



The Equity Knowledge Network

Restorative Approach to Education

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What is a restorative approach to education?

A restorative approach to education invites all members of a school community to participate proactively in building healthy relationships and a positive school climate. Typically, schools implement restorative practices such as conferences, circles, and mediation, but they do not adopt a comprehensive restorative approach that supports community development. Instead, educators use restorative practices to manage individual student behaviour and respond to issues such as bullying and violence. Schools tend to use these practices to control student behaviour because educators' understanding of a restorative approach has been shaped by the criminal justice system (Vaandering, 2010).

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Restorative justice, a process that originated in Indigenous tradition, was adopted by the Western criminal justice system in the 1970s. Restorative justice filled the gap between retributive justice and rehabilitative justice. Retributive justice holds offenders accountable for their harmful actions without supporting them, while rehabilitative justice supports offenders without holding them accountable (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). Restorative justice achieves both objectives.

It requires offenders to face the impact of their offence on the victim, but it also draws offenders into the community and supports them in changing their behaviour (Brunk, 2001).

A restorative approach to education is not primarily focused on reacting to individual student misbehaviour (Reimer, 2018). Instead, a restorative approach encourages schools to tend to the relationships within their communities on an ongoing basis. It calls upon individuals to share their perspective on harmful aspects of relationships and build healthy relationships within the school community. It also calls for systemic changes that will address the root causes of harm and improve the learning environment (Vaandering, 2010). This shift away from correcting individual behaviour and toward engaging all aspects of the school community requires a commitment to restorative principles (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015).

What are the principles of a restorative approach to education?

According to Llewellyn and Llewellyn (2015), the principles of a restorative approach to education include, but are not limited to, relationality, contextualism, dialogism, and future orientation.

The principle of **relationality** teaches us that people develop “in and through relationships” (p. 16). Our identities are shaped by our relationships and the social groups that we belong to such as our race, gender, or class. Ultimately, our relationships can both help and harm us.



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In order to have healthy relationships, we must strive for relational equality. This means that we treat each person with an equal amount of respect, dignity, and care based on the context and their individual needs.

The principle of **contextualism** reminds us that we need to pay attention to the context in which our relationships exist. The behaviours, issues, and decisions in our school communities are not isolated. Everything that happens in our schools is shaped by that context. In order to understand how a school community impacts the people and relationships within it, we need to engage all the individuals and understand their perspectives on the community.

The principle of **dialogism** teaches us that harm can only be addressed in relation to one another through dialogue. This communication should include a range of community members from inside and outside of the school. However, all people are not able to participate equally in dialogue due to their experiences of marginalization. Schools should begin dialogue by asking marginalized community members about what they need to engage effectively in the process. Then, schools should strive to meet those needs throughout the process to support the participation of marginalized community members. When stakeholders engage in dialogue out of a genuine desire to understand the perspectives of others, the process can lead to decision making that reflects the varied needs of the school community. It is critical that the school community's input is not just heard; it must have a meaningful impact on the choices that are made within the school.

The principle of **future orientation** reminds us that a restorative approach is focused on understanding the present situation to make meaningful changes in the future.

The restorative approach is not focused on correcting individual behaviour, and instead calls for collective action and changes in social relationships. These changes should happen in areas such as policy, curriculum, assessment, and more.



How have restorative practices been used to reduce suspension and expulsion rates?

In the 1990s and 2000s, schools used restorative practices as an alternative to suspensions and other consequences that excluded students from the school community (Reimer, 2018). These practices were adopted by some Ontario school boards in order to shift away from the punitive measures outlined in the *Safe Schools Act* (SSA) (2000). The SSA legislated mandatory suspension or expulsion for certain offences, and these fixed consequences were similar to zero-tolerance policies in the United States (Winton, 2012). Many school boards used the term “zero tolerance” in their discipline policies, even though the SSA instructed educators to use their discretion and consider mitigating factors in cases that did not require mandatory consequences (Hussain, 2015).



