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## Applying the Framework: Positive Youth Development and Restorative Practices

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**Abstract:** This article compares the framework of positive youth development and school connectedness with the practices of restorative measures applied to harm and rule violations in schools. Formal school discipline practices of in- and out-of-school suspension have the unintended outcomes of increases in maladaptive behaviors, with drawl or avoidance of school staff, stigma among peers and poor academic achievement, among others. Restorative practices provide accountability for harm, as well as the opportunity to guide youth in their development, regardless of their experience as an offender, victim or bystander. Stories illustrate the strengths of this approach. Recommendations for school and youth programs regarding restorative measures will include suggestions for future research and evaluation.

### Introduction

The principles and philosophy of restorative measures are congruent with many programs and curricula that teach social emotional learning and classroom and behavior management. Restorative practices—circles to repair harm or restorative group conferences, as well as family group decision making and restorative peer juries—give educators an effective means of helping students practice the social skills they have been taught, under real and significant circumstances. As Margaret M. Clifford wrote, “We must encourage students to reach beyond their intellectual grasp and allow them the privilege of learning from mistakes. Students need challenge not easy success” (Clifford, 1993, p 149). When students have a vested interest in a fight or bullying situation, either as a victim, offender or bystander, they will learn more deeply as they practice repairing harm, communicating feelings, and problem solving.

In addition to being a strong learning tool, restorative measures can be aligned with the broader area of healthy youth development, as a means of implementing the elements youth need to engage as they grow to adulthood. The Konopka Institute for Adolescent Health uses Dr. Gisela Konopka’s lifetime study of youth and their developmental needs to present a framework for working with youth, as well as a list of common components for successful youth

programs. This paper will discuss school connectedness, formal school discipline practices and their outcomes, and through a series of stories, examine restorative measures and positive youth development to illustrate the strengths of both. Finally, recommendations for school and youth programs regarding restorative measures will include suggestions for future research and evaluation.

## School Connectedness and School Discipline

Resiliency research looks for elements in adolescents' lives that contribute to their strengths, assets and protective factors. One of the largest such studies were done by the Center for Population Options in collaboration with the University of Minnesota. *The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health*, otherwise known as *AddHealth*, analyzed data from some 90,000 students across the nation, administrators of the schools the students attended, and 18,000 of their parents. Findings indicated two broad concepts: family connectedness makes a difference in the lives of youth and school connectedness makes a difference in the lives of youth (Blum & Rinehart, 2002, p. 7).

Students easily feel connected to school when the student never gets into trouble or has conflict with other youth. But it is more difficult to feel or maintain connection when a student is at odds with others on a continual basis, or when the student is victimized, but the victimization is not addressed. The challenge for educators is to maintain their professional self and their connection with youth while holding students accountable for misdeeds or harm, and to support those that have been harmed through meaningful involvement (Gathercoal, 1993, p. 30).

While school connectedness is an indicator of student health, typical school disciplinary practices rely heavily on exclusion. Formal discipline of suspensions, detention, exclusion and expulsion undermine the possible connections between the excluded student and the adults and other students in the school building. In a 1998 study by Costenbader and Markson on school suspensions, they summarized research on the effects of in- and out-of-school suspensions. Serious negative outcomes of out-of-school suspension included:

- An increase in maladaptive behaviors not addressed by the suspension;
- Withdrawal or avoidance of school staff;
- A negative impact on self respect;
- A stigma among peers;
- Driving a school problem into the streets and community
- Disruption of education progress, and
- Loss of state aid based on average daily attendance.

In-school suspension has been correlated with drug use, poor academic achievement, grade retention and long-term disaffection and alienation (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). Costenbader and Markson's own research showed "that students who had been suspended were more likely to be involved with the legal system."

Restorative measures, however, look not at rule violations but at the violation of relationships, and seek to hold the youth responsible to the persons who have been harmed and/or have been affected, challenging all to repair the relationships. Howard Zehr, in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, describes wrongdoing as "...a violation of people and interpersonal relationships. Violations create obligations. The central obligation is to put right the wrong."

(Zehr, 2002, p. 19) The person who did the harm, the person harmed and the community—classmates, bystanders, staff and family members—work together to “put right the wrong.”

