

USING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES TO TEACH AND UPHOLD DIGNITY IN AN AMERICAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT. The protection and promotion of dignity is a foundational objective of restorative justice. Dignity-enhancing restorative justice practices, which are rooted in the traditional practices of Indigenous people groups, have been widely adopted in schools reactively, as a response to specific infractions. A growing number of schools are adopting restorative practices proactively, with a view to preventing misbehaviour by improving climate and strengthening relationships. This report from the Evanston / Skokie School District (K-8) in Illinois explores a cost-effective restorative practice implementation plan that focuses on volunteers and teachers partnering to introduce one key proactive practice, sharing circles, to classrooms. Using Donna Hicks' "essential elements of dignity" as a framework, I argue that restorative circle initiatives are a simple and effective means of transforming school communities by acknowledging, promoting and honouring the dignity of students.

UTILISATION DE PRATIQUES RÉPARATRICES POUR ENSEIGNER ET PRÉSERVER LA DIGNITÉ AU SEIN D'UN DISTRICT SCOLAIRE AMÉRICAIN

RÉSUMÉ. Protéger et promouvoir la dignité est un objectif fondamental de la justice réparatrice. Les pratiques de justice réparatrice visant à développer la dignité sont ancrées dans les traditions des peuples autochtones. En réaction à certaines infractions, des écoles ont largement adopté ces pratiques. Or, un nombre grandissant de milieux scolaires mettent en place des pratiques réparatrices de manière proactive. Elles préviennent ainsi les mauvais comportements en améliorant le climat et en renforçant les relations. Ce rapport provenant du district Evanston / Skokie (maternelle-secondaire 2) en Illinois étudie un plan économique de mise en œuvre de pratiques réparatrices au sein duquel bénévoles et enseignants font équipe pour introduire une pratique-clé en classe : les cercles de partage. En me basant sur le modèle des « éléments essentiels de la dignité de Donna Hicks », je soutiens que l'initiative de mise en place d'un cercle de réparation constitue une manière simple et efficace de transformer une communauté scolaire. Ce faisant, il est possible de reconnaître, promouvoir et honorer la dignité des élèves.

Jamie¹ was a fourth-grade student at a K-8 magnet school in the Evanston / Skokie, Illinois District 65 school district. He was a sincere and thoughtful boy, but his enthusiasm for school had been dampened recently due to bullying in the classroom. On the day he first opened up about how that made him feel, I was facilitating a “sharing circle” for his class. Jamie was holding a small, smooth stone engraved with the word “strength,” which I had chosen as the circle “talking piece” and as a reminder for the students of the strength of character it takes to speak honestly and openly about one’s inner thoughts and feelings. As long as Jamie held the stone, his peers knew it was Jamie’s turn to speak and their turn to listen. I had opened the sharing circle with our regular opening ceremony, in which we took three deep breaths and intoned together: “May we walk in beauty; may our words be beautiful; may we walk in beauty.” The students then passed the “talking piece” stone around the circle and took turns responding to my questions, some light (“What’s your favourite thing to do on the weekend?”) but the final one more probing (“Tell me about a time when you’ve felt unsafe”). As we made our way around the circle to speak and listen to one another about feeling safe, some students chose to “pass,” but most took the stone eagerly and responded earnestly. When it came to Jamie, he spoke very briefly yet poignantly about feeling dehumanized at times by some people in his life, and how unsafe that made him feel. It’s probable that many of his peers were unaware of the context of his statements. But across the circle, unnoticed except by her teacher, one of Jamie’s classmates had tears in her eyes. Susan had been suspended earlier that week for bullying Jamie. Later, her teacher Amelia described to me her surprise at Susan’s reaction:

I watched her cry, and I talked to her after and I remember her saying, “I just feel so bad.” She made the connection between her actions and Jamie’s feelings, and the thing that got to her was Jamie saying he didn’t feel human. I’ve never seen her act like that before, I’ve never seen her show empathy or remorse, and I swear the suspension didn’t even shake her. But listening to Jamie in that context...it got her. That will always stay with me. (personal communication, February 26, 2016).

