

Developing Restorative Justice in an SEBD school: Is a sair¹ face really better than a red face?

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Keywords: social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; restorative justice

Synopsis: In the context of restorative justice as an approach to discipline with young people in a school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, Michael Roos explores pupils' life experiences, in their words, to ask how we might make school life a positive an experience for all pupils.

A Prologue

A number of students had walked the half mile over to the local community centre to play football. Towards the end of the game a couple of our older boys (both 15 years old) - let's call them John and Scott, became involved in a heated argument regarding the fairness of a rather late tackle. As staff approached, John spat at Scott hitting him on the arm. Scott replied by punching out at John catching him on the side of the face. Staff interceded and separated both boys before any other physical violence occurred, though verbal insults continued to be traded. After a brief discussion one member of staff agreed to walk John back to school and have a chat with him whilst a colleague would do similar with Scott using a more circuitous route.

I arrived back at the school for lunch about half an hour later with the rest of the staff and students to find John and Scott sitting together, laughing and joking with each other as they both attempted to tease some of the younger boys. Both members of staff had used the walk back to school to discuss the nature of football and sport, the unreasonableness of both boys' reactions and the fact that usually John and Scott got on pretty well. On returning to school the boys agreed to meet up. They had a brief chat about what had happened before apologising and shaking hands. Whereupon they both scampered off to the Dining Hall to annoy the first years.

The incident was noted, but no punishment was given to either boy. The matter was closed.

I am a teacher in a school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). For the past year and a half or so I have been part of a team attempting to develop a more restorative approach to matters of discipline. Recognising that elements within the staff might be quite resistant to this initiative, virtually all development work has focused on the adults in school This has included in-service training days, discussion sessions, staff surveys, the development of a library of restorative materials, production of a policy and an 'easy to use' pro-forma on which staff note details of an incident and the outcomes. We even called our initiative Voluntary Restorative Practice (VRP), providing the illusion that this change was somewhat optional. Outwith periodic opportunities to comment on

¹ sore

incidents they had been involved in, there was virtually no work done with students. No one sat down and asked them what they thought of this fairly major change within their school.

As the next stage of development loomed, in spite of perceived successes, I began to have doubts. So, in the grand tradition of seeking student contributions and opinions only after the big decisions have already been made, by us, the 'experts', I decided to interview a number of my older (S4) students. Did they feel VRP had made a positive difference to relationships, discipline and ethos within their school? Also, had their experience of restorative justice in a school environment affected how they resolved conflicts within their own communities; or is confrontation and aggression still the first response? Are schools as agencies of middle class culture trying to impose a set of values unusable outside the school gates? If so, for whose benefit? If what we do in schools does not improve the lives of our students, outwith the limits of the school day, why do it?

My initial desire was to see if the students understood the difference between restorative practices and a more retributive approach. I opened each interview by recalling an incident that the student had been involved in and asking for their recollections. All the boys could give examples of the type of punishments which might normally have come their way from a 'typical' school approach and interestingly their responses to the use of restorative practices were nearly always framed within a punishment paradigm.

For example, one student, Billy, had gotten into a heated argument with a member of staff during an outing. He had refused to put his seatbelt on in the minibus and had ended up being verbally abusive to a female member of staff who became very upset by the personal comments.

Me: What's the difference [with a restorative approach]?

Billy: Ye dinnae get in as much trouble.

Me: You don't get in as much trouble?

Billy: Aye, ye get let aff wae it easier... Ah suppose in the restorative thing we write it down, that's the only thing that's different, ye write it down on a daft wee bit of paper.

Me: Okay

Billy: Tae make it look professional.

In a sense it feels as though we have been 'sussed'. Is that what being professional has become - having 'a daft wee bit of paper'? From the interviews it was clear that the boys 'liked' VRP but saw it in simple terms as an easier form of punishment than a detention or an exclusion (not unlike, I have to say, some of the staff attitudes) and did not make an immediate connection to the improving of relationships element of restorative justice. Does this matter?

Me: Did it [the incident on the minibus] affect yours and D's [staff member involved] relationship?

Billy: Naw, cos ah wiz wae her the next day, and she wiz like she said she wiz sorry and ah said ah wiz sorry tae, and that wiz it

Mel: But if you had been given a punishment for that, would that have made you feel different towards D?

Billy: Aye, if ah'd been charged ah'd have blamed her for gettin' charged.

Me: Even though you were out of order, you would have probably blamed her?

Billy: Aye!

Perhaps we have allowed ourselves to focus too much on the paper element as 'doing VRP' and work with staff, especially our reluctant staff, needs to focus on the 'why' rather than the 'how' of restorative justice. Would relationships be improved by removing our (school staff) power to impose a punishment? What perhaps came across from the interviews was the pointlessness of a school taking punitive measures. In Billy's incident, previously he may well have been suspended for the verbal abuse or even charged by the Police. While we may say that the restorative approach failed as he stated he would still have blamed D had he got charged, the reality of the situation was that Billy did not get charged, did not lose out on several days schooling and he and D were able to work together the following day. Who knows the restoration of the relationship that went on between them that day?

