

Mending The Harm - Using Restorative Approaches to Tackle Bullying

Forest Hill School is a large local authority maintained boys' comprehensive in the London Borough of Lewisham. We have always been a popular, oversubscribed school with good results but in 2002 it would be fair to say that we were also over controlled and overly punitive. Sanctions had become our first response to problems and our fixed term and permanent exclusions were very high. We set a high standard and we enforced it rigidly.

At this time, senior staff were the first port of call for discipline issues and individual staff were relieved of the need to follow up or reconnect with misbehaving students. As a result the sanctions systems were swamped and discredited. Despite clear guidelines on how and when to use detentions, boys ended up in the most severe detention - school detention - for such disparate offences as 'Failing to bring a pen' and 'Swearing at the teacher'. Staff gave out detentions by the yard and some boys had more than their hours in the school day. This quickly led to the whole matter being routinely ignored and as there was a vestigial 'honour' system whereby the boys were given a slip which they were supposed to take home and get signed, parents were unaware of how many detentions their son had incurred. Fixed Term exclusions were the automatic response to serious bullying. The situation had been untenable for some time but we had no framework for change. The 'Three strikes and you're out' system promoted by the then government didn't meet our needs at all. It wasn't until we discovered 'Restorative Approaches' that we began to see how we might manage whole school change.

As part of the Behaviour Improvement Programme, the Local Authority approached the Australian practitioner, Marg Thorsborne, to come and offer training for schools. The course was inspirational, the arguments compelling and, by the end of it, I could see that it might provide the structure for us to begin to change. One of the key success factors was that the course had received such rave reviews that the LA invited Marg Thorsborne back and from that point she came on a bi-annual basis for the next few years. This meant that I could be confident that I could plan strategically for key staff to be trained on a roll out and that I could be equally confident about the quality of training they would get. Real whole school change is a gradual process. I looked for those colleagues who would be most receptive to the ideas and the challenge of changing the way we worked with our young people.

Introducing restorative work really means changing the way you approach wrongdoing:

Restorative justice in the school setting views misconduct not as school-rule-breaking and therefore a violation of the institution, but as a violation against people and relationships in the school and wider school community. Restorative justice means that the harm done to people and relationships needs to be explored and that harm needs to be repaired.

(Cameron and Thorsborne, 2001)

One of our biggest problems was that the legacy of everything being passed to senior staff perpetuated a culture of defiance from students for those staff who were not perceived as having status in the school. Redressing this meant that all staff had to accept that fixing something that had gone wrong was everyone's responsibility.

The first thing I had to do was to change my vocabulary. When investigating an incident I began with 'Clearly someone has made a mistake and has caused harm' followed by an invitation to whoever it was to step forward and join me in attempting to put things right. This offer was made with the students knowing that if they didn't take up the invitation to own up, take responsibility and work with me then I would have to investigate and when I found out who was responsible, then serious sanctions would follow. This was their opportunity to be involved in the matter.

The first time I tried it, I could hear myself speaking and thought 'this will never work', but to my surprise the boys concerned put their hands up and we began the process of putting matters right. This period of trying things out, building confidence and seeing the engagement with students was very important. These small scale individual successes led to feeling we could take it on as a school. By this time I had managed to get all the pastoral leaders trained and together we decided on a pilot. We resolved that no year 7 student would receive a fixed term exclusion unless they had first had the opportunity to participate in a restorative conference. I also managed to organise a session for all staff with Marg to ensure they were fully aware of the principles of restorative work.

When talking to students it becomes clear that they don't always share the same views on sanctions as the school. They want bullying to stop, they want whatever has gone wrong put right and they want some confidence it will not happen again. They also need a voice in what happens. Quite often, when students had been found bullying and had been excluded for a few days, whilst the parents or carers may come to a re-integration meeting, the victim was not included and was left not knowing what had happened and waiting fearfully for the reappearance of their tormentor, imagining that it would be all the worse when they got back. Putting the victim at the heart of the process means they can have a safe and supported opportunity to explain what it was like for them and to know that the bully has heard the harm that has been done. This is not a 'no blame' approach. Students can only engage in a restorative if they accept responsibility for the harm they have caused and genuinely want to make amends.