Jamie, Susan, and their classmates are among hundreds of schoolchildren in District 65 who have been introduced to the restorative practice of sharing circles, due to an initiative first spearheaded by social workers from the Evanston Police Department in collaboration with District 65 educators and community volunteers. The practice of community members communicating together in a ritualized circle is a deeply rooted tradition of Indigenous peoples, including the First Nation peoples of Canada and Native American tribes (Umbreit, 2003). Today, this ancient communication structure is frequently employed under the rubric of restorative justice as a response to wrongdoing, to facilitate the coming together of injured and injuring parties to respectfully share their experiences, repair harm and restore broken relationships. Follow-

ing the successful adoption of reactive peace-making circles as a response to youth conflict, chronic truancy and non-violent crimes, the Evanston Police Department Youth Services Bureau decided to partner with District 65 to teach circle competency and introduce restorative justice principles and practices to Evanston and Skokie students more generally. This is in line with an emerging trend of adopting restorative justice practices in school settings more expansively, not only as a response to specific infractions and behavioural incidents, but also with a view to proactively preventing misbehaviour and conflict by improving school and classroom climate, building a sense of community, and strengthening relationships between students and teachers (Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2014).

Educators have long emphasized the importance of school climate and community building to the social and emotional wellbeing, behaviour and competency of students. In recent years, growing attention has been paid to the use of restorative practices in school settings to these ends (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2009; Reistenberg, 2012; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), and there is mounting evidence of the positive influence of restorative practices on school climate, student connectedness and pro-social behaviour (Gray & Drewery, 2011; Gregory et al., 2014; Lewis, 2009). However, implementing restorative practices in schools formally and systematically is not a simple process. For example, in the United States, the restorative school climate movement has been led by the International Institute for Restorative Practices, which offers a formal two-year whole-school implementation program. The program aims for 100% staff participation in eleven key restorative practices, with a view to ensuring school-wide improvements in climate and relationships (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2011). The program is comprehensive, detailed and rigorous; it also requires schools to commit significant time and funding to training and implementation. The District 65 approach, by comparison, has been informal and incremental, focusing initially on introducing teachers and students to just one restorative practice: sharing circles. Volunteers from the community are sent into each classroom, school by school, to help teachers implement 10-week sharing circle programs. These volunteers have been trained in the philosophy of restorative justice and circle facilitation, and provided with age-appropriate circle guidelines and discussion topics that reflect restorative values and ideals. Following on from this initial exposure to proactive community-building circles, the restorative practices rollout continues with a second phase focused on training teachers on how to implement reactive restorative practices, such as peace-making circles and “informal restorative interactions,” into the classroom. By relying on an extensive network of community volunteers, and with initial training and facilitation organized by the Evanston Police Department, this has been a relatively cost-effective way of introducing restorative principles gradually and organically in elementary and middle school classrooms across the district. The

circles initiative has also been an effective way of demonstrating the benefits of restorative practices generally to educators, parents and students, which has resulted in an increase in the school district's commitment to and financial support for restorative practices over the years. The initiative has now been taken over by a full-time District 65 restorative practices coordinator, who is supported by a large team of community volunteers.

SHARING CIRCLES AS A PROACTIVE RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

The basic premise of the classroom sharing circle as a proactive restorative practice is that student behaviour, character, and social and emotional competence is improved when they feel connected to an inclusive, supportive, and respectful community. Circles can be used to this end both procedurally and substantively. Procedurally, circles enhance connectedness and community by providing a safe space for students to share opinions, concerns and feelings openly with one another. Facilitators can also intentionally raise substantive discussion topics for shared exploration that prompt students to reflect on restorative values, such as empathy, respect, personal accountability, community and dignity.

These proactive community-building aims are reflected in the structural elements of sharing circles. Before each sharing circle, students are reminded of the circle guidelines, which are designed to ensure circles embody and promote restorative principles. Participants sit in a circle to convey equality, transparency, and joint ownership of the process. A "talking piece," ideally an object that holds meaning for participants, is used to represent the right to speak and the obligation of others to listen, and to remind participants to be self-controlled, respectful, honest and open. Students are asked to "speak and listen with their hearts" and are reminded that "what happens in circle stays in circle," to help create a space where students feel respected, safe, and free to be vulnerable.

