Making Amends: A Restorative Justice Approach to Classroom Behavior

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Abstract

Enticed by developing skills that would empower students to solve problems, take responsibility for their own actions within the classroom community, and model real-life processes for resolving conflict, a team of third-grade teachers responsible for nearly 100 students embarked on creating a classroom behavior system titled *Making Amends*. Framed by social learning (CASEL, 2017) and principles of restorative justice (Evans, Lester, & Anfara, 2013), the approach promotes student-initiated protocols to resolve classroom conflicts. When harm has been caused, the offending student selects a sentence frame from the *Making Amends* binder to name the harm, take responsibility for the harm caused to persons or the classroom, and identify an action to repair the harm. As a result of the *Making Amends* system, teachers report decreased teacher involvement in resolving classroom conflicts, enhanced instructional focus by the teacher, and increased student ability to self-manage behavior and take responsibility for actions.

Classrooms are microcosms of society where children learn the social and emotional

skills necessary to become engaged citizens in society. As promoted by the Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2017), social and emotional learning in the

classroom involves the development of self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision

making, self-management, and relationship skills. Developing these skills requires that children

are provided with opportunities to recognize the impact of their behavior on others, empathize

with others, constructively engage decision-making and problem-solving processes, regulate

one's own emotions and behavior, and constructively negotiate conflict. A growing body of

research suggests that social and emotional learning initiatives enhance classroom behavior and

academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

A traditional approach to classroom discipline focuses on violation of rules, establishing

guilt, and punishment of the offender with no opportunity for remorse or amends between the

offender and victim. In contrast, a restorative approach focuses on violation of relationships, the

needs of individuals, and understanding the impact on all parties with opportunity for expression

of remorse and repairing harm between the offender and victim (San Francisco Unified School

District, n.d.). Restorative approaches assume that people make mistakes, take responsibility for

their own actions, and take action to learn from one's mistakes in building positive relationships

(Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015). Gossen (2004) refers to this restoration of relationships as

restitution, a process of reflection and healing that involves discovering who one wants to be in

relation to others and learning how to make amends to repair the hurt relationship. The

opportunity for all parties to contribute to a resolution empowers a shift from a punishment to a

repair mindset (Smith, Fisher, & Frey, 2015).

Recent studies of punitive approaches to school discipline show little evidence of

improvement to student behavior (Skiba, 2013). Meanwhile, alternative discipline and behavior

support models that emphasize relationship over punishment and that address student behavior

alongside change in school culture are gaining attention.

Restorative justice, as defined by Amstutz and Mullet (2005), "promotes values and

principles that use inclusive, collaborative approaches for being in community. These

approaches validate the experience and needs of everyone within the community, particularly

those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or harmed. These approaches allow us to act and respond in ways that are healing rather than alienating or coercive" (p. 15).

Similarly, Evans and Vaandering (2016) describe restorative justice in education as "facilitating learning communities that nurture the capacity of people to engage with one another and their environment in a manner that supports and respects the inherent dignity and worth of all" (p. 8). Both definitions value the individuals within the community and the means in which the members participate with each other and contribute to the well-being of the community.

Though empirical research on restorative practices is in the nascent stage, a few studies show positive impact of restorative justice on classroom environments. Skiba (2013) argues that social-emotional learning contributes to nonviolent school climates and provides students with alternative solutions to solving problems. Hopkins (2016) presents a case for restorative justice approaches creating conditions for developing empathy and cohesion within the community. Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz (2016) demonstrate the potential of restorative practices in creating better teacher-student relationships, improving schools, and reducing racial inequities in discipline referrals. Similarly, Armour (2015) cites an improved school climate related to student behavior and improved racial inclusivity upon the implementation of a restorative discipline approach.

This article presents a practitioner-based examination of an outdated, ineffective, and punitive behavior system and the emergence of a restorative justice approach that values community, nurtures engagement with others, and collaboratively resolves problems.

What Wasn't Working: "I haven't moved down all year."

