Athabasca University Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN AN ONTARIO SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

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Introduction

According to *Wikipedia, The Free On-Line Encyclopedia,* restorative justice "is commonly known as a theory of criminal justice that focuses on crime as an act against another individual or community rather than the state." This idea of the importance of community is key to the concept of restorative justice. As the *MAIS 603: Community Development Course Guide* writes:

> Dispassionate processes of law and the courts, as well as the official justice mechanisms such as probation and parole, still leave many offenders and victims disconnected from their communities, from attachment to local values, and from concern for other human beings. Community development processes opened several channels from the early 1970s to the present in which offenders, their victims, their communities, and other stakeholders can participate in healing, discussion, decision making, and other aspects of correction and rehabilitation (31).

With the above in mind, from my perspective as a school administrator—currently, I am the lone vice-principal of a grade 9 to 12 Ontario secondary school with a student body of 925 students—restorative justice is an approach to discipline where the offender, the offender's parents, the victims, the victims' parents and school staff are all part of the process. Offenders come to understand the true consequences of their actions, and all parties, including the victim, then have a say in identifying ways the offender can repair the harm that has been done.

As a vice-principal, the value of restorative justice is that it leverages conflict as a learning opportunity for students. It dissembles the autocratic nature of authority in my

school by stressing less importance on punishment and stressing more importance on supporting victims and offenders. Restorative justice has proven itself to be important to me because it helps to build trusting relationships between students and adults in my school setting while fostering a sense of ownership in dealing with conflict.

The restorative justice approach is a shift in how communities think about crime and punishment. With this in mind, the paper that follows will have three sections, with each section examining the following three questions: Section One: Why restorative justice?; Section Two: How have restorative justice practices changed the way schools' deal with "crime and punishment"?; and, Section Three: What effect have restorative justice practices had on my District School Board and secondary school? In addition, Section One will offer an Introduction to the reader on the concept of restorative justice.

Section One

Community is a concept that means different things to different people. We often make use of the word in a general sense to refer to our neighbors, our work, and our schools; in short, our world. Despite our habitual use of the word, many of us seem to feel that we have lost touch with our sense of community. The sense of community that previous generations had is often not as present today. A lack of community, Howard Zehr writes in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, "is particularly a problem in cultures where traditional communities have eroded, as is true in much of the United States" (27). People just do not feel as connected with others as they once did. There are many reasons for this: extended families live further apart than ever before, divorce rates

are high, many careers demand that people have to move before they can put down roots, and the trend towards bigness and consolidation has resulted in the growth of big box superstores, multinational corporations, big governments and sprawling suburbs (Rubin and Rubin, p.3-6).

Government has tried many initiatives to foster a sense of community. However, government itself is not community. " 'Community policing,' " writes Ted Wachtel in *Real Justice: How We Can Revolutionize Our Response To Wrongdoing*, "…involves an administrative decision to create a storefront police substation or shift police from riding in cars to foot patrol or riding on bicycles. The police administration usually does not involve citizens in the decision-making or implementation, so there is rarely a sense of connection…efforts that carry the 'community' label usually produce superficial results because government sees community as simply part of its geographic location" (193).

Schools, too, can unerringly promote a lack of community for many of their students through their discipline policies. Schools do not purposefully set out to hurt their students but they often operate under the false assumption that punishment causes students to magically change their ways. The end result of detentions, suspensions and expulsions—the latter two became much more prevalent in Ontario's schools after the passing of the provincial Conservative's *Safe Schools Act* (1999)—is a growing number of young people who see themselves as outcasts. The standard school disciplinary approach, as Wachtel writes, "provide[s] little or no opportunity for reintegration—for making amends, apologizing, repairing the harm or shedding the offender label. They exclude from the disciplinary process those most affected by the offense—the offenders, victims and their respective communities of care" (124).

This tendency to punish youth without giving much thought to reintegration—in the school's case through suspensions and expulsions and in the Justice System through incarceration—was a major impetus behind the Department of Justice's decision to replace the *Young Offender's Act (YOA)* with the *Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA).* The introduction of the *YCJA* in April 2003 followed an exhaustive amount of review and discussion by Federal-Provincial-Territorial task forces, House of Commons standing committees and Department of Justice focus groups. All these reviews and discussions concluded that the *YOA* had some significant problems, including:

- Incarceration is overused—Canada has the highest youth incarceration rate in the Western World, including the United States.
- The courts are over-used for minor cases that can be dealt with better outside the courts.
- The *YOA* does not ensure effective reintegration of a young person after being released from custody.
- The system does not give sufficient recognition to the concerns and interests of victims (*The Youth Criminal Justice Act: Summary and Background,* 2).

