



Establishing a Restorative Mindset

Considerations for Adults in Schools

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What Is a Restorative Mindset?

A restorative mindset is a way of thinking. It is a world view that values inclusive, collaborative approaches for being together in community. These approaches validate the experiences and needs of everyone, particularly those who may have been marginalized, oppressed or harmed. Acting through a restorative mindset allows us to respond in ways that are healing and supportive rather than alienating, punitive or coercive.¹ A restorative mindset informs our daily interactions with others. Educators who interact restoratively with students “‘model’ effective ways of building and maintaining emotionally healthy relationships, and promote helpful, prosocial attitudes.”²

In a sense, **a restorative mindset is simply a “way of life” or “way of being”** that places emphasis on healthy, respectful relationships among adults and children as a central value at school. This mindset challenges us to refocus our outlook so that positive relationships become the center of all interactions, including those that involve discipline.

The idea of interacting with others through a restorative mindset is gaining attention as a progressive option for building healthy school communities, repairing harm and restoring relationships.^{3,4}

Howard Zehr, a pioneer of restorative justice, implies that although the restorative mindset may not have a financial cost, it can be quite complex to adopt.



“Restorative approaches are values-based and needs-led.”² These approaches are an integral part of a positive school climate that supports healthy relationships and a shared sense of community as a foundation for teaching and learning. The principles of a restorative mindset are based in and build upon the central tenets of humanistic psychology.

Genuineness – engaging with honesty, openness and sincerity.

Positive regard for all individuals – valuing self and others for who we are.

Empathy – striving to understand the experiences of others.

Self-actualization – seeing capacity for positive growth in self and others.

Optimistic perspectives on personal development – believing that people can learn and change for the better.

Accountability – acknowledging individual and community responsibility.²

Our mindset, or how we frame our thinking, guides our approach to people and situations. When we value others and their humanity, we recognize that we all have a great deal in common. Rather than building barriers between ourselves and others, we focus instead on our commonalities – the shared experience of being human, living and interacting with others in a complex society. By framing our interactions with others through a restorative lens, we choose to see the best in others and view them from a strengths-based perspective. **A restorative mindset is applied in an equitable, culturally responsive fashion.** In this way, it is a universal strategy used with everyone.

Choosing to view the world through a restorative perspective is just that – a choice. It is a moment-by-moment decision to:

- Intentionally reframe negative thinking
- Deliberately resolve to be optimistic
- Purposefully determine to treat others with dignity and respect

Why Is a Restorative Mindset Important in School Settings?

A restorative mindset is based on authentic care for others, viewing the action of students, colleagues, parents and others in the best possible light. While looking for the best in others helps us connect more positively with them in any situation, this shift in focus also allows us to provide students with supports and interventions they may need in order to make positive choices and be successful. One way to show students that we care about them is to treat them and others with dignity and respect. Choosing to interact with all students in a positive, respectful manner allows us to demonstrate that we value them as vital and respected members of our school community. Students who have a positive connection to school engage in risky behavior less often.

When we as educators interact with students through a restorative lens, our words and actions show students we care about them and as a result, their academic and health outcomes are improved.⁵

A restorative mindset can compliment any school reform or school climate initiative. Because a restorative mindset is a conscious decision to see the best in others, it can be integrated into every interaction we have or program we undertake. Anti-bullying programs, positive school climate initiatives, and schoolwide positive behavior systems can all benefit when implementers approach the work with restorative thinking. But, as Zehr implied, this may be more easily said than done.^{3,4}

A restorative mindset starts with self – it starts with one person electing to value and respect others. As educators, we have an opportunity to influence this mindset in others when we “walk the talk.” No matter what role an individual plays in a school community, our simple words and actions can contribute to positive school climate when we:

- Treat others the way we want to be treated
- Are open and accepting of others
- Learn about others’ interests
- View others’ actions in the most positive light
- Seek to discover the perspective of others
- Avoid assumptions and judgements



Valuing Lived Experiences of Others

Each person amasses experiences over the course of a lifetime. These experiences shape who we are, how we see the world and our perception of how others see us. **Having a restorative mindset means recognizing and valuing the lived experiences of others.** It acknowledges that while our past experiences may differ in many ways, each person's past is equally valid.