There are several restorative practices used in school, such as restorative conferencing, circles to repair harm and restorative peer juries. Ideally, the person who was harmed, the person who did the harm, and the community—other affected parties, classmates, bystanders, friends, staff, family members, elders or neighbors—come together in a facilitated process. The group talks about the harm and how people were affected by it, identifies needs and obligations as a result of the harm, identifies possible solutions, and comes to agreement through consensus. The agreement should include restitution, reconciliation and resolution, as well as provide support for the victim or for the offender.

In a conference, the facilitator is called a facilitator; in a circle the facilitator is a keeper; and with peer juries, the members of the jury—trained students—together facilitate the process. Schools administrators that use these practices may combine them with more traditional discipline responses, such as a shortened suspension time for a fight, if the affected students agree to participate in a circle upon returning to school.

In *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline in Schools*, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet (2005) provide the following principles of restorative discipline:

- relationships are central to building community;
- focus on harm done rather than on rule-breaking;
- give voice to the person harmed;
- engage in collaborative problem-solving;
- change and growth and enhance responsibility (p 26-28).

These themes are echoed in healthy youth development studies.

### **Healthy Youth Development**

In 2000, the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health published the monograph *Growing Absolutely Fantastic Youth*. It summarized the research on adolescent development and provided a framework for healthy youth development which can help guide discipline practices in both schools and youth programs. When using Gisela Konopka's *Requirements of Healthy Youth Development*, restorative discipline can provide youth with opportunities for healthy adolescent development. Dr. Konopka asserted that all young people need to:

- Participate as citizens, as members of a household, as workers, as responsible members of society;
- Gain experience in decision-making;
- Interact with peers and acquire a sense of belonging;
- Reflect on self in relation to others and to discover self by looking outward as well as inward;
- Discuss conflicting values and formulate their own value system;
- Experiment with one's own identity, with relationships; try out various roles without having to commit oneself irrevocably;
- Develop a feeling of accountability in the context of a relationship among equals;
- Cultivate a capacity to enjoy life; and

- Participate in the creative arts, to learn self-expression and communicate deeper feelings from within (p. 20).

In formal school discipline situations, when a student violates a rule, adults often talk about how the student has lost privileges or the right to participate in school, activities, and class trips. Students often lose the right to make decisions (conveyed by the principal via the student handbook), and at least for a time being, the right to participate as a responsible member of the school society. With a restorative response, however the student does not lose the chance for positive youth development. The list above is, in fact, a list of all that could happen in a conference or circle to repair harm.

Youth participating in a restorative process are part of the decision-making process:

- discussing and coming to consensus about making amends,
- giving back to the community,
- making restitution and
- outlining a plan for improving behavior.

Restorative justice participants—the person who did the harm, the person harmed, community members, friends—are operating as a responsible members of society. A responsible person recognizes when she has done harm and works to repair that harm. A responsible person offers his knowledge and insight to solve a problem.

Howard Zehr identifies needs for victims, offenders and community. Needs for victims include information, truth-telling, empowerment, restitution or vindication. Offenders need accountability, encouragement to experience personal transformation, encouragement and support for integration into the community and for some, at least temporary restraint. The community—classmates, bystanders, staff, family members—need “attention to their concerns as victims, opportunities to build a sense of community and mutual responsibility, and encouragement to take on their obligations for the welfare of their members...( Zehr 2002, p. 14-18).”

Both victims and offenders are in need of positive interaction with peers and acquiring a sense of belonging, albeit for different reasons. Being a victim of harm or crime sets a person apart, and receiving messages of care and concern helps to bring the victim back into the community. Victimization can also feel dis-empowering, and having the chance to articulate what one needs to be safe or what restitution would be acceptable helps increase the youth’s sense of personal power. In addition, by listening to all sides and working together to make an agreement that repairs the harm, all participants have the opportunity to empathize and develop capacity for pro-social moral agency (Hymel, Rocke-Henderson & Bonanno, 2005, p. 9).

## **Healthy Youth Development through Restorative Measures**

### ***Membership, accountability, and decision-making***

Three stories have been selected to illustrate the application of restorative measures as a thoughtful means of furthering healthy adolescent development in students.

