

BOOK REVIEW

Margaret Thorsborne and Dave Vinegrad, *The continuum of restorative practices in schools: an instructional training manual for practitioners*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2022, 198 pp., ISBN 978-1-78592-776-8.

All students deserve access to welcoming, supportive and safe schools and classrooms. A successful school climate and student discipline involve setting all students up for success by meeting not only their academic needs but also their social, emotional, behavioural and mental health needs. Schools must have the necessary tools to assist students with addressing any behaviour that could otherwise interfere with their learning, the learning of others, or the school environment, especially when it comes to safety. Preventing and eliminating discrimination when administering student discipline is non-negotiable as well. According to the U.S. Department of Education's website:

The Department recognizes and appreciates school administrators, teachers, and educational staff across the nation who work to provide a safe, positive, and nondiscriminatory education environment for all students, teachers, and other school staff. The Department is committed to protecting our students' wellbeing, and we recognize that a strong foundation in building healthy and productive relationships with others helps students thrive.¹

This implies that a restorative environment is necessary for students to thrive. The underlying premise of restorative practices lies in the belief that people will make positive changes when those in positions of authority and/or influence do things with them rather than to them or for them or being neglectful of them. This book reminds us of all that.

The manual explains that, when transitioning from a punitive or retributive approach to a restorative one, there is a paradigm shift from fear and avoiding consequences to compassion and maintaining relationships; from offences defined as individual violations of laws or rules to offences as acts of harm arising from and affecting individuals, relationships and community; from accountability forced through a process in which authorities determine guilt and impose punishment to accountability as an inclusive process of understanding and repairing the harm.

This book also reminds us that restorative practices must be a whole-school approach (27). Indeed, while individuals can have a positive impact, the necessary climate and culture change of the whole school will not be transformed if all stakeholders, including family and community members, are not involved in a restorative manner. Moreover, as the authors put it, 'Unless the school is ready and the ground is fertile, enthusiastic efforts at implementation of a whole-school culture change are likely to result in false starts and unnecessary resistance' (27).

1 Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html> (last accessed 19 January 2024).

This book is extremely user-friendly. It describes many different styles of responsive circles, with a variety of scripts that can be used for easy implementation. It unpacks the restorative continuum in an applicable manner and provides a platform that models how to facilitate different types of encounters across the curriculum. The book underscores that pre-conference work is essential for success. Emphasis is also given to the importance of ‘appropriate training in these processes to minimize the risk of poor decision-making, misuse, and therefore unintended harm to any parties involved in these interventions’ (16).

I am inspired by the way the restorative practices continuum is unpacked in this book, and, as an experienced practitioner, I can see that my own thoughts and feelings about it are validated. So many of the initiatives in schools currently fit into this continuum, and I appreciate the way the authors draw attention to that and explicitly explain where different initiatives fall in the continuum.

The authors encourage the use of the expression ‘those responsible’ in place of ‘offenders’, and ‘those affected’ or ‘those harmed’ instead of ‘victims’. I feel their explanations around this are very relevant, not only to separate restorative initiatives in schools from the criminal justice context (and language), as the authors themselves point out, but also to stop labelling individual people and, instead, start to focus on the behaviours themselves.

The authors bring attention to the integration with other efforts for whole-school behaviour improvement programmes such as ‘trauma-informed practice, wellbeing, special needs, early years work and the neuroscience of brain development’ (13). According to them, ‘[r]estorative practices cannot exist in isolation and is better understood perhaps as the glue that holds everything together, especially if we understand it as part of a wider set of relational practices’ (13).

I challenge the distinction and transition away from affective statements to effective statements. I believe there is a place for both types of statements along the continuum and feel it would be unjust to completely dismiss the value and need for affective statements. While I appreciate the authors’ explanation, I still hold that affective statements have significance. Affective statements are a way to communicate to another person how they have affected you by their behaviour, either positively or negatively, which is humanising and allows for vulnerability. They can be offered when you see someone doing something that makes you uncomfortable or impacts you in some other way. I agree that how the statements are delivered is as important as the content of the statement itself and that we should focus on ‘the least intrusive strategy, delivered respectfully, so that we can keep the small stuff small’ (14). So, for example, when I teach and model affective statements, I include the following: ‘I feel ... (the emotion), when ... (the occurrence). It makes it (reason/because).....’ I stress the importance of tone, voice, volume, body language and so on. The purpose of affective statements is to set boundaries, give feedback and teach empathy. According to the authors, effective statements are constructed to remind the student of the agreed class expectations or values and to direct them back to whatever they should be doing (63). They argue that affective statements can be used to manipulate the behaviour and lay the blame with the person responsible. I understand that opinion, but I do still see the value

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in affective statements when used correctly, and I feel that the same argument could be made about effective statements. I have seen first-hand the positive impact of using affective statements to assist in deescalating volatile situations as well as providing positive reinforcements for behaviours we want to see repeated.

Chapter 5, 'Responding to Bullying', beautifully outlines the problems of bullying and how to address them, with options for various situations. Relational accountability is presented as a means to transition away from traditional bullying management practices that are not working. This chapter also outlines the challenges in addressing bullying, pointing out how complicated issues can be. It explains where bullying falls on the continuum and provides examples of effective statements that can be used. When responding to reports of bullying, the authors suggest five steps towards a restorative approach, with detailed explanations of each, as well as three scenarios and two case studies. They explain that the 'one-size-fits-all approach' does not work. Fair process must be put in place for instances of bullying to have opportunities for 'reflecting, taking responsibility, being accountable, healing of harms and reaching acceptable outcomes for all parties' (75). They go on to state that

In a school, fairness is a key part of the glue that binds us together into a strong and emotionally healthy community. If people experience fairness like this, they learn to trust the system.

I feel this addresses the U.S. Department of Education commitment statement perfectly.

Chapter 8 is invaluable. The 'what ifs' are outlined, and the authors provide answers to the concerns that come up not only in face-to-face trainings but also through emails and phone calls after trainings. I am so enthusiastic to utilise and share this chapter.

I appreciate that the authors reference back to earlier training manuals, as early as in the introduction, and I do feel strongly that this is an advanced practitioner manual. The authors give credit to other authors, researchers and practitioners that continue to develop practices and, in Appendix 11, an extensive list of resources in the field of restorative practices and restorative justice is provided. All in all, I believe the authors exceeded what they set out to accomplish. The theme of how to 'keep the small things small' was delivered throughout the manual. I highly recommend this book to advanced practitioners to deepen their own learning and practice and to share this information with others.

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