In 2015, a team of five third-grade teachers at an elementary school with 44% limited English proficiency (HCPS, 2015) gathered for end-of-year reflection and planning for the next year. Frustrated with the ineffectiveness of their current clip system (also known as the stoplight or traffic light) in shaping positive behavior, the team brainstormed alternative approaches that would empower students to solve problems and take responsibility for their own actions within the classroom community.

Previously the team utilized a stoplight visual posted in a dominant location in the classroom. A clothespin with each student's name visibly imprinted is clipped to the green light every morning. Based on teacher observation of positive or negative behavior and choice throughout the day, the teacher directs a student to move his/her clip a step up or down. The clip system relies on the teacher noticing student behaviors and choices and thus requires teacher surveillance in reinforcing expected standards. Negative behaviors tend to attract immediate attention, and positive behaviors often go unnoticed.

Student accountability fails in a system monitored by the teacher and void of student input. Students do not connect moving their clips with any long-term decisions to replicate or change behavior. The clip system does not motivate positive behavior nor deter negative choices. The same students who were instructed to move their clips also ended the day below green. Some student clips never moved off green.

By directing students to "take a step down," the system authorized teacher aggression instead of giving constructive feedback to guide change. An incident during whole group reading instruction reinforced its shortcomings. Frustrated by a student talking to a peer during the teacher's instruction, the teacher stated: "Ellen, go take a step down." As directed, Ellen

moved her clip to yellow and returned to the rug in tears: "I haven't moved down all year." An intended quick fix to disruptive behavior resulted in loss of instructional time and emotional harm to the teacher-student relationship that endured throughout the day.

Concern for the psychological impact on students rose among the teaching team as they reflected on the shame and humiliation inherent in the clip system. Public display of the stoplight and overt directives places students in an emotionally vulnerable place at a time when they are developing self-awareness, enjoying membership in the group, and learning to take responsibility for their own actions.

The Birth of "*Making Amends*"

When the team convened for beginning-of-the-year meetings, they brainstormed goals, aspirations, and practicalities that would work differently in the classroom. Thus birthed *Making Amends*, a system designed to replicate the dispositions and skills adults use to restore a situation when harm has been caused. Sufficient components and protocols were created to launch the system, with agreement to add and revise as the year progressed.

The team drew from *Talk It Out!*, a district-wide conflict resolution program for elementary students that "focuses on resolving real-life problems that occur in most classrooms, such as teasing, put downs, pushing, hitting, cheating, gossiping, or refusing to share" ("Talk it Out!", 2017). Simultaneous to the development of *Making Amends*, the district enrolled teachers and administrators in a Restorative Justice in Education certificate program at Eastern Mennonite University to support district-wide commitment to the principles of restorative justice: creating just and equitable learning environments, building and maintaining healthy relationships, and healing harm and transforming conflict (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

The teachers developed the *Making Amends* system based on principles that repair harm, resolve conflict, and reconcile relationships (Evans, Lester, & Anfara, 2013):

- The system replicates real-life skills needed to restore relationships when harm is caused. For example, when an adult causes harm to another, restoration of the relationship involves action that is meaningful to the person who has been harmed. The adult world does not tell someone to take a step up or down based on behavior.

- The outcome mimics the action of the behavior and connects the harm with the resolution. For example, if a student puts down another student, the offender can repair harm by personally apologizing. In the clip system, a step down does not mimic the behavior.

- When someone errs, they are held accountable to repair the harm caused by the mistake. For example, if a student destroys property by writing on a table, the student can repair harm by cleaning classroom tables. In the clip system, a wrong is acknowledged without opportunity to repair harm.

The *Making Amends* System

Children's literature focused on character development and the impact of actions on others guided the development of *Making Amends* (Table 1, next page). The mainstay book *Have You Filled A Bucket Today?* features carrying an invisible, imaginary bucket that gets filled with joy from positive behaviors and sadness and loneliness from negative behaviors. The teachers applied the concept of bucket fillers and dippers in listing actions visible around the school.