The *YCJA* addresses these problems by taking a broader approach, which includes: "significantly increased federal funding to the provinces and territories, crime prevention efforts, effective programs, innovative approaches, research, and public education partnerships with other sectors (such as education, child welfare and mental health)" (*The Youth Criminal Justice Act: Summary and Background,* 2). The restorative justice approach to crime is an example of such a partnership "with other sectors".

My District School Board—Kawartha Pine Ridge—is working collaboratively with the Ministry of Child and Youth Services to make restorative justice in our Board a reality. Bruce Schenk, a Chaplin and restorative justice practitioner with the Ministry's Alternative Custody Unit, has been seconded to the Board to help roll out the program with local police services and youth-centered organizations such as Rebound Youth

Services, Eastview Boys and Girls Club and Kinark. Schenk's efforts will help to ensure that all groups that interact and work with the schools will be following the same philosophy when it comes to dealing with unacceptable behaviors.

The restorative justice philosophy that my Board has chosen to follow is the Real Justice model. Real Justice bases its teachings on the approaches—started in 1991—taken to policing in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, Australia, by Police Sergeant Terry O'Connell. O'Connell had heard about successful restorative processes occurring in New Zealand and decided to take a closer look. In New Zealand, restorative justice has been legislated since 1989. Restorative practices had been around for centuries in New Zealand and originate from the indigenous people of New Zealand, the Maori. A Maori proverb sums up their approach quite nicely: "A child not taught properly is the shame of the elders and the shame of the child."

O'Connell found the old fashioned approach of crime/blame/punishment just was not working as well as he would like. "We need to get away from assigning blame," he explains. "You don't make kids accountable for unacceptable behavior by punishment…the prisons are full of individuals who swear it wasn't their fault and insist they have been treated unfairly by the system" (Beneteau, 1).

The success of the Real Justice approach hinges on asking explicit questions in a common language everyone can understand, in order to get to the root of the problem. Whether an incident involves bullying, a fight, theft or vandalism, the questions remain standard. The questions, as found in *The New Real Justice Training Manual* on pages 58 and 59, are:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking of at the time?

- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done and in what way?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

This process allows the offending students to understand, take responsibility for and come to grips with the consequences and the hurt their actions have caused. Restorative practices, through the use of conferencing, also give all parties a say in identifying what needs to be done to repair the damage.

Restorative justice provides the building blocks students desperately need to learn how to deal with conflict. Society in general and the school system in particular has, according to O'Connell, "never been good in dealing with emotions or conflict, yet life is all about learning to deal with these very issues" (Beneteau, 8). "We need to teach our children that you don't need to love everybody nor be everyone's best friend," O'Connell says, "rather, we need to model behaviors that allow our kids to co-exist while taking ownership of their actions, thus creating an environment that nurtures and builds healthy relationships" (Beneteau, 8).

O'Connell claims that in the fifteen years he has been involved with Real Justice, he has seen time and again that schools that consistently engage in restorative practices create safer environments where incidents like bullying are dramatically reduced (Beneteau, 8). A safer school community grounded in empathy and good relationships can only lead to increased learning opportunities for all. The restorative justice approach is transformative and focuses on repairing the harm done to the victim instead of looking for retribution. Art Lockhart and Lynn Zammit in *Restorative Justice, Transforming Society* illustrate this dichotomy:

Retributive	**Restorative**
-Violent act violates policy/statute/ code of conduct;	-Violent act violates people/ relationships/community;
-Focus on the offence;	-Focus on the obligation of offender to make amends;
-Punishment decided externally;	-Plan for reparation of harm decided by those affected by the incident;
-Offender is defined by deficits;	-Offender is defined by capacity to make reparation to the victims;
-Focus on offender and incident;	-Focus on victim and reconciliation of all parties;
-Focus on removal of offender from school and community.	-Focus on reintegration of the offender with necessary supports.