As educators, it is especially important that we take the time to understand the lived experiences of our students and their parents. These experiences shape how they interact with the school community. According to the National Survey of Children's Health measuring adverse childhood experiences, almost half (47.9

percent) of U.S. children under the age of 18 have experienced one or more forms of serious childhood trauma. "Even more concerning, nearly a third of U.S. youth age 12-17 have experienced two or more types of childhood adversity that are likely to affect their physical and mental health as adults."⁶

Valuing the lived experiences of others includes an understanding of the importance of being culturally responsive as we interact with students and parents from cultures that are different from our own. Being culturally competent is "a way of being that affirms one's own culture while positively engaging with those whose cultures differ from their own. It takes into consideration



the differences between cultures, viewing diversity as a benefit and interacting knowledgeably and respectfully among a variety of cultural groups."⁷ **Cultural responsiveness is a key factor in establishing healthy relationships.**

Conflict and Healthy Relationships

Open, honest, and safe communication is a fundamental part of a healthy relationship,"⁸ and can serve as the foundation for how we interact with others on a daily basis. But, building and maintaining relationships can be difficult work. Even in healthy relationships, it is natural for people to experience conflicts with others, so conflict resolution skills are essential for everyone. The ability to address conflict is also critical in identifying unhealthy interactions before they have a chance to affect an individual's life in negative ways.⁹

It is imperative that educators help students see conflict as a normal component of healthy relationships within a

Conflict is defined as an "expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals."¹⁰

community. **Taking time to build trust in relationships is crucial for increasing the capacity to handle conflict as it emerges.** By modeling respectful and honest dialogue through conflict, we teach our students these important skills. It is much easier to be honest with others during times of disagreement if we already have established a level of trust.

Conversely, it is important to recognize that not all negative interactions between students fall into the category of "conflict." While it is essential to allow ourselves and our students to engage in thoughtful and respectful discussions to alleviate conflict, it is imperative that we do not use conflict resolution strategies as a way to intervene in situations of peer abuse (e.g., bullying, bias, hazing, intimate partner violence).

Why Must Conflict and Peer Abuse Be Handled Differently?

When a situation occurs where one person is identified as having been harmed and another person has committed harm, face-to-face meetings between those involved would be an inappropriate response, at least initially. Our response must ensure that the person who was harmed is given an opportunity to identify and articulate need and provide input about how those needs can be met. Likewise, the person committing the harm is held accountable both to the person harmed and the broader community.

Peer abuse involves a real or perceived power imbalance and intentional harm. When an imbalance of status or power is used against an individual or group of individuals, be it physical, social or emotional, it is considered peer abuse. An imbalance of power between individuals may result in negative outcomes when the person in the more powerful position chooses to use the power to bully,

intimidate, harass or coerce the other person. It is important to note that a perceived imbalance of power may be just as harmful as an actual imbalance.

Students subjected to peer abuse are at increased risk for a variety of negative outcomes, some of which are serious and potentially life threatening. Students who are bullied experience a greater rate of negative physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, sleeplessness), emotional consequences (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts), and academic challenges (e.g., failing grades, truancy, dropping out) than their non-bullied peers.¹¹ These outcomes may continue into adulthood.¹² Strategies to intervene in abusive behaviors are very different from conflict resolution methods where individuals may be brought together to “work things out.”

When thinking restoratively, it is important to consider the power dynamics between individuals within the school community. Bullying prevention researchers and experts caution against specific uses of restorative practices, such as face-to-face meetings, in cases of bullying out of concern that more harm might occur as a result, especially to a person who has been victimized.^{13,14}

When someone has harmed another, address the harm individually with each involved person. These conversations are important to help each person process the situation. “One-on-one restorative meetings between trained adult facilitators and students who bully may be beneficial in helping students take responsibility for their actions. Similarly, meetings between adult facilitators and students who are bullied may help students recognize that adults care about them and their safety.”¹⁵

Forms of Peer Abuse

Bullying – any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated; bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social or educational harm.¹¹

