



NeMTSS
FRAMEWORK



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NeMTSS Research Brief

Restorative Practices

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CHILDREN, YOUTH, FAMILIES & SCHOOLS**

Restorative Practices: An NeMTSS Research Brief

Key Points:

- Restorative Practices serve as a healing alternative to traditional disciplinary practices. They aim to repair harm by cultivating strong relationships among students, educators, and community members by transmitting positive values and a sense of responsibility among all members in the school community.
- Examples of Restorative Practices include victim-offender mediation, restorative conferencing, discussion circles, and restorative agreements.
- Restorative practices can help to improve school climate and relationships.
- Effective implementation of Restorative Practices is a multi-stage process; having milestones to mark progress with short, intermediate, and long-term goals can help maximize effectiveness.

Introduction

Exclusionary school discipline policies such as suspensions and expulsions as methods to address unacceptable student behaviors are linked to negative student outcomes, such as an increased risk of school dropout and weaker bonds between students and staff (Chu & Ready, 2018). Further, these practices often disproportionately affect minority students (Jacobsen et al., 2019). "Restorative practices" are an alternative to disciplinary measures through an educational process that is "not interested in blame, shame, fault, apologies, or excuses...only fixing" (Gossen, 1998). Restorative practices focus on values, accountability, and community building, and have been shown to benefit students by helping establish a sense of responsibility and effective relationships (Shramko et al., 2023). Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have currently enacted legislation supporting the use of restorative practices in schools (Center on Gender Justice and Opportunity, 2020).

What are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practices are methods of conflict resolution that aim to repair harm and build a positive classroom climate by cultivating strong relationships among students, educators, and community members (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). Misbehavior in schools is regarded as an act against the affected individual(s), school, and community (McCluskey, 2008a), therefore restorative practices enable the student to talk about their behavior and their circumstances within this community (McCluskey, 2008b), and create a plan to fix the harm caused (Gossen, 1998). As a positive alternative to individual punishment, restorative practices focus on healing (Chmelynski, 2005), education, and community restoration (Wearmouth, et al., 2007). The primary challenge associated with implementing restorative practices is the need for schools to commit to long-term, incremental reform, as effective implementation requires a shift in overall school culture (Payne & Welch, 2018).

Restorative practices originated in Māori, Aboriginal, and Native American communities (Cowie, et al., 2008) and is commonly seen today in the area of Criminology (Chmelynski, 2005). Restorative practice is known by many other terms, including restitution, restorative

justice, community justice, transformative justice, peacemaking criminology, relational justice, (McCluskey, 2008a), restitution restructuring (Gossen, 1998), and restorative measures (Shaw, 2007). Participation in restorative practice is voluntary (Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005) and often includes models such as victim-offender mediation, restorative conferencing (Wearmouth et al., 2007), discussion circles (Boulton & Mirsky, 2006), and restorative agreements (Meagher, 2009).

Restorative practices consist of the following five principles:

- Full participation of all interested parties in order to seek consensus
- Heal both the victim and the offender
- Hold the offender accountable for the harm caused
- Reunite what has been divided
- Strengthen the school community to prevent future harm (Varnam, 2005)

Victim-Offender Mediation

One model of restorative practice is Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM), also sometimes referred as Victim-Offender Conferencing or Victim-Offender Dialogue (Umbreit & Armour, 2011). This process emphasizes the importance of assisting the offender to come together with the victim to discuss the impacts of their wrongdoings and methods to rectify harm that was done (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018; Umbreit & Hansen, 2017). This approach is different from other restorative approaches due to its emphasis on working directly with the victim and the student, and not necessarily with other family members, support individuals, or others from the community (Hansen & Umbreit, 2018). According to Hopkins (2004), five stages are involved in mediation: establishing mediation guidelines, allowing participants to share their story, participants sharing what they need to move forward in agreement, writing down agreements, and discussing progress. This approach is intended to be humanistic in nature and is designed to deepen connections and facilitate healing (Lewis & Umbreit, 2015). Nascimento et al. (2023) conducted a review of studies examining the impacts of victim-offender mediation on well-being, and found an overall positive psychological impact on victims, improving the emotional needs of victims and their perceptions of their offenders.