From the above, it can be seen that restorative justice is much more than a program. Rather, it is a system-wide change on how conflict is dealt with across the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Boards' 100-plus schools and in its dealings with students, teachers and administrators. Whether a fight in the schoolyard or a staff dispute or disagreement, the question format with all-party participation remains the same. As Kawartha Pine Ridge Superintendent Maureen Moloney says, "The key is empowerment and building an environment where every individual feels they are valued, that they belong and that their opinions and feelings are respected" (Beneteau, 8).

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the impetus for the restorative justice movement in the schools comes from the *YCJA*. Experience in Canada and other countries (New Zealand, Australia) has shown that measures outside the court process

can provide effective responses to less serious youth crime. One of the main goals of the *YCJA,* according to *The Youth Criminal Justice Act: Summary and Background* is:

> …to increase the use of effective and timely non-court responses to less serious offences by youth. These extrajudicial measures provide meaningful consequences, such as requiring the young person to repair the harm done to the victim. They also allow early intervention with young people and provide the opportunity for the broader community to play an important role in developing community-based responses to youth crime. Increasing the use of non-court responses not only improves the response to less serious youth crime, it also enables the courts to focus on more serious cases (4).

My District School Board, through its restorative justice initiative, is one example of a "community based response" to youth misbehavior. Like the *YCJA*, and its efforts to look for non-court responses to allow the courts to focus on more serious cases, restorative justice allows the schools to find alternatives to suspending and expelling while leaving these important discipline measures as a last resort for the most serious of behavior infractions.

There may be some who believe restorative justice is a "soft approach" when dealing with students who get themselves into trouble. However, according to Bruce Schenk, this belief is completely unfounded, "…expectations of acceptable behavior are and will be maintained and in some instances, consequences such as suspensions may be doled out in addition to the restorative practice process" (Beneteau, 8). Nevertheless, despite the outcome of each individual case, the restorative justice approach will ensure that fair, equal and respectful treatment for all involved will occur.

Now that a definition of restorative justice has been arrived at, its importance to me as a secondary school administrator has been discussed and an answer to the first research question: "Why restorative justice?" has been explored, the next step is to ask

"How have restorative justice practices changed the way schools' deal with 'crime and punishment'? An exploration of this question follows in this paper's next section.

Section Two

As Todd Gribbon, Sean Ruddy and Jeff Thornborrow write, in *The CAP Journal* article "Restorative Justice: Building Relationships, Building Communities", "[b]uilding trusting relationships and strong communities is central to the work of all school administrators" (32). How an administrator goes about building trusting relationships and strong communities depends, in part, upon their philosophy of education. A philosophy that follows the restorative justice tenets of inclusiveness and ownership of one's actions will have a positive effect in moving a school's culture from the old-fashioned retributive (punishment) approach to a restorative (supportive) approach towards student interaction (Gribbon, Ruddy and Thornborrow, 32).

A restorative approach has become even more important with the introduction by the Ontario Government of Bill 52 in December 2006 and Bill 212 in June 2007. These two Bills require a change in the way school boards work with students. While the adjustment phase is still ongoing—it is a process, not an event—some important changes in how Ontario's schools function have occurred.

Bill 52 is an Act to amend the Ontario Education Act respecting pupil learning to the age of eighteen. In Ontario, age sixteen has been changed to read age eighteen in all areas regarding compulsory attendance. As a result, the Bill requires students who would have left school for other pursuits at age sixteen, to be enrolled in school until age

eighteen or graduation (whichever comes first). This has proved to be a difficult adjustment for many students who otherwise would have left school at an earlier age.

Bill 212 is an Act to amend the Ontario Education Act respecting behavior, discipline and safety for Ontario's students. The Bill addresses—amongst other things—putting in place prevention and early intervention strategies to address inappropriate student behavior and providing programs and supports for students who have been expelled or suspended for six or more days to facilitate their successful return to school. The Bill requires that all of Ontario's publicly funded school boards offer programs for expelled students and those on long-term suspension by February 1, 2008.

With Bill 52 there is potential for an increase in the number of students not overly interested in school (compulsory attendance until age eighteen) and, as a result, more students displaying behaviors that could lead to suspension and expulsion. This possibility, when partnered with school board responsibility—due to Bill 212—for putting in place prevention and early intervention strategies to address inappropriate student behavior, presents an opportunity for restorative justice to be embraced by Ontario's school boards on a grand scale.