An important objective of the District 65 sharing circle curriculum is to teach students and teachers the basic premises and format of sharing circles, in order to smooth the way for teachers and aides to use circles more reactively, in response to individual incidents (formal peace circles) and classroom-wide problem solving (responsive circles). By teaching students restorative principles such as the presumption of respect and self-advocacy skills, they are better equipped to resolve future conflicts and communicate issues and concerns. Other uses for sharing circles include lessons, classroom meetings and as "check-ins" at the start of each day. Many District 65 teachers, after being trained by volunteer circle facilitators, have begun using sharing circles for a range of classroom activities. For example, Amelia, my sharing circle classroom teacher, was so impressed with the method that she began using circles on a daily basis as a means for checking in with her students before beginning lessons:

I wanted to start the day with a better understanding of what their attitude was when they walked through the door. Because if I don't know that they're feeling like a one or a two [on a happiness scale of one to five] in the morning and they're goofing around, I get frustrated. But when I know that they came in not feeling great, I can relate to them and show more understanding – “I know you had a tough morning this morning and we need to push through this together.”... Hearing them [in sharing circle] helps me understand who they are and where they're coming from when they come to my classroom, and that makes it much easier to teach them and connect with them. (personal communication, February 26, 2016).

Amelia has noticed a dramatic improvement in both classroom climate and in her ability to handle disruptive behavioural situations since she began using check-in circles on a daily basis.

USING A DIGNITY FRAMEWORK TO EVALUATE PROACTIVE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

There is ample research pointing to the benefit of restorative justice circles as a response to disruptive behaviour in schools (Alfred & Bendich, 2012; Coates, Umbreit & Vos, 2003; Dubin, 2015; Gray & Drewery, 2011; Harrison, 2007; Wong, Cheng, Ngan & Ma, 2011; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004). Further, as noted above, a growing body of research points to the impact of proactive restorative practices, including sharing circles, on school climate and community. For example, in Canada, the Nova Scotia Restorative Justice Program has begun implementing restorative practices, including circles, in numerous schools throughout the province, resulting in reported shifts in student involvement, staff satisfaction, and discipline referrals (Shafer & Mirsky, 2011). Advocates of restorative practices also highlight the effectiveness of sharing circles as a pedagogical tool for teaching social and emotional competencies such as active listening, empathy and respect for others (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Reistenberg, 2012).

Building on these arguments in favour of school restorative practice initiatives, and as a former volunteer sharing circle facilitator in District 65 who is also a legal scholar interested in child rights, I am struck by the potential for proactive restorative practices such as sharing circles as a tool for intentionally and actively acknowledging, promoting, and honouring the dignity of students. I suggest that a dignity framework is a useful additional way to explore the impact and potential of sharing circles on individuals and communities within schools. The idea of human dignity is “one of the key concepts which underpins and informs the human rights enterprise” (McCrudden, 2008, p. 656). The meaning of the concept is arguably contestable, but at a minimum dignity requires recognition of the intrinsic worth of every person (McCrudden, 2008; Hicks, 2011). According to the Kantian moral outlook, this requires treating people not as means to an end, but as ends in themselves, thereby respecting their autonomy and personhood. This notion of dignity is reflected in what Ted

Wachtel (2013) described as the fundamental unifying hypothesis of restorative practices: that “human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them” (p. 3).

In her treatise on the role and power of dignity in everyday contexts, including the classroom, Hicks (2011) argued that “our desire for dignity is our highest common denominator” (p. 17). She also noted that “the actions and reactions of dignity need to be learned” (p. 18). Sharing circles are an ideal response to both the desire of students to be treated with dignity, and the need to teach students to treat one another with dignity. As explored below, each of Hicks’ “ten essential elements of dignity” can be embodied and imparted in the sharing circle structure:

1. *Acceptance of identity.* Dignity is upheld when people feel free to express their true selves without fear of denigration. In the sharing circle, students are taught to listen to one another with an open mind, accepting the learned perspectives and experiences of others without judgment.
2. *Inclusion.* The sharing circle is a storytelling forum, which emphasizes active listening and respect. This allows students to experience connection with one another by uncovering commonalities, an experience that validates each participant’s “intrinsic worth as a human being” (Pranis, 2001, p. 8) and helps “stimulate an ability to take other people into account as equally valued members of the class group” (Macready, 2009, p. 218). Personal narratives break down barriers that hold people apart from each other (Pranis, 2001, p. 7). Circles give everybody a sense that their voice is heard in their community, and help democratize the classroom (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013, p. 62).
3. *Safety.* Students in my sharing circle emphasized that they felt safe to speak freely about their feelings and opinions. In such a context of equality and respect, students experience circles as a place where they are safe from humiliation and judgment, and free to be vulnerable.
4. *Acknowledgement.* Restorative practices emphasize the importance of showing respect by fully listening, validating, and responding to others, in this way prioritizing “knowledge of the other” and “inter-dependence” over self-knowledge and independence (Macready, 2009, p. 215). Devoting classroom time to sharing circles is an effective way for teachers to actively demonstrate to students that their feelings, thoughts and experiences are worthy of acknowledgement. As Amelia put it, “sharing circles sent a big message to my kids: that your voice is strong and your voice deserves to be heard and that it’s OK to feel the way that you feel.” On the other hand, as Hicks (2011) puts it, if children are silenced, “they learn that their feelings and experiences don’t matter. For them, that translates into ‘I don’t matter’” (p. 119).