Interested in the possibility of the transferability of RP skills I next asked each student to recall an incident they had witnessed or been involved with in their communities and asked whether a restorative approach could have been used to sort the matter. In all interviews, equal amounts of incredulity and hilarity filled most of this section.

Me: A lot of the police and the criminal justice workers are trying to do restorative stuff.

Dan: Yir gonnae get yir pals, yir no gonnae get the polis.

Me: Can you ever imagine ...

Dan: (whining, simpering voice) I'm phoning restorative practice on you.

Me: So is the idea just so ridiculous ...

Dan: Yir pals wid be like, ya wee poof ye ...even yir maw wid disown ye. Every body just batters everybody.

Me: Why?

Dan: Just cos, that's the way we liveIt's a shithole!

Similarly, very similarly, with our old friend Billy.

Billy: Cos of the culture we get brought up in.

Me: Which is what?

Billy: We're no wee geeks that's gonnae back doon fae a fight.

Me: What would happen if ye backed down from a fight?

Billy: They'd make ye feel like a shitebag....like in front ae yir pals ... ye wouldnae want it tae happen ... a sair face is better than a red face!

All the boys had a similar response to the idea of using restorative justice within their communities. The principles and practices of restoration seemed so far removed from these boys' reality that made it not only unlikely to happen but should they attempt such an approach, might have the effect of actually damaging relationships with their peers and even with their families. The notion that 'schools cannot compensate for society', weighs heavily on those of us who work with this group of students. We see

so much potential, yet, continually, these boys and girls are unable to 'escape' from lives of crime and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, dysfunctional families (though who ever escapes that one?) and poverty. This can mean schools and teachers attempting to compensate for what they see as some sort of cultural deprivation. We go about organising a curriculum which we believe our students must acquire in order to enrich the quality of their lives. This sees schools and teachers reinforcing the hegemony of middle-class values with our ideas (based on our experiences, our lives) of what constitutes the good life. Rather than being transformative, as I presume we all wish, this actually reaffirms a model of education as primarily to do with social control.

In developing VRP within our school we can perhaps see an example of the conflict between what Giroux (1997) posed as the struggle between dominant and subordinate cultures. As well as a social process education in schools is also a cultural process and the dangers of failing to take heed of this is brought out in my students' descriptions of their communities - Dan describes his as a 'shithole', now where did he learn that? It is a fine balancing act, not wishing to subordinate these students' cultural capital: their families, communities, beliefs and values. Do we do that in how we dress, in the cars that we drive to school, the pictures of our rosy-cheeked children on our desks, in how we speak? From the transcript it is clear that 'my boys' and I, speak differently. What (or who) gives us the right to assume we have the moral and cultural high ground? From the tales told at times by my students I doubt I have the skills or cultural understanding to survive for long in their world, where a reputation for retribution might serve me better. Yet we expect and judge their ability to live in ours.

So, can we reconcile the use of restorative practice within school and its apparent uselessness in the community lives of our students? Perhaps I am in danger of seeking out the answers I want and have not listened to the 'unwelcome truths'..... at one point towards the end of our interview I asked Billy, 'so if we just do restorative in schools, what's the point?'

Billy, (after a period of silence) "Well there is because then ye can enjoy yir school life, ye urnae gonnae get taught aff somebody ye don't like, cos that would just be awkward sitting in a class with somebody that ye despised, and they're teaching ye, ye wid just feel awkward **so it makes it better when ye dae it it feels like ye huvnae fell oot wae them in the first place.**" (Simply, a beautiful definition of restorative justice)

When we focus on the big questions in education perhaps we fail to recognise the potency of individual schools and perhaps need to shift our attention from macro to micro variables. Billy talks about enjoying school life and relationships with staff seem to be important. He is well equipped to survive in his community but also understands what is required of him in a school setting. In many ways more able to straddle the cultural chasm than I – or you. If students like Billy can separate their school and community lives perhaps schools and teachers need to do so too. If we cannot re-engineer society from our classrooms, perhaps we need to focus on how we make school life as positive an experience, in and of itself, for all our students, whether they hail from the leafy suburbs or a 'shithole'.

Reference

Giroux, H. (1997). *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Glossary

ae – of

aff –off

ah – I

a shitebag – a coward

a shithole – an unpleasant place

aye - yes

dae - do

dinnae – don't/didn't

fae - from

geeks – well behaved young people

gonnae – going to

huvnae – have not

maw - mother

naw - no

no - not

oot - out

pals - friends

polis – police

sair – sore, painful

tae – too/to

urnae – are not

wae - with

wid - would

wiz – was

wouldnae – would not

ya wee poof ye – you coward

ye – you (singular)

yir – your/you're