In the past, schools have been strongly retributive in their approach to managing student misbehavior. Common practice was to implement a progressive discipline policy where student behavior code infractions resulted in an ever-increasing level of punishment from office referrals for a discussion with an administrator to suspensions and expulsions. Schools relied on this process to alter and change student misbehavior (Gribbon, Ruddy, Thornborrow, 33). However, this practice provided little or no opportunity for students to properly reintegrate back into schools or for students to

change their misbehaviors (Wachtel, 123-125). For schools to follow the intent of Bill 212, opportunities for students who have misbehaved to properly reintegrate and change their misbehaviors must be provided. Restorative justice practices allow students who have misbehaved the opportunity to access early intervention strategies to settle disputes and pursue their education.

For this change in how schools deal with discipline, administrators utilizing a restorative framework need to assist their staff in making a paradigm shift in the way they view and resolve conflict in schools (Gribbon, Ruddy and Thornborrow, 33). Gribbon, Ruddy and Thornborrow reference Howard Zehr's seminal book on restorative justice: *Changing Lenses* (1990) and write "…that a paradigm, a construction of reality, shapes the lens through which we understand, determine and resolve conflicts in schools. Zehr (1990) argues that a paradigm, a construction of reality, shapes the lens through which we understand, determine and resolve conflicts, as well as construct what we know to be possible and impossible" (33). Having a school make the switch in philosophy from a "retributive lens" to a "restorative lens" requires that the school community, as Gribbon, Ruddy and Thornborrow quoting Zehr's *Changing Lenses* write, shifts its views on misbehavior from: "(1) focusing on blame-fixing to problem solving; (2) focusing on the past to focusing on the future; (3) focusing on punishment to focusing on repairing harm; (4) neglecting victims' needs to victims' needs being central; (5) neglecting offenders to offenders being given a role; (6) neglecting victim-offender relationships to victim-offender relationships being central" (33).

For this paradigm shift to occur, the entire school community needs restorative justice training so that all stakeholders can better understand restorative justice's main

principles. My District School Board provided this training for all staff and students during the school day and had evening sessions for interested parents and community members. These sessions were important because if we, as administrators, fail to communicate what our philosophy is around school discipline then we will face difficulties in creating a school culture where restorative justice principles are followed.

These sentiments were echoed in a workshop I attended on Friday, November 17, 2006 at the Ontario Principals' Council's annual Odyssey Conference at Toronto's Downtown Sheraton Hotel. At the conference, Sean Ruddy, a vice-principal, and Jeff Thornborrow, a social worker, gave a workshop on restorative practices in the Near North District School Board (North Bay and Parry Sound Area). In their community, there was a call for change in how the school dealt with discipline issues. This call was strongest amongst their First Nations communities. The First Nations community's concept of justice includes healing circles and restorative practices similar to those of New Zealand's Maori. After listening to this call for change, restorative justice was something the Near North District School Board decided to pursue with the aid of the Ministry of Child and Youth Services who provided the funding for Jeff Thornborrow's services (similar to my board and Bruce Schenk).

In 2005, the Near North District School Board ran a pilot project for restorative justice at Almaguin Highlands Secondary School (South River), where Sean Ruddy is the vice-principal. According to Thornborrow and Ruddy, ensuring that all stakeholders were made aware of the process and were offered the chance to participate if required was a key to its success. In a similar approach to my District School Board's, they trained all staff, students and interested parents and community members at their

secondary school in restorative justice. The community sessions were particularly well attended, in part because there was a real desire from segments of their community to incorporate restorative justice into school discipline policies.

While my District School Board is the first board in Ontario to undertake restorative justice for an entire board, (we started in 2006), the Near North District School Board, while only having one school involved in 2005 and, increasing the project to two more secondary schools in 2007, does have one more year of experience. As a result, an exploration of their data is most interesting and hopeful.

In 2005, at Almaguin Highlands Secondary School, they ran five restorative justice conferences with thirty-one participants in total. Two suspensions were shortened as a result of the conferencing and most impressive of all was the 0% recidivism rate for all students involved in the five conferences! Many people are wary of the time commitment conferencing can entail. However, according to the preliminary data, it seems like it is time well invested if the issues resolved in the conferences do not need to be dealt with repeatedly.