Restorative Conferencing

Restorative conferencing is an approach which involves meetings between the student committing the wrongdoing, victims, and other relevant parties, such as family members or school personnel (Scheuerman et al., 2020). The core tenets involved in restorative conferencing include dialogue, relationship building, and the communication of moral values (Goodstein and Butterfield, 2015). Dialogue involves a process of conferencing between parties to discuss the harm that was done and facilitating a process to make amends between relevant parties (Scheuerman et al., 2021). Relationship building occurs when there is a respectful and understanding discussion between all parties involved (Scheuerman et al., 2021). Lastly, the transmission of moral values occurs when the student committing the harm develops an understanding of their wrongdoings and desires to make amends to their behavior to correct the harm that was done (Goodstein & Butterfield, 2015). Research on restorative conferencing practices has found that there is generally a high degree of transmission of the three core tenets during these meetings (Bouffard et al., 2017).

Discussion Circles

Discussion circles, also known as peacemaking circles, problem solving circles, or community circles, are the third restorative model (McMorris et al., 2013). Follestad and Wroldsen (2018) define restorative circles as a process where participants sit in a circle with an adult acting as a facilitator. Discussion circles are intended to create a safe place for a group of people to talk without interruptions (Umbreit, 2010). During this time, students and staff “sit together in a circle and take turns sharing their thoughts and concerns” (McMorris et al., 2013, p. 5). When a participant wants to talk, they must hold a talking piece, and only the person who is holding the talking piece may speak. This practice gives each group member the chance to speak without being challenged or interrupted (Umbreit, 2010). Franza (2023) found that restorative circles, when implemented at the high school level, allow students to understand commonalities that exist between them. It was also found that it was imperative that students have a connection to their restorative facilitator in the process of engaging in discussion circles for increased feelings of school connectedness.

Restorative Agreements

Restorative agreements consist of a record of actions to be taken by the student committing the misconduct (Meagher, 2009). These agreements can be contracted at the end of a restorative justice conference (Hayes and Daly, 2006). Typically, agreements will require the student who committed the harm to provide a verbal or written apology, pay monetary damages, or perform community service (Hayes and Daly, 2006). For older students, agreements may consist of reflection papers or repairing damaged property (Meagher, 2009). Evidence has shown that students committing the wrongdoing typically perceive their agreements as satisfactory, fair, and consensual when they are sufficiently involved in the creation of the agreements (Hayes & Hayes, 2008). However, there is debate regarding the effectiveness of agreements on offending behavior. Hayes & Hayes (2008) found that most students found agreements to be reasonable but did not feel that restorative agreements had an impact on post-conference offending behavior. These findings draw importance to fair and just student involvement when creating agreements, and the importance of combining agreements with other approaches, such as restorative conferences.

Benefits of Restorative Practices

Improved School Climate

Studies have indicated that restorative practices may lend themselves to improvements in school climate. For example, Acosta et al. (2019) implemented a whole-school restorative practices intervention in 13 middle schools. Results indicated that students self-reported experiences with restorative practices significantly predicted improvements in school climate and connectedness, peer attachments, social skills, and cyberbullying victimization (Acosta et al., 20). Further, Grant et al. (2022) investigated whether assignment to restorative practices improved school climate and teacher turnover rates. Results indicated that Restorative Practices had a significantly positive effect on school climate but did not have an impact on teacher turnover rates (Grant et al., 2022). These studies provide promise in the use of restorative practices to improve school climate.

Improvements in Relationships

Restorative practices can help strengthen relationships between students, educators, and school leaders (Forsberg & Leko, 2022). Implementing restorative practices daily can help educators and school leaders promote safety and create prosocial skills necessary for success (Forsberg & Leko, 2022). Gregory et al. (2016) found that teachers who implement restorative practices regularly had more positive relationships with diverse students and issued fewer exclusionary discipline referrals to minority students as compared to teachers who implement restorative practices less frequently (Gregory et al., 2016). Further, students perceived their teachers as more respectful (Gregory et al., 2016).

