Charting Your Course
FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Restorative Approach in Nova Scotia Schools

By Amy Hunt

The emergence of restorative justice (RJ) in both local and international contexts in recent years speaks to the growing awareness of the need to transform the culture of our social institutions, and the ways in which people experience them. Nova Scotia is home to one of the most comprehensive restorative justice programs in the world and is therefore uniquely placed to implement or apply the restorative approach in schools, as well as other institutions and organizations, including but not limited to the Restorative Inquiry for the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children, the Nova Scotia Youth Facility, Dalhousie University, Senior Safety, and the Department of Community Services.

As Jennifer Llewellyn (2018) explains, "Justice viewed restoratively is fundamentally about just relations. In simple terms, as an approach to justice it says relationship matters to the way we understand justice and the issues at stake, as well as how we respond. This relational view extends beyond interpersonal relationships to relations at the level of groups, of institutions, of systems, and of society."

What does this mean for schools in Nova Scotia?

A restorative approach in schools is a relational approach to education. It seeks to construct positive, inclusive and safe school cultures by fostering respectful and responsible relationships among school community members that are rooted in mutual respect, care, concern and dignity. A restorative approach embodies the idea that our institutions should be mechanisms for social engagement as opposed to social control (Morrison, 2013). Disciplinary issues are not the core of this approach; rather, a restorative approach is attentive to the promotion and protection of positive relationships within a learning community (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). In other words, a restorative approach in school requires more than a restorative response to conflict, harm and wrongdoing; it speaks broadly to a relational way of being, learning and knowing with others in community.

Nova Scotia has invested significantly in a restorative approach in schools. Between September 2012 and August 2015, the Restorative Approaches in Schools Project (RAISP) provided interested schools in Nova Scotia with the tools, resources and supports necessary to adopt a restorative approach. It established a provincial restorative network with over 200 educators and partners to foster a learning community meant to sustain the adoption of a restorative approach in schools. Richard Derible, former Project Lead of RAISP and current Director of Restorative Initiatives at the Nova Scotia Department of Justice has said that "adopting a restorative approach in schools helps us figure out new ways, and enhance the things we are already doing, to make room for every student" (Derible, 2013).

In August 2018, a new RJ unit was formed at the Nova Scotia Department of Justice which has positioned the growth of the restorative approach in education as an ongoing priority.

Why take a restorative approach in schools?

The restorative approach, which is rooted in relational theory, reminds us that students are shaped and constituted by their interactions with other students and their teachers, and that they live their lives in and through a complex web of relationships (Derible, 2013). In schools that take a restorative approach, there is thoughtful consideration of the impact that policies and practices have on relationships in classrooms, on the playground, among staff, with parents, and with the community at large. This attention to building and maintaining just relations in schools has resulted in greater school attachment, less conflict, better behaviour, fewer suspensions and exclusions and better learning outcomes. All of these outcomes are significant factors in the reduction of young people's risk of coming into conflict with the law (Llewellyn, 2018).

For Students & Families

School is a big part of a young person's life. A restorative approach in school requires students to think about themselves and others, to work on developing healthy relationships and to learn how to manage conflict. Adopting RA in schools can have a positive ripple effect into the home and the community. RA in schools offers new knowledge, methods and skills for decision making and problem solving, such as affective language and respectful dialogue. Restorative skills help children thrive, leading to better behaviour and relationships. Schools that use this approach report that students often solve problems on their own without adult intervention, or they know that there are restorative processes in place they can depend on in their learning community. Parents will notice that their children are demonstrating a different way to resolve conflict at home and experience more harmony at home as they and their children practice the same skills that teachers and students are using at the school. A restorative approach in schools helps students become more attached to their school, which encourages education and discourages absences or "dropping out," giving students a better chance at being successful in life (Nova Scotia Department of Justice, 2013).