Definitive data to support restorative justice's effectiveness is not there yet—it is still in its developmental stages in many of Ontario's school boards—however, there is plenty of hope. Melodie McCullough's article in *Professionally Speaking: The Magazine of the Ontario College of Teachers:* "Restoring Justice for Safer Schools" shares this sense of hope: "[a]dministrators say the hard data isn't there yet to show whether or how well restorative justice is working, but there have been plenty of positive reports…in the Waterloo board, suspensions are down" (57). McCullough quotes Lynn Zammit, a Restorative Justice Project Coordinator from the Waterloo Region District School Board,

"I have no faith that suspensions teach students emotional and social skills, which is what they're missing in the first place that's causing the problems. We are in the education business, so I would like to think that, even in the most severe cases of school discipline, there's still an opportunity to be educators and teach" (57).

Support for Zammit's sentiments about the importance of restorative justice conferences is also found in the *YCJA*. *The Youth Criminal Justice Act: Summary and Background* writes, "[t] he *YCJA* authorizes and encourages the convening of conferences to assist decision-makers in the youth justice system" (6). Often, in my role as vice-principal, I work with the police to help resolve disputes. My school is assigned a police liaison officer and restorative justice conferencing and extra judicial measures are things my police officer often encourages to avoid laying charges as the *YCJA* "requires police officers to consider the use of extrajudicial measures before deciding to charge a young person" (*The Youth Criminal Justice Act: Summary and Background*, 6).

When school administrators and the police work together through the mechanism of restorative justice both of these traditionally authoritarian groups can be seen in a new and positive light by our students. Restorative justice's power lies in breaking down the autocratic face of authority in schools by placing less importance on punishment and more importance on supporting victims and offenders. This is the approach that allows students and authority figures to build trusting relationships and fosters a sense of community ownership of problems and their solutions.

The purpose of Section One was to explore the concept of restorative justice. Section Two's purpose was to explore the question "How have restorative justice practices changed the way schools' deal with 'crime and punishment'"? With the

introduction by the Ontario government of Bills 52 and 212, a shift in how schools deal with student discipline is required. A shift from a retributive to a restorative approach is gradually becoming the ideal and the benefits of this shift and examples of its successes were discussed. The next and, final section of this essay, will bring its focus closer to my day-to-day realities as a vice-principal, by exploring the following question: "What effect have restorative justice practices had with my District School Board and secondary school?"

Section Three

In the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board our other large initiative in addition to restorative justice, is Character Education, which is sometimes referred to as social responsibility or moral intelligence. Michelle Borba in *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Kids To Do The Right Thing*, suggests ways to develop good character in our young people. She defines character, what she calls "moral intelligence," in terms of seven core virtues: empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. My board personalized Borba's work and after a lengthy consultation process with our schools and community settled on ten character attributes: respect, honesty, empathy, initiative, courage, responsibility, integrity, fairness, perseverance and optimism. That these ten core values are also underlying tenets of the restorative justice philosophy further reinforces the importance of a restorative justice approach in our schools towards discipline.

For several centuries and until recently, the evolution of human thought has emphasized intellect and reason. Our society, writes Ted Wachtel, "has disparaged emotion as a weakness, an unpleasant reality that humans should strive to overcome with thoughtfulness and intelligence" (186). However, philosophies are changing. Society is beginning to see the role emotion plays in our lives. Daniel Goleman, longtime science writer for *The New York Times*, said that "emotional intelligence" is a far better indicator of success and well-being than intellectual intelligence. Goleman's influential book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, claims our abilities to emphasize, to understand and appreciate the emotional needs of others, (think of Character Education), is a key component of emotional intelligence (Wachtel, 186). Restorative justice conferencing fosters and encourages precisely this ability.

Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people cannot address their higher needs until their basic needs have been met. Therefore, as Rick Hugh and Jenni Lynnea in *Restorative Justice in Schools in Surrey, British Columbia* write "a person's essential physiological needs must be met before [they] will consider such higher needs as security, belonging, esteem and ultimately self-actualization" (10). Transferring this analogy to a school, the need for safety and feelings of security that accompanies a positive school discipline approach must be satisfied before the school can address such higher needs as a relevant curriculum, effective teacher instruction and the ultimate goal: student success (Hugh and Lynnea, 10).