Bias – an inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair.¹⁶

Hazing – any action taken or any situation created intentionally that causes embarrassment, harassment or ridicule and risks emotional and/or physical harm to members of a group or team, whether new or not, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate.¹⁷



Intimate partner violence – describes physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse; this type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy.¹⁸

Will Adopting a Restorative Mindset Stop Peer Abuse

An important consideration for all schools is whether restorative approaches can dovetail with their existing school climate improvement efforts, and if so, how. Research shows that it is essential for schools to be intentional about addressing problem behaviors. Reductions in harmful behaviors such as bullying, abuse, harassment, impact of trauma, disproportionality and racial tension cannot be achieved solely through a general “whole school

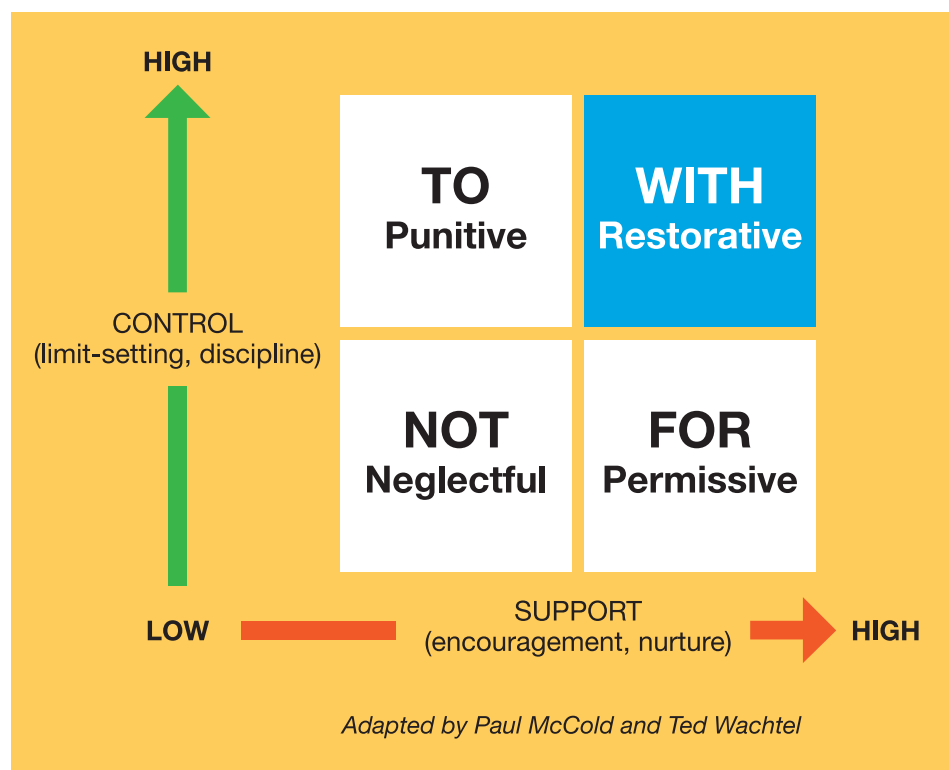
climate” focus. Integration of multiple school climate improvement efforts is necessary to address specific types of peer abuse and achieve desired reductions. Changes in school climate do not automatically create change in the prevalence of peer abuse. Research-based programs that address peer abuse must intentionally teach staff and students that bullying and other harmful acts are unacceptable, as well as how to address and stop these harms.



Can a Restorative Mindset Impact Discipline?

Educators who approach discipline through a restorative mindset are focused on repairing harms to individuals and/or the school community. This does not mean that restorative discipline ignores negative behaviors or code of conduct infractions. It does, however, mean that the focus and outcomes of restorative discipline is quite different from those experienced through authoritarian-based discipline.

The four quadrants of the Social Discipline Window represent different degrees of either high or low control and high or low support.¹⁹ While a punitive approach to discipline may result in immediate compliance it may also produce resentment on behalf all parties. A permissive approach may be well-intentioned, but the end result can devolve into enabling or rescuing a person from the logical consequences of their choices. Too often, people who operate exclusively out of either the Punitive or Permissive quadrants end up frustrated, tired, exhausted



and sometimes cynical that anything will ever change. This results in an unwillingness to address the behavior and could lead to inaction.