Engaging in this work broke the staff expectation that serious incidents would be dealt with by exclusions. The difference between restorative approaches and other behaviour schemes is that it is a root and branch change of attitude to wrong doing. For us instead of expelling the problem we needed to find a way of seeing ourselves as an institution that sat at the heart of its community and was strong enough to work with young people and their families to effect a change in their behaviour. At the end of the pilot year we had reduced the fixed term exclusions for year 7 by 75%.

Using restorative approaches has enabled us to articulate a school philosophy that relationships are centrally important and the key task for the teacher is to make, sustain and restore relationships that support students in their learning. We were able to put the focus on the need to reconnect when something has gone wrong and a student is asked to leave the classroom. For the teacher there is a clear expectation that they will organise reconnecting with the student. To make reconnecting important for the student we redesigned the sanctions system so that detentions are only issued once opportunities to go back and fix the problem have been ignored.

What has been critically important has been giving parents a key role at the beginning, not at the end of a decision. This has transformed the relationships with some parents. I am no longer inviting them in to tell them what is going to happen, but to ask for their input into what we (school staff, parents and students) are going to do. Even when the decision is a tricky one - that the student has ignored earlier restoratives and caused further harm and so will now have time out of school- parents have been understanding and supportive. Where serious harm has been done and parents have been involved in the meetings, they are clear that the opportunity to support their son in restoring the harm he has done has been incredibly important. For parents of the victims, the opportunity to meet the person who has caused harm and their parents has been reassuring and given them closure on the incident.

Students who engage in the process and make a contract to avoid further harm almost always keep it. One of the things we developed was 'Community Service' where boys could do something for the school, working with the premises staff to make amends. Where the process has worked and students have suggested this or agreed to it, they have always turned up and engaged with good grace. One of the best outcomes from meetings has been to be able to say to students that you are proud of how they have managed themselves in a meeting and to be able to thank them for the help they have given. The matter has been restored; everyone can move on.

As our confidence grew we began to use classroom conferences allow students a structured way of making their voice heard. These begin with all students in the class writing a confidential answer to the questions 'what are the problems harming relationships in this group' and 'what are the problems stopping the learning'. The answers are typed and names are removed before being read out by the teacher in the conference so that everyone can hear how people feel about what is happening in the class but from a neutral voice.

It is very important to think through what questions you are going to ask the group. The format of the meeting is very structured with boys speaking in turn. It is very important to be comfortable with silence and to go around the circle more than once as the boys who 'pass 'on an opportunity to speak the first time frequently hear someone else say something that gives them a model for their own contribution. Lastly, when the moment is right, students are asked to own the harm that they have done. I am always amazed and impressed by how painfully honest students can be and how readily boys accept these comments and forgive. At the close the class agree on a contract for future behaviour between themselves.

This is powerful stuff and not to be undertaken lightly. I have talked to school teams who say 'we do this anyway' but whilst individual teachers may well be intuitively restorative in their relationships with students, conferencing and class conferencing needs trained people if you are to avoid re-victimising students. Nor should you underestimate how draining the big conferences can be. The preparation is time consuming but it is in the preparation that change happens. When conferences are less successful it will have been because the preliminary stages were rushed or skipped.

The school has seen real and sustained change in individuals and in groups. It doesn't mean that nothing 'bad' ever happens again, but it increases the confidence that when something happens it

can be fixed. We have seen real impact - yes, we have reduced exclusions and sanctions but the real measure is in improved relationships. This way of responding to harm also gives students the opportunity to develop their emotional maturity as you offer them a model and the support to articulate difficult feelings both as victim and as someone who has caused harm. The time that you would in any case have had to spend on punishment now has a much bigger gain in promoting good relationships and in enabling students to engage with difficult emotions successfully.

One of the most important gains from introducing restorative approaches across the school community has been the ability to focus on those students who need interventions and greater support. The focus has moved from student behaviour to staff behaviour, because if you can get staff to use restorative approaches with everything that goes wrong, most things can be fixed by the class teacher. In addition, this consistency in staff responses has allowed the inclusion team to target support much more accurately and ensure that provision is effectively mapped to need. Now, when a problem does occur, the students are participants in fixing it and so gain confidence that their class community is resilient.

When our students are asked about whether there is any bullying in the school, they have the confidence to say that there is bullying in every school but at Forest Hill it is dealt with quickly and effectively. Restorative thinking begins by acknowledging that harm occurs in any community; that there is an obligation to restore that harm and that everyone in the community has a role in that process. In that transparency lies its success.

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