

Social Emotional Learning and Restorative Practices

"Restorative Justice will change humanity
Restorative justice will change humanity
So Change, so change, change our world today..."

--New Orleans Rethinkers

The Rethinkers are a group of New Orleans secondary school students who came together after Hurricane Katrina to make a difference in their schools. Fed up with the high suspensions rates in the schools, they set out to develop restorative justice practices designed to replace punishment with reconciliation and healing. In 6 short years they have made a real difference in ending what they see as the "school-to-prison pipeline."¹

Restorative Justice is a worldwide social justice movement and can be seen as a civil rights movement of the 21st Century. The right to a quality education has been seriously eroded in the United States and other Western countries. Research has demonstrated that simply accelerating cognitive learning through high stakes testing and neglecting social and emotional learning (SEL) is not addressing the whole child. Recognition of this deficiency was highlighted by two groundbreaking books by Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*.² In 1994, Goleman co-founded The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)³

Restorative Justice with its origins in traditional wisdom and indigenous peoples practices is the perfect vehicle for delivery of SEL. What follows is a discussion of how

¹ Please see "Rethink Documentary 2010" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVxfJ-jEugZQ>

² Goleman, D. *Emotional Intelligence*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1995); Goleman, D. *Social Intelligence* (Bantam Books: New York, 2006); See Goldman, D, & Senge, P. *The Triple Focus: A new Approach to Education* (More Than Sound: Florence, MA, 2014) for a new text that provides educators with a rationale for incorporating three core skill sets in the classroom-understanding self, other, and the larger systems within which we operate.

³ See casel.org for a full discussion of SEL and the skills & competencies that are the backbone of SEL. They are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making. CASEL produced a groundbreaking meta-analysis in 2011 that included 213 positive youth development, SEL, character education, and prevention interventions involving 207,000 students, and demonstrated that students exposed to SEL practices improved academic achievement by an average of 11%.

SEL's five competencies are integrated into restorative narrative practices as we at Restorative Schools Vision Project have developed them.⁴

1. Self-awareness:

Restorative Practices are values based that focus on a student's strengths not his or her deficiencies. By using circles in the class rooms, RJ places great emphasis upon working **with** students to understand and practice secular ethical values such as caring for others, empathy, compassion, kindness and respect. An interregal aspect of Restorative Narrative practices that we advocate and encourage is to emphasize that *the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem*.

The self that students need to become aware of and need to nurture is the **caring, respectful and compassionate self**, not the disruptive and obstructive self. By the student separating him or her self, from the **problem**, the student is challenged to take responsibility for his or her actions. This same practice of separating the person from the problem or problematic behavior is used throughout our preventive work in Circles and our responsive work in Restorative Conversations, Restorative Conferences and Restorative Mediations.

Circles are also appropriate for working with students to identify positive and negative emotions, the triggers for negative emotions, and how the responses to these emotions affect others. Restorative conversations can serve this same purpose.

2. Self-management:

Self-awareness leads to self-management once a student becomes aware that his or her disruptive behaviors are the problem, not him or herself. It is easier to manage stress and control impulses once the student realizes that his or her behavior is the focus, not his or her self.

Strong emphasis is placed on **appreciation** of the person. Appreciation strengthens and reinforces competencies that allow students to monitor his or her progress toward personal and academic goals, as well as express emotions appropriately. Once the strong and competent self is re-membered, the validated emerging positive self can take charge and move away from old bad habits, replacing them with new strength based good habits.

⁴ Restorative Schools Vision Project is a non-profit organization dedicated to working with schools to transform their cultures by shifting the paradigm from punishment for mistakes made to accountability through supportive empathetic and culturally sensitive practices. (See restorativeschoolsproject.org and our link to our Facebook page.)

3. Social awareness:

Restorative Narrative processes that we practice and teach are primarily relational in nature. These practices are informed by the ethical values, mentioned above, of caring, empathy, and compassion. As in self-awareness and self-management, our non-hierarchical circle practice places all students on the same plane and encourages face to face caring interaction. In the classroom circles, we have developed respect agreements with students and teachers. Students take responsibility for making these agreements by defining what it means to be respectful toward each other, toward their teacher and toward the school facilities. Along with their teacher they also define and develop what it means for their teacher to be respectful toward them.

We encourage students to use this same respectful process at home and in their community. This practice is developed from the bottom up and moves toward a collaborative and community based ethic. Together we become stronger and more responsible.

4. Relational skills:

Like social awareness, relationship skills, based upon collaboration and cooperation grow out of empathetic and compassionate interaction first introduced in circles. Along with individual rights and responsibilities, relational responsibilities are equally important. When harms are caused, students are given the opportunity to take responsibility for the harms caused in a supportive environment. We emphasize high levels of responsibility along with high levels of support.

Restorative mediations offer a high level of support to enable students to make things right. In more serious matters, a restorative conference involving family and community members is encouraged. This process gives both the person harmed and the one or ones causing harm an opportunity to gain deeper understandings of the causes of the harm and then to take creative steps to heal. The relational skills learned in circles provide the scaffolding for this to succeed.

5. Responsible decision-making:

After self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relational skills are learned and practiced, students are prepared to make responsible decisions. We see this as the logical consequences of the above skill building and, as it turns out, is the easiest part of restorative narrative SEL work. For example, in a restorative mediation students learn not only how to resolve conflict, but more importantly, what were the causes of conflict. By examining the full cultural, social, and gendered context out of which conflict arises, students gain the deep understandings necessary to make wise academic and social decisions. The focus has thus shifted from the harm caused and

the student's role in that harm to the solutions for the harm caused. The student who caused the harm becomes a part of the solution. It is easier to take responsibility for harm caused when the harm is seen like a third person, outside of the student.

An example of responsible decision making is to work with students to help them shift from being bystanders to negative behaviors such as bullying and aggression to becoming upstanders. To stand up draws upon empathetic and compassionate skills learned in circle practices.

This process, reinforced by community involvement, thus reinforces social and emotional learning both at school and at home. As the song at the beginning of this paper illustrates: "Restorative justice will change humanity."

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