Table 1

Children's literature featuring character development

- *Have You Filled A Bucket Today?* By Carol McCloud
- *Hurty Feelings* by Helen Lester
- *Just Kidding* by Trudy Ludwig
- *Pinduli* by Janell Cannon
- *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig
- *Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun* by Maria Dismondy
- *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco
- *What if Everybody Did That?* by Ellen Javernick
- *The Potato Chip Champ* by Maria Dismondy
- *My Secret Bully* by Trudy Ludwig
- *The Sandwich Swap* by Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah

A *Making Amends* binder, housed in each third-grade and specialist subject classroom, contains a title and picture of the action on the left-hand page and a sentence frame on each of five right-hand pages (Table 2). The binder guides students in choosing how to make amends when either they or a teacher identifies a mistake has been made. The verbal apology template ends with a question "Is there anything that I can do now?" to invite input from the one who has been harmed. Students are encouraged to make amends when they are ready to discuss.

Table 2

Making Amends Sentence Frames

Verbal Apology	Apology Letter	Help the Classroom	Show Appreciation	I create
I am sorry that I _____. It is wrong because _____. Next time I will _____. Is there anything that I can do now?	Dear _____, I am sorry that I _____. It is wrong because _____. Next time I will _____. Sincerely, _____	I would like to make amends to our class for _____ by _____ in the classroom. I think this is an appropriate way to make amends because it will _____.	I would like to make amends for _____. I will show my appreciation to _____ (person) by _____ (action).	I would like to make amends for _____ by _____. I think this is an appropriate way to make amends because it will _____.

Teaching Students about *Making Amends*

      Morning meeting launches the day in every classroom in this elementary school as a time to circle up, greet each other, share important information from their lives, practice social and academic skills, and focus on the day ahead (Kriete & Davis, 2014). During this time, students learned the word "amends," read *Have You Filled A Bucket Today?*, and engaged in frequent and extensive conversation, modeling, and role-playing relating to the different types of amends. Teachers emphasized the importance of matching the amends to the harm that was caused. For example:

- Verbal Apology or Apology Letter: If a student said or did something that upset someone, such as putting down someone, he or she could make amends by speaking or writing an apology and find out what to do to make it better.

- Help the Classroom: If a student disturbed the class or damaged classroom property by leaving pencils on the floor, the student could make amends by performing a job that helps the class community such as sweeping the floor or sharpening pencils.

- Show Appreciation: If a student hurts a friend's or adult's feelings by acting out in class, the student could make amends by showing thankfulness for something they do.

- I Create: If a student has dipped from someone's bucket, the student could make amends by coming up with an idea of how to fill their bucket.

      Later in the year, teachers incorporated the concept of cause-and-effect and how actions effect the feelings of others. In the second year of design, teachers created a bulletin board and posters with graphics and examples to assist students in choosing when and why to apply the *Making Amends* sentence frames (Table 3, next page). Unintentionally, teachers spent less time and attention devoted to teaching *Making Amends*, and classroom relationships and interactions

suffered. In the future, teachers plan to front-load instruction to strengthen decision-making and problem-solving practices throughout the year.

Table 3

Bulletin Board Visuals

Making Amends
We all make mistakes and dip from someone's bucket sometimes.
Making amends is a way to fill their bucket back up!
When you fill someone else's bucket, your bucket fills up, too!
Bucket filling is showing kindness and respect for others.
Bucket dipping is being mean to others on purpose.

Reflections: What Works? What Doesn't Work?

Teaching students the word "amends" took more time than initially expected. Students asked many questions to conceptually understand expectations and outcomes, such as what happens if students break a rule that doesn't hurt people or yell out in class. *Making Amends* stretched students and teachers alike to move beyond traditional punitive approaches of classroom management and forced teachers to articulate with students when the classroom learning community has been harmed.

Teacher perspective on what student behavior warrants response has shifted. Not every situation requires making amends. Previously, the clip system served as a response when a student called out in class. Now teachers help students individually correct disruptive behaviors rather than dole out punishment.