Since 1999 and Ontario's *Safe Schools Act*, a "zero tolerance" culture has invaded the schools. Unfortunately, to some, zero tolerance means expulsion from school. I disagree and like the saying that "zero tolerance is zero thinking." Zero tolerance should

mean that we do not ignore the behavior just that our means of dealing with the inappropriate or unacceptable behavior has changed from being retributive to becoming more restorative. An equal balance of empathy and consequences should replace punishment whenever possible because as a school board we are educational not punitive in nature. As Hugh and Lynnea write, "I recently saw a phrase used in describing old furniture that I had to write down because it fit so well when applied to youth in zero tolerance situations: 'Restore, not replace'" (10).

With this in mind, some examples of avoiding "zero thinking" by attempting to "restore, not replace" when faced with student misbehavior will now follow. At Courtice Secondary School, four formalized restorative justice conferences were convened during the school's second semester (February to June 2008). One conference, which was comprised of eleven participants including: students, parents, siblings and administrators, worked together to find a peaceful resolution for two girls in grade nine.

The two girls engaged in a fight at lunch—right outside my office—which I broke up. After separating the girls and giving them a chance to calm down, I spoke to them on an individual basis and quickly arrived at the conclusion that both girls were friends and quite angry, shocked and upset that they had come to blows. Faced with this information, I decided that a restorative justice conference would be appropriate for the girls to attempt to resolve their differences in a more peaceful way. I also hoped that a successful conference would avoid any future negative fallout: another fight between the girls or, as sometimes happens, their friends picking sides, which can lead to more negative behavior including fighting, name-calling, bullying and shunning.

During the conference, all sides had a chance to hear one another out in a controlled environment where everyone was presented with the opportunity to talk: one voice at a time. Here we learned that many of the things that the girls' thought had been said about them by the other were in fact the result of the "rumor mill" and negative peer pressure. Inappropriate use of technology, specifically MSN Mail and Face Book played a major role in the creation of all the negative feelings that led to the fight. The girls were able to see that their actions did have consequences, discovered the power and appropriate use of technology, realized that their parents loved and supported them and most importantly that they still wished to be friends. The conference ended with the girls embracing in a tearful hug.

Upon reflection, one of the girl's parents contacted the school to share that she was pleased with the process. Initially, she was hesitant to participate because she was upset that her daughter—who had been hit first—was, in her opinion, being unfairly blamed for the fight. However, after hearing all the things the girls had said and done—in their own words—she realized that both girls were at fault. She was happy that an opportunity to "find out what was really happening" was provided and was most pleased that both girls were able to resolve their difficulties and salvage their friendship. In addition, one of the girls commented that she thought that everyone had a voice at the conference and that the presence of the adults "really showed that they cared."

As the above restorative justice conference illustrates, inappropriate use of technology is becoming more prevalent in an educational setting. In one particular instance, a student had posted disparaging comments about a teacher's sexual orientation on a website. In replacement of a suspension, the school conducted a restorative justice

conference involving the student and his parents, the teacher and her partner, the police and a school administrator.

The teacher stated that the student made some good reflections and showed remorse. The student also offered to help repair the harm by removing the offending material from the website and apologizing to the victims. The teacher later commented that more was gained by having a circle then by simply suspending the student. The teacher was pleased that she and her partner were given full opportunity to discuss how the student's actions had made them feel and that the student was brave enough to hear her out with his parents present and offered to make amends. The teacher's feelings about the student were that "he got it" and that he would not do something like this again. If the student had simply been suspended she doubted that in the future he would not do it again.

In the last while, my school board, like others throughout North America, has sought to comprehend what motivates young people to commit violent and hurtful acts in school settings. Often, as Hugh and Lynnea write, "research is showing that aggression and violence is related to a lack of connection. There are simply not as many positive 'anchors' in the lives of young people—be it church, neighborhood, family, etc. We have all heard the saying 'It takes an entire village to raise a child.' One of the positive aspects of restorative practices is the fact that the likelihood of healthy connections with adults in a school or community setting is far greater" (11). The two restorative justice conferences discussed above, illustrate that taking the time to build connections with students in a school setting can be successful for all involved when we agree to make the effort and give it a try. Clearly, we as educators have a moral responsibility to address

this lack of connection that many of our students feel by striving to provide a successful education that seeks to both educate in mind and morals. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (Hugh and Lynnea, 11).

