

# The Role of Restorative Discipline in the School System

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## Abstract

*Classroom discipline plays an integral role in the daily activities of educators. Educators can choose traditional discipline methods with short-term results or modern practices such as restorative discipline that promise holistic healing with lasting results. Research has shown that the use of restorative discipline builds community, promotes healthy decision making, and heals all involved parties. No single discipline strategy can work for all situations. A balance between traditional and innovative practices is necessary for the effective management of the school and to meet the needs of individual students.*

Faced with choosing discipline strategies on a daily basis, 21<sup>st</sup> century educators are using innovative discipline methods. Veering from traditional methods that do not offer lasting results for perpetrators, current discipline trends have yielded restorative practices. Restorative discipline involves doing good by giving back (Hostetler Mullet, 2014). Rather than a traditional punitive measure of disciplining a student through suspension or expulsion, restorative discipline seeks to repair the well-being of the students involved. A holistic approach is taken to offer reconciliation for all stakeholders involved in the school community. A student who has committed a wrong is given the opportunity to right the wrong through a method determined and facilitated by the victims, administration, or a combination of both. Due to the lasting results of practicing restorative discipline, the chances of a repeated offence are lessened (Payne & Welch, 2015). In the school system, restorative discipline builds a cohesive community, promotes healthy decision making, and heals the parties involved. Together, these factors increase the potential for long-term results for students and the school community, making restorative discipline an appealing choice of discipline method in the school system.

## Community Building

Restorative discipline builds a cohesive community. Educators value the positive relationships required to establish safe learning environments. Restorative discipline acknowledges the importance of relationship building to build community (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Students must feel a part of a greater whole to have a successful school experience. Similarly to society, the students who commit an offense will often become repeat offenders (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Rather than the use of suspensions and expulsions to discipline students, restorative discipline seeks to break the cycle of repeat offenders being removed from the school. Restorative discipline sends these students a message of being welcome in the school community (Felt, 2014, para. 8). Students must feel belonging to have a positive school experience. Restorative discipline uses the power of positive relationships to strengthen the cohesiveness of school community by creating a safe and welcoming environment.

I experienced the effects of restorative justice and how it builds stronger relationships and community during the 2014-15 school year. A high school student, Bailey (a pseudonym), created a social media account to publish insults about her peers. After several months of vocal negativity and the drama that accompanied it, it became known that Bailey was the face behind the anonymous social media account. Upon meeting with administrators, Bailey admitted that she was the perpetrator and was willing to take measures to correct her behaviour. Fortunately, Bailey was willing to participate in the restorative discipline process. Had Bailey not been willing, school administrators would have been forced to resort to traditional disciplinary measures such as suspension or expulsion. In this situation, the student council and administration met to

determine a restorative measure for Bailey's actions. Because restorative justice promotes collaborative approaches for being a part of a community (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 15), the team decided that Bailey needed to apologize. Bailey met with each classroom in the school to explain her situation and to apologize for what she had done. Further to the recommendation of student council and administration, Bailey created another social media account wherein she posted positive messages about the school community. The students of the school who felt betrayed began to understand and communicate with Bailey about why she acted in a negative manner (de Souza & McLean, 2012). Communication provided victims with the opportunity to contextualize the situation (McMurtrie, 2015). In return, this communication brought the students together to build stronger relationships and community.

Beyond Bailey as an individual, other unforeseen beneficial outcomes helped to create a more positive school climate (Payne & Welch, 2013). The concept of "pay it forward" independently spread throughout the building. One of the deeds included students transferring the experience by reaching out to other students who, like Bailey, lacked a sense of belonging. Students identified peers with whom they typically did not associate, and they worked on building and strengthening relationships. Athletes began eating their lunches with the debate students; the media students taught the cheerleaders how to create a promotional video for seeking sponsorship. All around, a stronger, healthier community was established. Further to Bailey's second social media account, other students of the school contributed their own positive comments to the account. The entire school community was on board. Students were empowered to become involved (Gillard, 2014). In this instance, restorative discipline led to unforeseen positive outcomes that complemented the intended outcomes.

### **Healthy Decision Making**

Along with community building, restorative discipline promotes healthy decision making. Students who have been harmed by misbehaviour are given a voice, increasing the chance that future offenders will make healthier choices because bringing attention to the suffering felt by others deters a re-offense (Hostetler Mullet, 2014). Upon meeting with each classroom, Bailey became aware of how strongly she hurt her peers, causing her to not want to harm them again. As research completed in the Oakland School District shows (DeNisco, 2015), restorative discipline has proven benefits. Oakland School District implemented restorative discipline over three years and saw an 87% drop in suspension rates (DeNisco, 2015, p. 22). Oakland School District also saw "graduation rates increased 60 percent at high schools with the programs compared to 7 percent at those without them" and "chronic absenteeism dropped 24 percent at middle schools with the programs, compared to a 62 percent increase at schools that did not have them" (DeNisco, 2015, p. 22). Demonstrated by Oakland School District, students who attend restorative discipline schools show an increase in choosing to make healthier decisions.