5. *Recognition.* Sharing circles provide a forum in which teachers and students can give recognition to one another's contributions and ideas. Students are encouraged to listen actively to one another with an open mind, and frequently respond to each other with implied or express affirmation and validation. Sharing circles demonstrate to students that their feelings are legitimate and worthy of recognition. As one student in my sharing circle in Evanston put it, circle taught her "that it is OK to feel mad, sad, upset, happy, grumpy, tired, silly, and kind."
6. *Fairness:* Sharing circles embody fairness, by using the talking piece to ensure each participant has an opportunity to be heard. In this way, each individual is empowered and treated as an equal (Coates et al., 2003, p. 266; Macready, 2009, p. 218).
7. *Benefit of the doubt:* By bringing students into closer community with one another, students are encouraged to trust one another and assume good intentions. A sharing circle curriculum that encourages reflection and discussion on root causes of behaviour is a useful way of teaching students to give their peers and broader networks the benefit of the doubt.
8. *Understanding:* Children who learn to express their beliefs, emotions, and experiences will be more likely to feel that they are understood. By practicing such active listening in sharing circles, students gain understanding of the complexity of human motivations and develop empathy for those around them. As one student in my sharing circle remarked, looking back on the circle experience, "I have learned that if you want to be heard, then listen to other people."
9. *Independence.* Sharing circles are an opportunity for students to find their voice. Although circles emphasize community and interdependence, the competencies learned in circle time also empower students to self-advocate and take greater control of their lives.
10. *Accountability.* Accountability is a key premise of restorative practices. As Morrison, Blood and Thorsborne (2005) noted, restorative practices aim to "create a context wherein individuals can take responsibility" (p. 338). Circles provide a forum for students to acknowledge their own violations and hurtful behaviours, fostering a "tolerable level of shame" (Hicks, 2011, p. 22) and thus personal growth. As students embark on this process together and learn more about one another, "they can also develop a sense of shared authority / ownership over the classroom climate to increase accountability" (Gregory et al., 2014, p. 5).

CONCLUSION

One student I was honoured to meet with in sharing circle was Alex, an incredibly quiet boy who spent most of the sharing circle program passing on his turn with the talking piece. According to his teacher, Amelia, Alex only seemed capable of expressing one emotion, anger, and she had been struggling with how to address his outbursts since the beginning of the school year. But once she started using circles for morning check-ins, Amelia came to realize that Alex was having a very difficult and lonely time at home, which helped her adjust her approach to his anger issues. We also noticed that slowly but surely, over the course of the ten-week sharing circle curriculum, Alex was very occasionally speaking up, cautiously and bravely experimenting with articulating feelings other than anger. At the conclusion of our program, he wrote me a note about his experience in circle: “You taught me how we should treat each other.... You taught me how to talk in front of people. What I like the most about you is you showed how you felt, you told me personal stuff in your life. You taught me how to show feelings.”

As Alex’s experience shows, sharing circles are a simple and potentially very effective means of helping students discover their voice and learn to self-advocate. Hicks (2011) argued that children, like all people, experience dignity when they are treated as worthy (p. 155). Indigenous people groups have long understood the circle as a space of equality, connectedness, empowerment, and dignity. As schools continue to embrace restorative practices as a means of transforming school climate and student behaviour, circles can be used to actively create a safe space where children feel seen, heard, and understood, and as such are acknowledged as inherently worthy. In this way, circles and other restorative practices have the potential to help create classrooms that are dignity-enhancing communities. Of course, circles are just one of a list of skills that can be implemented as part of a movement towards a restorative school climate that emphasizes respect, collaboration and relationships (Macready, 2009; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). But this snapshot of the District 65 sharing circles program shows that even an incremental, one-practice-at-a-time approach to restorative practices can have a meaningful impact on students and teachers alike.

NOTES

1. All student and teacher names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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