Oscar Reed, Circle keeper and trainer, has worked in the Minneapolis Public Schools, and tells this story:

*The principal of one of the middle schools with whom we collaborate asked me to facilitate a Circle for nine members of the school's basketball team. Recently, they had done considerable damage to an opposing team's locker room. The principal felt that it would be too easy to suspend them, which is what the students expected, and valuable lessons would be lost.*

*In attendance for the Circle were parents, social workers, teachers, the basketball coach, the school's police liaison and the maintenance engineers. After two hours of testifying, justifying, apologizing, and finally, realizing the far reaching effects of their actions, the team was left alone to think and talk about what they had done, as well as come up with some "consequences" for their actions. This two-hour Circle was by far the hardest thing these boys had ever done.*

*The following day the Principal called to tell me the boys had come up with a solution. The proposed plan included:*

- 1) the team taking part in paying for the damaged door;*
- 2) each member of the team writing a letter of apology to the other school;*
- 3) attending a school assembly and sharing with the entire school not only what they did but how they decided on their own "punishment"; and finally*
- 4) helping the school's maintenance engineers clean all the boys' restrooms for one week.*

*Keep in mind that the alternative was suspension, which, for these boys, meant a few days at home watching TV or playing video games and walking the streets.*

*The opportunity to work with these students gave me an opening to introduce the principles of Health Realization through the Restorative Justice Circle. Then they tapped into their own natural wisdom to find solutions for inappropriate actions.*

Through the circle, the students practiced life skills with a specific, serious situation. Because the adults left the students to themselves to solve the problem, they were intimately engaged in developing "a feeling of accountability in the context of a relationship among equals." The boys were members of a team, but they also recognized they were members of a school. As responsible members, they included specific tasks to "clean up" the mess they made. Working by themselves, they proved they could make good and fair decisions that required them to make amends. They made themselves accountable to the school they damaged through the letters of apology and paying for the door, and they made themselves accountable to their school by explaining themselves in the assembly, and they made symbolic restitution to janitors everywhere by helping to clean the bathrooms in their school.

Oscar saw the youth after their assembly. They seemed to carry themselves with more confidence, head up and open. Perhaps that was due to their renewed connection to their school, to its reputation, and to its clean bathrooms. Perhaps they also were relieved that while they experimented with their own identity, trying out various roles, they did not have to commit larger perspective themselves irrevocably to being vandals and fools.

### ***Conflicting values and looking outward***

Adolescents, as they grow into adulthood, move from a self-centered view of the world to a larger perspective, hopefully encompassing themselves and others. Youth do all kinds of things that provide exceptional opportunities for practicing reflection and perspective taking. The

discussions in a conference can be profound, as the following story from a high school restorative justice planner illustrates.

*Four juniors got into a fight in the school hallway, were sent to the office and agreed to sit in circle to try to repair the harm, in lieu of suspension. Three boys admitted to jumping the fourth boy because he had made disparaging remarks about a friend of theirs who had been killed in a car crash earlier in the month. Through discussion, all four boys agreed that the person they had harmed the most was the boy who had died. He did not deserve the disparaging remarks, and he would not have wanted the friends to start a fight. So they all agreed to go to the cemetery, and one by one, apologize at the dead boy's grave.*

These boys may have struggled with conflicting values: defending a dead friend's honor versus honest speech, however insensitive. They also were engaged in experimenting with their own identity: by fighting, am I brave, a true friend, or a tough kid? By talking out loud, am I painfully honest, clever with words, mean, unthinking or a bully? What is my relationship to my friends, to the school, and in this instance, to the dead? They tried out several roles in the course of this story, right up to the visit to the gravesite.

The alternative consequence for all four of the boys was out-of-school suspension. Allowing feelings of grief and shame to compete with a game cube and a TV set for 3-5 days does not "encourage reflection on self in relation to others or self-discovery by looking outward as well as inward," as these boys did.

### ***Capacity to enjoy life and self-expression***

The final story is about an argument over dancing. Konopka (1973) describes the capacity to enjoy life as the opportunity "...to be creative, to be frivolous, to do things on one's own, and to learn to interact with all kinds of people—people of different life styles, different economic and cultural backgrounds, different ages."

