

by
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About the Authors



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Restorative Schools: Using Community Circles for Culture Transformation

At North View High School (not its real name), they kept coming back to school even after they graduated. When North View started implementing restorative practices last school year, they began an after-school program called, simply, "Community." Students whose behaviors previously would have led to an immediate detention were given the option: go to lunch detention or come to Community. At Community, the Assistant Principal and a guidance counselor, both trained in restorative practices, led students in a circle process. While students had to share what behavior had led them to be there, they spent the majority of the time talking about what was going on in their lives. One outcome was that the behaviors (such as wandering the halls, being late to class) ceased. More importantly, the students kept coming back – and started bringing their friends. Earlier, this year, some students who graduated continued to show up to Community at school once a week.

Over the past twenty years, and with growing frequency in the last decade, school districts across North America have brought restorative practices into their schools, using restorative conferencing to respond to serious harm, sometimes hiring restorative justice (RJ) coordinators to handle everyday conflict. In this model, "restorative justice" often looks like a facilitated discussion between a student who has harmed a peer or, more realistically, all people involved who have contributed to the conflict somehow.

For instance, tenth grader Kiera started a social media sexual rumor about Maria after hearing that Maria was interested in Kiera's boyfriend. A trained RJ facilitator (adult or peer) brought together the students and other supportive individuals of the students' choosing, and guided the, in a conversation using restorative questions, such as "What happened?" "Who was affected and how?" and "What needs to happen to make things as right as possible?" The conversation led to an agreement about what the parties planned to do to repair the harm and move forward. Almost always, bringing people together in a predictable, non-judgmental space and giving them a chance to hear each other will result in some repair. The student who started the rumor might apologize. A teacher who participated in the restorative conversation might support the students to understand how sexism leads girls to feel insecure and take their insecurities out on each other instead of working together. The girls might agree to talk with their peers about why spreading rumors on social media is harmful and what to do if we see it happening.

These processes are powerful. In order for restorative practices to truly transform a school, however, it must be implemented school-wide and on many levels, not as a simple alternative to the usual punishment that happens in isolation from the rest of the school climate. Schools doing whole-school change work embrace proactive community building as a key strategy in creating a truly restorative school. Over the long haul, in fact, restorative community-building processes, such as circles, create obvious harm repair.

ACE STUDY

The landmark Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE) shed light on a stark reality that most children have or are experiencing adverse experiences such as a family member with mental illness, divorce, abuse, neglect, or domestic violence. The toxic stress created by these experiences can affect students' physical and mental health, putting them in a chronic state of fight, flight, or freeze, pumping stress hormones to their own bodies' detriment. The impacts of these adverse experiences can persist into adulthood—developing into conditions like depression, heart disease, substance abuse, and suicide.

Children coming from adverse experiences often struggle to gauge threats, self-regulate emotions, and bounce back from setbacks. Think of a student, Serena, who was late to class because she was helping her siblings get ready for school. Her dad wasn't around and mom was actively using opioids. Serena was on high alert from toxic stress. When a teacher reprimanded Serena for being late, she snapped. Too often behaviors like this are seen in isolation, interpreted as "dysfunctional behaviors", and deserving of "discipline."

It's clear how a restorative harm-repair process, like the one between Kiera and Maria, can be much more powerful than a detention or suspension. But how can sitting in a community-building circle support Serena to regulate her emotions and offset the negative impact of childhood trauma?

SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

Children like Serena "act out" because they have deep unmet needs for safety, understanding, love, belonging, and to be seen. They are at higher risk of participating in unhealthy and risky behaviors like early substance use and early sexual initiation. However, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says, "*school connectedness*— [is] the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning

as well as about them as individuals..." Research has shown that students who experience higher rates of school connectedness have better outcomes in risky behaviors, as well as attendance and academics. Community building circles are a powerful strategy in building school connectedness.

WHAT IS A CIRCLE?

Many indigenous people, from the Tlingit to the Maori people, have used circle process long before the implementation of restorative practices in schools. While our background and experience is not drawn directly from those traditions, it is important to acknowledge that this way of engaging with one another is not a recent or Western discovery.