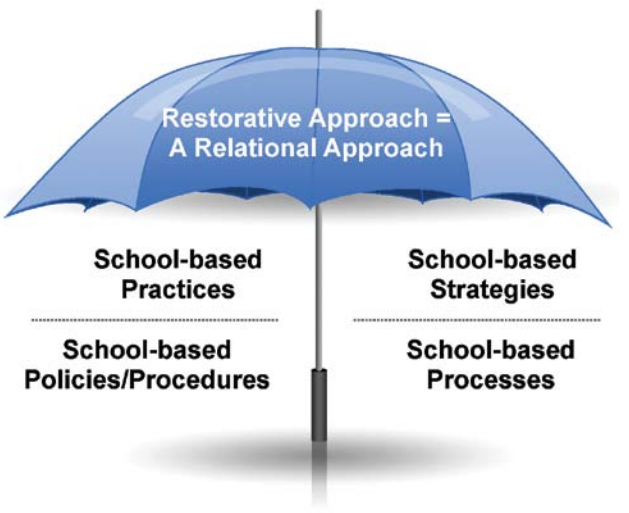
For Schools

RA in schools works alongside and supports all of the other things we are doing to support kids. It gives back time to educators so they can focus on teaching. A consistent restorative approach reduces the level of stress around relationships—student-to-student or student-to-teacher. A common thread that runs through almost every conflict in schools is the perception that only one side is being heard, and being valued over the other. A restorative approach reduces that perception and supports more satisfying conflict resolution (Nova Scotia Department of Justice, 2013).

Students across Nova Scotia experiencing a restorative approach report a greater sense of positive attachment to school and an increased sense of belonging to their school community. Restorative schools – both locally and internationally are experiencing a reduction in suspensions and office referrals and increases in student attendance. Teachers report enjoying their work more and connect the underpinning values of the restorative approach as reasons they chose to teach in the first place. In terms of student achievement, one school that adopted a restorative approach in Nova Scotia over a five-year period reported a closing of the achievement gap that had been a feature of the school. Overall student achievement on external assessments climbed from a 60 per cent success rate to success rates in the 90 per cent range on several indicators (Derible, 2013).

HOW we do we take a restorative approach in Nova Scotia schools?

Restorative justice offers a common and predictable set of relational principles to guide practices and processes; it is not one fixed model or practice (Llewellyn, 2018). It does not require purchasing an expensive toolkit that offers a one-size-fits-all model or delivering pre-packaged training modules. It is more about a relational way of thinking and being in community with others. Using the following relational principles for practice, we must frame the ways in which we make decisions, problem solve, teach, learn, work and play together as being:



- **Relationally focused:** understanding and positively shaping interconnections
- **Comprehensive & Holistic:** not only incident focused, also taking account of contexts & causes
- **Inclusive/Participatory**
- **Responsive:** contextual, flexible practice; informed by data/knowledge
- **Focus on Taking Responsibility:** both individually and collectively
- **Collaborative/non-adversarial**
- **Forward-focused:** Educative, problem solving/ preventative & proactive

A principle-based restorative approach in education reshapes schools to become restorative.

WHAT does it look like to take a restorative approach in schools?

Far from suggesting we abandon previous initiatives or start from scratch, a restorative approach, when embraced as a continuum of practice rooted in relational principles, provides a new lens to review, support and animate the work schools are already doing to support students (Derible, 2013). Social and emotional learning programs, culturally relevant pedagogy, community outreach initiatives, student-centered teaching and assessment, and professional learning communities are all examples of work that schools are currently engaged in that can be supported through a restorative approach. RA in education serves as the umbrella concept for all of the practices, policies, procedures and pedagogical methods that schools embrace through a relational lens.

For example: affective statements and questions (language that describes how something made someone feel – students are not always aware of the impact their behaviour might have on others); restorative conversations and dialogue (conversations that help teachers support an open dialogue starting with questions like "Can you tell me what happened and how you became involved?" instead of "Why did you do that?"); restorative meetings (staff meetings, parent meetings, School Advisory Council meetings that are organized to encourage authentic engagement through the use of circle processes); restorative conferences (formal responses to serious incidents led by a facilitator that involves all parties including support persons); and classroom circles are all effective practices. Circles are structured but semi-formal opportunities for connection among students. They can include check-in circles and check-out circles to gauge how students are feeling at the beginning and end of the day, classroom norms circles, academic goals circles, curriculum circles, circles to address behaviour problems and/or proactive circles.

As we continue to develop the restorative approach in schools across the province, we hold the potential to transform the social culture of schooling in support of just relations for all people in our communities.

If you would like more information, please contact Amy.Hunt@novascotia.ca.

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[From The Teacher, September 2018, Volume 57 Number 1, Page 4 ©NSTU 2018]