*One might think that dancing is the expression of enjoying life, but in one high school, with one group of girls, a discussion about different dance styles and the girls' dancing ability resulted in an argument going from the hall to the bus, drawing a crowd, and the police liaison officer called in to handle the situation. He could have charged the girls with disorderly conduct. In addition, the assistant principal could have suspended them out of school for 2-3 days. Instead, they all agreed to meet in Circle and develop an agreement.*

*At the core of the shouting was this issue: "One student perceived another student to be talking about her and disrespecting her way of dancing," wrote the social worker that facilitated the Circle. The girls—Tsehaj, Samantha, Kee, Zoie and Tanisha—were African American, Hmong American, African immigrant and Anglo. The last two girls were the arguers, and both were transfer students, one from Kenya and the other from inner-city Boston.*

*Part of the issue was that the transfer students did actually dance better than all the other Midwestern students, and they were vying for attention as the new kids in the school. In the Circle discussion, they realized they had more in common with each other than not. All girls were able to "quickly acknowledge they were really coming from the same place, same style of dance," and could share in each other's experiences. The agreement was that they would repair the harm by coming together in the hallway for a "shared dance experience after school."*

Zehr (2002) recommends that in restorative justice, we pay attention to the intended and

unintended outcomes. By the pictures of the dance session, it looked as if the girls were participating in creative arts, learning self-expression and cultivating a capacity to enjoy life—all outcomes intended and in line with positive youth development. In this instance, an unintended but positive outcome was that some boys stopped by to watch and applaud.

Participating as members of a group or household, experiencing decision-making, acquiring a sense of belonging, experimenting with identity, developing a feeling of identity in the context of a relationship among equals, and cultivating the capacity to enjoy life are the developmental tasks for healthy youth. As a district superintendent once pointed out, these are also the elements that draw a youth to join a gang or other negative peer groups. Whether we as adults pay attention to adolescents or they pay attention to themselves, they will look for opportunities to develop, positively or negatively. We adults have ample opportunity to help direct youth, even if they call us bad names, key our car, fight in the lunchroom or get arrested for possession of a controlled substance.

### **Youth Development Programs**

The Konopka Institute conducted an extensive review of research, and found common components of successful programs for youth development. This list provides an excellent framework for adolescent restorative justice programs, in schools, communities, or the legal system. Each conference, peer jury or circle should check off each of these seven elements as part of their operating system. Successful youth development programs:

- Build strong adult-youth relationships;
- Have a clear, well articulated philosophy about youth;
- Build interventions on a theory of youth development, grounded in research;
- Recognize the strengths of youth;
- Recognize the human resources in the community;
- Actively involve young people in all aspects of the program;
- Provide life skills (Konopka, 2000, p. 20).

In *Restorative Measures: Respecting Everyone's Ability to Resolve Problems*, Cordelia Anderson outlines guiding principles for restorative measures in schools, including the importance to "build on youths' strengths and recognize them as resources. Each child/youth has strengths and potentials, is a resource, and needs to be able to make change to achieve success." Seeing youth as resources requires that adults "have high expectations for each student rather than seeing someone only as a risk with deficits." Restorative measures facilitate a student's success, whether victim or offender, friend or bystander (Anderson, 1997, p. 20).

Life skills are practiced in every restorative session, including listening and speaking, self-reflection and problem-solving. Life skills can also be included in agreements, such as writing and illustrating a children's book or tutoring. One student agreed to volunteer at three pow-wows, working with the managers on set-up, ticket-taking, greeting and seating the drum groups and concessions. Connecting a student with an adult who helps teach skills strengthens the student's connections with caring adults.

As participants in conferences or circles, young people are active participants, but they can also serve as co-facilitators or co keepers, recruiters and restorative peer jury members. By inviting past participants to future sessions, student who have done harm or who have been harmed, can use their experience in meaningful ways to give insight to others.

## Final Thoughts

Positive youth development provides a framework for individuals, programs and institutions that work with youth. Future youth programs should include an emphasis on restorative measures as a means to develop healthy youth. Research and evaluation of programming should assess the ability of variations of restorative practices (e.g., circles, restorative conferencing, peer juries) to meet various youth developmental needs. These practices, like other youth development programs should be tested for short and long term effects on: self-esteem, depression, substance use, academic achievement as well as recidivism rates.

The AddHealth study states that school connectedness is as important to young people's health as "immunization programs, nutrition programs, health and physical education curricula, and health services" (McNeely, Nonnemaker, Blum, 2002, p. 145). Positive youth development provides a framework that can be used to broaden and support the practice of restorative measures. Often, conferences and circles start out tense; participants may be angry, afraid or embarrassed. Hopefully through talk, support, accountability and restitution, the path of a youth, whether they have offended or have been harmed, may be cleared to cultivate a capacity to enjoy life.

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