Participants are seated in a circle so that everyone can face one another. Usually there are no tables or other objects in the middle of the circle, unless participants decide to place objects important to them in the center.

An adult, a student, or both, facilitate the circle, using predetermined, relevant, meaningful questions. The routine of the circle is the same every time, creating predictability and a trauma-sensitive practice. Authority figures such as teachers and principals share their thoughts in the circle as well, shifting the power dynamics from adult-centered to the collective.

A talking piece is used -- whoever is holding the object gets the opportunity to speak; everyone else listens. Participants have the opportunity to pass if they want -- this is a trauma sensitive approach, as it gives students choice. Participants (including the facilitator) do not respond directly to shares. Instead, they can wait for the talking piece to come back around to them.

Community-building circles can tackle everything from low-risk ice-breakers (What's your favorite food?) to discussing classroom norms (What does respect mean to you?) to processing a school fight (How did you feel when you heard about what happened?) to sharing feelings after a staff member's death (How do you take care of yourself when you're having a hard time?). Student and adult participants build community when they get to know each other and, through vulnerability in a structured, predictable, and non-judgmental space, develop meaningful, caring relationships. These relationships are between peers, between students and adults, and between adults (for instance, try a circle in your next faculty meeting and see what happens).

For a student walking in the door with multiple adverse experience at home, like Serena, a community building circle can be a safe and appropriate space for her to have some of those deep needs of understanding, love, to be seen, safety met. This school connectedness fostered by this process safely and surely begins to build resilience and repair some of the harm students experienced outside the classroom. That is why the students who graduated from North View High School kept coming back week after week.

IN PRACTICE

Replicating the successful pioneering of student-led advisories in Oakland, California, one New England school has trained students and their advisory teachers in community-building circles. Students now lead some of their weekly Advisory groups (small

groups of students that meet weekly with a faculty member, otherwise known as "homeroom").

The teacher connected to an advisory reports a complete transformation of her group due to the students running community-building circles. They went from acting bored and disaffected to engaged and supportive of one another. In another school, a teacher integrated restorative practices into her social justice class. Students were trained to facilitate circle process both to build community and to repair harm. The class was a mixture of all kinds of students, coming from different cliques, including students facing significant challenges. After one month of the class, students who previously would not have given each other a second look in the hallway expressed interest in spending time with each other outside of school. The reason? As one student said, "We're family now."

At North View, the weekly after school "Community" started as a way for students who would have otherwise served a detention to repair harm while building community. But over time, the group welcomed friends and other students who sought community connection. In the circle, the guidance counselor facilitator starts by asking students to share their "highs and lows" -- something that is going well and something that is hard. Then students share why they are at Community. Students who opt in might say, "Because I like you guys" or "I like the community." Students for whom community is an alternative to detention share about the incident that led them to choose community over "consequences." These students can ask the group either to listen or, using the talking piece, brainstorm how to repair the harm. In this way, harm repair becomes a community process -- not just left to the individual -- a key aspect of restorative practices.

Importantly, community-building circles shift the responsibility of caring for and supporting students from the shoulders of adults alone to all the people in the building -- young people included -- creating a more organic and resilient network. Within the North View community group, when a student worried he was unable to afford a tux for the prom, other students in Community pitched in to pay for the tux and bought him a seat in the limo. The Community group also expanded their activities to supporting the broader community by running a clothing drive and taking on other community service initiatives.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) recommends that "responsive circles" should be used 20% of the time to respond to harm, and that "proactive circles" be used 80% to build community. We would expand that principle to encompass all restorative practices. In a restorative school environment the majority of restorative activities should be focused on community. As a preventive measure, building community through methods like circles decreases the likelihood that harm will occur in the school environment. Furthermore, when harm does happen, students have both the relational incentive and the circle process to do the necessary repair.

Notably, while community might not directly solve the problems of abuse, neglect, and other harm originating outside the school building, it does mitigate their impacts by creating a space where students can be seen, heard, valued and cared for. In other words, community-building circles can pave the way for healing. ■