Students identify and initiate a need to make amends. Whereas students previously reported playground incidents to the teacher after recess, they now request permission to go into the hall with the *Making Amends* binder. They return as two happy individuals. The teacher does not need to know what happened. Students shift quickly from a negative behavior to a positive action, and neither student nor teacher dwells on the negative.

When students create their own solutions, teachers can step away from the role of disciplinarian. In one incident, a teacher stepped into the hallway during the switching of classes to witness a girl running across the hall to jump and scramble up the wall. When the teacher asked how she could make amends, the girl said: "At the end of the day, because I wait for my bus, I could help the custodians with picking up pencils in other classrooms so they have time to wash the walls." Students genuinely think through how their actions affect others.

Students have generally welcomed a system focused on restoring relationships, taking responsibility for one's actions, and showing empathy toward others. One boy described his plan to resolve a soccer game conflict:

> *"We are going to keep on playing but we are going to like pass the ball and we are going not that hard on them were going to wait until one of the other tematte [teammate] from the other team and try to let them get the ball."*

One student valued the privacy and immediacy of an apology letter:

> *"I don't like when other people stare at you when they think you are in trubble [trouble]. . . I just like to get it over with without me saying sorry in person because if they see hwo ever did it they still might be mad at them. That is why I think we should do the aplogy letter to make amend to the other person that you did it to."*

Another student sought input from the peer he had harmed:

> *"Dear [Marvin] I'm sorry I called you a name that I don't' know that I never herd of hope you acsept[accept] my apalage [apology] is there anything I can do to make you feel better"*

This student prefers the amends system to avert individual embarrassment and shame:

"I like the amends system. 1 reson [reason] is you can keep it privit [private] instead of everyone looking at your clip and laghfing [laughing] a you. Because I know I would be inbarist [embarrassed] if some one was laghfing at me."

Over time, the restorative system has diminished the teacher's involvement in resolving classroom conflicts, increased instructional time, and freed the teacher to work independently with students who are less able to self-monitor their own behavior. Teachers anecdotally cite a decline in the frequency and nature of office discipline referrals. Where matters of damaging classroom property, unkind words exchanged between students, or disrespect of teachers may have resulted in external intervention prior to *Making Amends*, teachers and students are better equipped through the *Making Amends* protocol to converse with each other and resolve differences independent of office intervention. Further empirical research is needed to examine the impact on classroom behavior before and after the implementation of *Making Amends* across classroom settings that do and do not utilize the approach.

In the experience of this third-grade team, *Making Amends* does not attend to all behavioral challenges, particularly students with behavior plans or schools with zero-tolerance behavior policies. Teacher interventions or individual conversations to correct behavior are not sufficient to change behavior for some students who require frequent, different types of feedback. For the 5% of these third-grade students on individualized behavior plans, *Making Amends* does not provide the intervention and feedback necessary to result in changed behavior.

Making Amends teaches students to respond when harm has been caused in the learning environment. Whereas teachers are often tempted to punish for disruptions dealing with not raising a hand, talking out-of-turn, or talking with a neighbor, teachers who have implemented

Making Amends tend to address those behaviors with private conversations and repetitive review of their high expectations for classroom participation and engagement.

The third-grade teachers of nearly 100 students estimate that *Making Amends* is effective for 95% of their student population and the common behavior challenges that cause disruption to instruction or cause physical or emotional harm in the community of learners. These behaviors may involve mean words directed at another, hurt feelings, name calling, intentional physical harm, minor defacement of or intrusion into another's property, disrespect to teachers, emotional responses to a teacher that are atypical of the student's character, and other mistakes that third-graders make while they are experimenting with who they are as students at this age. *Making Amends* empowers students to "act and respond in ways that are healing rather than alienating or coercive" (Amstutz and Mullet, 2005, p. 15).

Making Amends has clearly contributed to the social and emotional well-being of children in these third-grade classrooms. While engaged in restoring what has been harmed, students and teachers alike, as valued members of a community, develop skills of self-awareness, empathy, responsible decision-making, self-regulation, and constructive conflict resolution.

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