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After the adoption of this policy, suspension and expulsion rates increased significantly in Ontario (Winton, 2012). Black students and students with disabilities were overrepresented in these statistics, prompting an official complaint from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2007). In 2007, the Ontario Ministry of Education amended the SSA based on the findings of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Act was renamed the Progressive Discipline and School Safety Act (PDSS).

The PDSS reflected the Ministry's shift toward supportive alternatives to suspension and expulsion such as restorative practices and progressive discipline (Vaandering, 2010). Progressive discipline is still an integral part of Ministry legislation that calls for a "continuum of prevention programs, interventions, supports, and consequences" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018). These interventions should be early and ongoing. The consequences should be developmentally appropriate for students and should reflect mitigating factors. Progressive discipline is also a whole school approach focused on building a positive climate and respectful relationships between all members of the school community. Suspension and expulsion rates decreased once the PDSS was implemented (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017a).

This decrease in suspensions and expulsions demonstrates that policies that include aspects of a restorative approach can help to reduce the need for exclusionary responses to student behaviour. However, progressive discipline is insufficient because it is a largely reactive approach to conflict focused on correcting undesirable individual behaviour. Although it represents a systemic change in the Ministry's approach to discipline, it does not call for systemic change that addresses barriers to student success.

Black students (Zheng & De Jesus, 2017; Maynard, 2017), students with disabilities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017b), students from households with low socioeconomic status, students who identify as male, and students dealing with mental health challenges (Pollock, Faubert, Hauseman, Bakker, 2017) are still overrepresented in suspension and expulsion rates, an indication that more comprehensive solutions are needed to address this inequity.

How have restorative practices been used in Ontario schools?

Near North District School Board. In 2005, parents and community members in the Near North District School Board urged the board to change their approach to discipline. In response, the board implemented restorative practices at Almaguin Highlands Secondary school with funding from the Ministry of Child and Youth Services and the support of practitioner Jeff Thornborrow. The school held training sessions for staff, students, parents, and community members that informed all stakeholders about restorative practices and prepared them to participate. Almaguin Highlands Secondary School had 5 restorative conferences with 31 participants total (Wunderlich, 2008). The participants included students, parents, a facilitator, a vice principal, and occasionally a police liaison. The participants met in a neutral space to discuss their perspectives and develop solutions for improving student behaviour. These conferences led to shortened suspensions and a 0% recidivism rate among the students involved (Ruddy in McCullough, 2007). The program was expanded to two other secondary schools in 2007 and one school reported that the use of restorative circles resulted in improved student decision-making and supported students, staff, and parents in restoring relationships after harm occurred (Gibbon, Ruddy, & Thornborrow, 2008).



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Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board. In 2006, the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board implemented restorative practices as a board-wide response to student misbehaviour (Wunderlich, 2008). The board trained all staff, students, parents, and community members in the Real Justice model, a restorative justice program from Australia. Real Justice poses restorative questions that help participants to share their perspective on a conflict and reflect on their role in the problem and its solution.

According to Wunderlich (2008), the board connected the process to character education by identifying ten core values that could guide schools in their shift from punitive to restorative practices. The schools reported that these practices were an effective alternative to suspension and expulsion because students had the opportunity to understand the impact of the harm that they caused. In 2018, the board remains committed to their guiding values and using restorative practices as a whole-school approach to addressing conflict. They have also developed School Well-being Teams comprised of students, staff, parents, and community members that lead their schools in developing a positive climate (Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, 2018).

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How do we shift toward a comprehensive restorative approach?

While the Near North District School Board and the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board are using restorative practices as a response to student misbehaviour, other communities are shifting toward a comprehensive restorative approach. According to Amy Hunt (2018), Nova Scotia's Restorative Approaches in Schools Project has supported the province in moving away from the reactive, one-size-fits-all model of restorative practices. Instead, Nova Scotia schools are exploring how restorative principles can be used to improve existing school-based practices, policies and procedures, strategies, and processes. These systemic changes are an integral part of a restorative approach to education that removes barriers to student success and fosters a positive school climate.

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