Adopting a restorative mindset combines both high control and high support. Wachtel's fundamental hypothesis states that "human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them."²⁰

In school settings, one of the most persistent challenges in turning towards a restorative mindset as it relates to discipline is the issue of time. This involves a commitment to get below the surface of troubling behaviors. **While it may take more time to think and act restoratively, the end result is more likely to create a healthy community because people are engaged directly in the process.** A restorative mindset values depth over speed and effectiveness over efficiency. A restorative approach amplifies the value of accountability over punishment. This investment of time may result in more meaningful teaching and learning for both students and educators.



Authoritarian Approach		Restorative Approach
Focus	Rule-breaking; blame or guilt; adversarial processes; punishment to deter; and impersonal processes	Harm done to individuals; responsibility and problem-solving; dialogue and negotiation; repair, apology and reparation; and interpersonal processes
Outcome	Needs of those affected are often ignored and unmet needs behind the behavior are ignored	Needs of those affected are addressed and unmet needs behind the behavior are addressed
Accountability	Being punished	Putting things right ²

What Is the Connection Between Restorative Mindset and Restorative Practices?

Before a school can begin implementing specific restorative practices, staff and students must first begin interacting through a restorative mindset. The focus on building positive relationships among staff, students and parents is necessary to create a connected and concerned school community. Once this shared focus is underway, implementing specific

restorative practices and strategies is a logical next step. **Restorative practices offer a continuum of prevention and intervention activities to support positive behaviors and reduce negative behaviors or troubled relationships.**¹⁹

Restorative practices are based on the following basic principles:

- All people are connected
- Everyone should be treated with dignity and respect
- Each person's unique, lived experiences shape their truth
- Each person is responsible and held accountable for their actions²¹

Where Can I Learn More?

This white paper provides information about establishing a restorative mindset. Educators who are interested in implementing specific restorative practices, bullying prevention or other school climate improvement programs, are encouraged to identify research-informed programs that will address area(s) of need. Successful implementation of any

evidenced-based program requires completion of program specific training, development of aligned policies and procedures, and adherence to fidelity.

For additional guidance, contact the authors of this paper listed on page 2. See also, Integrating Bullying Prevention and Restorative Practices in Schools:

Considerations for Practitioners and Policymakers, accessible at <http://www.safeschools.info/content/BPRPWhitePaper2014.pdf>.

This white paper can be accessed at www.safeschools.info/white-paper/restorative-mindset-in-school-settings-2018.pdf.

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Resources

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The Highmark Foundation is a private, charitable organization of Highmark Inc. that supports initiatives and programs aimed at improving community health. The Foundation's mission is to improve the health, well-being and quality of life for individuals who reside in the communities served by Highmark Inc. The Foundation strives to support evidence-based programs that impact multiple counties and work collaboratively to leverage additional funding to achieve replicable models.

www.HighmarkFoundation.org



For nearly two decades, the Center for Safe Schools (Center) has been committed to developing creative and effective solutions to problems that disrupt the educational process and affect school safety. The Center is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and National Crime Prevention Council as one of 20 statewide school safety centers in the nation.

www.SafeSchools.info



Clemson University's Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life (IFNL) was created to generate, share and apply the knowledge needed to strengthen ties between families and communities. Safe and Humane Schools within IFNL leads efforts in the U.S. to implement the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, an international comprehensive schoolwide program designed for use in elementary, middle and high schools.

www.clemson.edu/olweus



The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) is a graduate school that offers courses and master's degrees in the emerging field of restorative practices (RP) and is a leading world provider of RP training, consulting and materials. IIRP is dedicated to the advanced education of professionals at the graduate level and to the conduct of research that can develop the growing field of restorative practices, with the goal of positively influencing human behavior and strengthening civil society throughout the world.

www.iirp.edu



Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a global, nonprofit organization that strives to share God's love and compassion for all through relief, development and peace. MCC's restorative justice work in the U.S. and around the world focuses on strengthening relationships based on respect and responsibility.

mcc.org/learn/what/restorative-justice