Maximizing Effectiveness of Restorative Practices

Research on school-based restorative practices indicates that whole-school interventions are more efficacious at improving student outcomes as opposed to classroom level interventions (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Todici et al. (2020) conceptualized restorative justice as a structural population health intervention, finding that students attending schools implementing restorative justice practices have lower rates of absences due to illness and better academic outcomes when compared to students not attending these schools. Further, restorative practices are most effective when they are implemented with fidelity and across multiple years, as this produces the most improvements in school climate and behavioral changes (Hollands et al., 2022). For example, schools implementing restorative practices showed greater reductions in rates of suspensions after two years as compared to schools implementing restorative practices for only one year (Hollands et al., 2022).

Huguley et al. (2022) conceptualize restorative practices as a framework which needs to meet three criteria to maximize effectiveness. First, restorative practices must be conceptualized within a social, emotional, and behavioral framework. Social emotional and behavioral practices create powerful, sustainable whole-school culture shifts; thus, they should be incorporated within the design of restorative programs in schools (Huguley et al., 2022). Second, restorative practices should be responsive to significant mental health needs. Especially for students of color and racially oppressed groups who may be experiencing ongoing environmental stressors, it is important to have trauma-responsive programming which helps students learn how to cope with stressors (Huguley et al., 2022). Third, restorative practices must operate with an awareness of how racism contributes to discipline disparities. Both structural racism and interpersonal biases can have adverse effects on student mental health (Huguley et al., 2022). Thus, to maximize the overall effectiveness of restorative practices, schools should operate with an awareness of these disparities and strive to reduce them with more healing approaches (Huguley et al. 2022).

Successful Implementation of Restorative Practices

Morrison et al. (2005) identified several key indicators to successful implementation of restorative practices. Though a long-term approach is necessary, achieving this process successfully may be slow; thus, having milestones towards short, medium, and long-term goals is suggested (Morrison et al., 2005). Successfully implementing restorative practices may take up to five years.

The first stage of implementation, titled gaining commitment, focuses on creating buy-in and establishing a need for change (Morrison et al., 2005). While there are several ways in which this can be achieved, perhaps the most persuasive is the use of data. Types of data that may be shared with stakeholders at this stage include suspension and referral rates, attendance

data, climate and safety surveys, or a review of current school policies (Mansfield et al., 2018). Once data is shared and a need for change is established, it is important to involve key stakeholders in the planning process for change, to ensure that all community members can collaboratively create the type of school environment that coincides with the goals and values of the school (Mansfield et al., 2018).

The second stage for successful implementation of restorative practices is titled developing a shared vision (Morrison et al., 2005). This process emphasizes the importance of leadership in supporting goals that the school hopes to achieve. Short, medium, and long-term goals are important and necessary to address the goals of the school community, and a statement for why the change is important for the school can also be of benefit (Mansfield et al., 2018).

The third stage of implementation, titled developing responsive and effective practice, involves training and assisting teachers and other school professionals to have a range of restorative responses to various situations that may arise (Morrison et al., 2005; Mansfield et al., 2018). To implement this stage successfully, it is important to first develop a range of different responses for common behavioral concerns, then train teachers in effective implementation (Mansfield et al., 2018). Lastly, continuous monitoring and keeping track of fidelity data can ensure practices are being implemented as intended.

The fourth stage of implementation, titled developing a whole school approach, involves embedding restorative practices at all levels of school policies and procedures (Morrison et al., 2005). This helps ensure that school policies are aligned and cohesive with restorative practices. Policies based on punitive discipline must be altered to more proactive approaches to be in alignment (Mansfield et al., 2018).

The final stage of implementation, titled professional relationships, focuses on organizational change to recreate a professional working environment that encompasses restorative policies and practices (Morrison et al., 2005). It is important to foster open, honest, and transparent communication at this stage (Morrison et al., 2005). This culture can ensure that morale to implement restorative practices remains high through support and respect of teachers.

Conclusion

Restorative practices are an effective way to repair harm and establish a sense of community among students, teachers, and other school professionals. There are a variety of ways to implement restorative practices, including victim-offender meditation, restorative conferencing, and discussion circles. When implemented correctly, they can help to improve relationships as well as school climate.

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