Another program that I am involved with in my school board that offers a connection to troubled or at-risk youth is "*Champions for Youth: A Community Mentoring Program*." *Champions for Youth* is a partnership among the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, community agencies (e.g. John Howard Society), the Youth Criminal Justice System, and probation officials with the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, Youth Justice Services. The program identifies students who may be at risk of dropping out of school, and matches these students with mentors from the community. My school board initiated this program with Peterborough Youth Court Justice Karen Johnston, to engage students who have had difficulties with the law and, help them to succeed academically and socially.

Students participating in the *Champions for Youth* program are aged twelve up to eighteen, and may have several of the following risk factors:

- academic concerns
- irregular attendance
- social/emotional/behavioral issues
- low aspirations for the future
- difficulties with the Youth Criminal Justice System

For students involved in *Champions for Youth*, the program strives to provide adult mentorship through regular meetings, to assist students in determining personal and academic goals, to increase school attendance, to improve student achievement, to help students reach their full potential and to reduce the likelihood of further involvement with

the Youth Criminal Justice System (*Champions for Youth* Pamphlet). As the Chair of *Champions for Youth: Clarington*, I can echo Hugh and Lynnea's comments about the importance of students feeling connected with others in their communities. Currently, after three years, *Champions for Youth* has partnered eighty-three mentors with at-risk youth. In this period of time, only two youth have re-offended. To me, this is an impressive recidivism rate and supports the importance of making connections for our youth whether through this program or a program of a similar philosophical nature such as restorative justice.

Conclusion

Restorative justice conferencing and programs like *Champions for Youth* are not a panacea. Conferencing and mentoring are not always substitutes for counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, suspensions and expulsions. Rather, restorative justice is, as Wachtel writes, "a narrowly defined way to replace arbitrary punishment for wrongdoing. That's all" (178). The participants determine the conference outcome. Other recommendations or actions that professionals might propose for the offender may occur but they are of no concern to the conference. The primary purpose of a restorative justice conference is, as Wachtel writes, "for the offender and other conference participants to agree on how to remedy the harm that was done" (178).

In our current processes, offenses are defined as violations against the Crown or the school. As a result, the criminal justice system and the schools fail to repair the harm done to individuals and communities. Very little attention is focused on healing as the

focus is on punishment. As Wachtel writes, "relying on punishment in courts and schools, we stigmatize offenders and create outcasts. Punishment does not foster understanding and empathy for victims, it fosters resentment and alienation. How ironic that offenders see themselves as victims" (204). The beauty of the restorative justice approach is that people see the results of their actions, gain a sense of connection and responsibility and often show remorse and a willingness to make things right. When this occurs, the likelihood of re-offending is low and often an administrator can legitimately lower or avoid assigning suspensions and expulsions altogether.

Clearly, this is a new approach and there can be resistance against trying to approach the age-old problem of student discipline with new methods. My Principal, addressed this with our teaching staff:

> I really don't believe that detentions (punitive actions) do anything to curb the undesirable behavior anyway. We see it every time we have a detention list—it doesn't stop kids from skipping classes…or, to correct myself, it stops certain kids who would never skip in the first place—students like I was and students like most teachers were. We wouldn't skip because then we'd miss class and then we'd be behind and not know what was expected of us or what was on the test, that meant something to us because the marks meant something because we had goals and saw a future ahead of us. I look around the room in detention sometimes and there are too many common factors among kids that go—and when we call home to speak with parents about their student not attending detention you completely understand why the kid was there in the first place.
>
> It's a circle and a huge philosophical discussion…I believe that we are not meeting the needs of all kids…not you as teachers or anyone else, but rather, we as an educational system. Nineteen per cent of students graduate and go to university; another twenty to twenty-three per cent are going to college…for them this works…because it worked for the teachers who are teaching them, me for example. Our system works for them—it was built for them for heaven's sake. What it wasn't built for is the other half of the kids in our building… "If you don't know where you're going, any road will do" is a quote I saw the other day…for too many of our kids the road just doesn't matter and they don't care what they do along the way because they see no relevance to their lives.

I have placed this lengthy quote here because I feel that it accurately illustrates the current situation in today's secondary schools. Many of our students feel disengaged and lack a connection with their school and community. Efforts must be made to counteract the disconnect that many students feel. Restorative justice is one such effort with the potential to connect and energize students who lash out in rejection against the rigid conformity that can be the education system. Attitudes and approaches are slowly starting to change. With this change, comes a sense of hope and optimism that our disenfranchised youth will be able to develop meaningful connections to their schools and communities.

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