for action

Staff described the following examples of values that are shown and experienced in restorative practices within their school communities:

Respect; positivity; empathy; fairness; kindness; perseverance; compassion; acceptance; understanding; sensitivity; curiosity; and a non-judgmental attitude.

Young people and adults living in an environment where restorative principles are practiced will be creatively imitating the values and principles of those around them. They will also experience support and enhanced confidence to take risks in their learning and to contribute to the creation of new meaning and new developments in action with those around them.

## **Conclusions**

Learning and development are not separate activities, nor are they the same thing – they are a unified process. This is a process in which development may be thought of as completing learning, and learning may be thought of as completing development.

Vygotsky's observation about 'growing into the intellectual life of those around them' has implications for the way in which staff create relationships and an environment that young people will grow into in their school communities.

In developmental learning communities, individuals will be responded to both as who they are and who they are in the process of becoming. This practice will entail a subtle but important shift away from thinking of behaviour as something to be managed, controlled or modified, to thinking of behaviour as performance - something that is continually being created with others.

The practice of restorative principles will reflect a school culture in which building relationships and creating environments for development are at the heart of all learning and development. These relational priorities will affect the way in which young people engage with all areas of the curriculum.

Restorative practices will help to build respectful and collaborative individuals who are open to continue learning and developing through engaging with others in schools, families, communities and the world at large.

### **References:**

Holzman, L. (2017), *Vygotsky at Work and Play*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Routledge  
Vygotsky, L.S. (1978), *Mind in Society*. Harvard University Press

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