In addition to the offender, victims must collaboratively make healthy choices. From being schooled through the public school system, students learn "that the teacher's word is taken as truth, and their perspective won't matter" (Gardner, 2014, p. 11). Restorative discipline removes the connotation that the student voice is silent. In restorative discipline, students as a team must decide on a fair approach to righting the wrong. Problem solving is used to determine how to restore the emotional harm that has occurred (Gillard, 2014). The team must decide on a restorative measure to right the wrong that has been done. Collectively, a healthy decision for restoration of emotion is made.

In Bailey's case, the decision was reached that she visit each classroom in the school to apologize for her actions. Bailey's peers were provided with an opportunity to converse with her and question why she chose to act the way that she did. When the victims' voices were heard, the offender understood the effects of his/her behaviour, making him/her desire to make better choices in the future (McMurtrie, 2015). Upon speaking with peers, Bailey felt remorse and independently desired to rectify the situation beyond the recommendation of student council and

administration by moving forward in creating a social media account that boasted positive messages of the school community. Bailey transformed her thinking from initially performing a negative act, to making a healthy decision by visiting each classroom to apologize and by creating a positive social media account.

Not only does the offender learn healthy decision making through restorative discipline, the victims do as well. When victims have a voice in determining a rectified action, they must reach consensus in an appropriate deed for the perpetrator to complete. The victims develop empathy for the offender (de Souza & McLean, 2012), and work as a team to reach an agreement. In the case of Bailey, the student council met with the administrators to reach a healthy decision. Students who were not involved in the situation observed how the situation was dealt with, and were encouraged to make healthy decisions through example. As seen in the scenario involving Bailey, implementing restorative justice and healthy decision making developed critical thinking, fairness, and teamwork skills in students. The restorative justice team discussed and decided upon the restorative action. When a restorative disciplinary action is used, there is a decrease in the likelihood of a repeated offense (Gillard, 2014). Restorative discipline promotes healthy decision making among both offenders and victims.

### **Healing**

Finally, restorative discipline promotes healing in victims and offenders. Through restorative discipline, rather than trying to get even, a shift in thinking is to get well (Hostetler Mullet, 2014). In order for restorative justice to be effective, it is imperative to heal those who are hurt. Hurt people will continue to hurt other people in order to distract from their own pain. Without healing, victims will feel the need “to get even” with the offender, causing the hurt to continue. In restorative discipline, time and action are key components to heal hurt. Students undergo a facilitated process to make amends and restore damaged relationships (Hostetler Mullet, 2014). When the process is completed with willing students, healing begins to take place for victims and offenders.

In looking at Bailey’s case, with increased communication, healing took place over the course of the school year. Emotionally harmed students accepted Bailey’s apology, and understood her rationale for behaving in such a manner. Bailey’s apology did not produce instantaneous results in healing. Healing occurred in the school community with a combination of the acceptance of Bailey’s apology and with the passing of time. Eventually, by focusing on the harms and needs of those involved, restorative discipline encompassed all healing (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Bailey, as the offender, healed by being given voice to express her story on her terms. The team directed Bailey to apologize, but she had the freedom to choose the delivery method. On her own, Bailey chose to visit each classroom in the school. In addition to the classroom visits, Bailey chose to create the second social media account. Victims healed by having the opportunity to converse with Bailey. For victims, there was vindication found in communicating with the offender (McMurtrie, 2015). Instead of fighting, students respectfully talked through their differences (Davis, 2014). The students had the opportunity to question Bailey, in order to see her perspective and hear her reasoning. When students understand the needs of others, positive behaviours develop (Wenos, Trick, & Williams, 2014). Communication broke down barriers and enabled all parties to move forward in healing.

Without healing, the cycle of hurt continues. In Bailey’s case, had restorative discipline not been practised, the victims may have tried to retaliate. In response, Bailey potentially could have again attacked the victims, causing the cycle to continue. Restorative discipline promotes healing and builds community (DeNisco, 2015). The method of delivery for restorative discipline does not offer a set procedure for reaching healing, but is unique to each case. Restorative discipline offers a safe, facilitated environment for healing to take place and break the cycle of hurt.

## Conclusion

Educators are faced with situations requiring disciplinary measures daily. No one method of discipline can serve as a blanket cure for all scenarios. In balance with modern discipline practices, traditional methods of discipline will continue to be needed as well. However, restorative discipline methods provide an innovative outlook on discipline in the school system. The philosophy of restorative discipline is solution based, whereby a misbehaviour has occurred that needs to be solved (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Restorative discipline is a proactive measure to prevent the re-offense of wrong-doers. When used appropriately, restorative discipline models humane and effective disciplinary measures to build character and establish a safe school environment. Restorative discipline is a modern approach that should be practised regularly in schools to build cohesive communities, promote healthy decision making, and heal the parties involved.

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## About the Author

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