

The Disciples of **BETHLEHEM**

Restorative Practice Is Transforming Durham Catholic District School Board

No significant learning occurs, without significant relationships.

Dr. S. Covey

As a leader in a school setting, you are charged with ensuring significant learning occurs on a daily basis. In my *green* days as vice-principal, I was sure that if we collected enough data, set targets and collaborated, significant learning would result. However, after counselling my regular visitors to the office, I quickly came to the realization that I can collect data and collaborate with my colleagues until I am blue in the face, but if the student lacks a sense of empowerment and belonging in the classroom, no learning will occur. To ensure a *significant place of learning* I would have to restore the breakdown in relationships amongst these visitors to my office. Fortunately, I discovered a philosophy that would shape my approach to discipline, transform my leadership and on the way, affirm my belief in the true message of reconciliation and restoration that Jesus first modeled. It all began with a trip to the little town of Bethlehem; Pennsylvania, that is.

Brenda McDonald and Laurie Corrigan, secondary school administrators at the Durham Catholic DSB, first incorporated restorative practices in the creation of the *Catholic Return Ticket Program*. With the successful implementation of restorative practice in this program, Anne O'Brien, the superintendent of Safe Schools, began to recruit the disciples, who would follow the star to Bethlehem to become officially trained in restorative practices. Honestly, there is a star.

This charming and quaint town in Pennsylvania is home to the International Institute of Restorative Practice (IIRP). The IIRP was developed from the experiences of Ted and Sue Wachtel, founders of the Community Services Foundation (CSF), a non-profit organization operating eight school/day treatment programs in south-eastern Pennsylvania. These schools foster positive behaviour among troubled youth through the continuum of restorative practices. The CSF began offering training in restorative practices through the real justice program conferences in 1995. Now global, with offices in over seven countries around the world, the IIRP offers training in many aspects of restorative practices and offers graduate programs in restorative practices in educational, social services and judicial settings.

Rooted in Native Aboriginal communities and the Mennonite communities of the 1970's, restorative practice rests on the belief that it is best to do things with people rather than to them, by engaging them in fair process and responding to behaviour in ways that involve strengthening and repairing relationships. It is a culture cloaked in reconciliation rather than retribution; a message aligned with the teachings of the New Testament. However, contrary to popular sentiment, restorative justice in disciplinary matters is not about removing control or consequences from the offender. Instead, it is a balance between control and support. A zero-tolerance approach is high on control of the offender and low on support; restorative practice is also high on control, but instead emphasizes a great deal of support. It is a collaborative approach versus an adversarial setting of discipline, classroom management and relationships.

In my role as a vice-principal, I was always waiting for the manual for discipline. Although I relied on detentions quite extensively, I would always see these same students back, usually involving the same victim and usually the next day. Didn't Einstein once classify insanity as doing the same thing but expecting different results? I was insane! Did I think my two-recess detention would have a better effect on *fixing* this student than the one-recess detention I gave yesterday? It seemed that in my classroom and in the office, the most effective approach was when I took the time to sit down with all parties involved, listened to the students, held them accountable for their actions but in addition attempted to restore the relationship between people. It did not necessarily mean the victim had to forgive, it just provided the grounds on which forgiveness could occur. Having the offender see the big picture about the impact of their actions and taking the time to restore relationships between people is an approach to discipline that can have a tremendous effect on the school community. I have always found that when I do things with people, the results are usually better. Restorative practices require an investment in time. Restorative conferences and circles take much longer than a detention, but they pay dividends in the long term.

When operating on this philosophy several restorative practices emerge in the educational setting, ranging from informal affective statements and empathetic questioning, to classroom circles and formal restorative conferences between the victim and the perpetrators. Restorative practice is still authoritative in most respects, but it does so in a way in which one of my fellow disciples to Bethlehem stated, "The dignity of the children is upheld." Restorative practice is not all disciplinary in nature. Indeed, classroom circles are pro-active in building relationships and providing a forum for feedback on relationships within the classroom. Classroom circles can strengthen the connections that students desperately need in an ever-increasing disconnected school and world. Research has shown upwards of 15 per cent improvement in students' attitudes towards school in the settings that utilize restorative practice.

Learning the philosophy of restorative practice on my first trip to Bethlehem served as an epiphany for me. Not that this approach was new for me, as it surely will not be for you; it was simply an affirmation of the many things I was intuitively doing in my practice. This training made me recognize when I was being restorative. It was transformative to my leadership style in that I became more deliberate and creative in consciously applying restorative practice. It became a guiding principle to my leadership.

Upon my return from Bethlehem, I held small impromptu restorative conferences in my office; and asked restorative questions in my counselling. I went into problematic classes on a weekly basis and conducted classroom circles. Students were eager to make right the wrongdoings in their relationships through the restorative practice process. In fact, students regularly said, "You're the first person who actually listened to me. You gave me a voice." This came from the victim, not the offender. During supervision in the yard, students regularly expressed a desire for more community building through circle time in their classrooms. I realized I had stumbled upon something special when that student who was a daily participant in detentions was actually interacting in a positive nature for the remainder of the term. It affirmed my belief that as a Catholic educator I can discipline through the lens of Jesus Christ.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:31-32

The Durham Catholic DSB has whole-heartedly embraced the culture of restorative practices. Hearing the word of the disciples, the board of trustees sent seven administrators and teachers to become certified as facilitators of the courses in restorative practice so that we could train others in Canada. Indeed, we are the first facilitators and school board in Canada to offer training in the IIRP course, *Using Classroom Circles Effectively in the Classroom*.

Today, the *Catholic Return Ticket Program* in Ajax is a fully restorative school. They have classroom circles to begin and end the day, progressive discipline is restorative based and all teachers

and counsellors are trained in restorative practices. With restorative practice meeting the components of the *Catholic Leadership Framework of Catholic Community and Developing the Organization*, the Durham Catholic DSB has embarked on an ambitious vision of becoming a restorative school board by having all schools operate using restorative practice as their compass.

Word of this grass-root movement spread quickly. By June of 2009, over 500 administrators, teachers, educational assistants and support staff had voluntarily, and without the cost of replacement staff, received two days of training in *Restorative Practices and Using Classroom Circles Effectively*. Demand was so great that training continued with sessions in the summer and will take place every Wednesday throughout the year.

Just like those first visitors to Bethlehem in Jesus' time who had their communities forever transformed, we have a community of educators transformed in Durham. Ironically, both transformations began in a little town called Bethlehem.

For more information on the IIRP visit www.iirp.org. For information on the movement in the Durham Catholic DSB, contact Mike O'Neill at mike.o'neill@dcdsb.ca.

WANTED
WRITERS FOR PRINCIPAL CONNECTIONS

Share your experiences, strategies and celebrations with colleagues across the province.

There are a variety of ways to submit your story or article.
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If you have any questions or suggestions regarding the magazine contact the editor Marisa Celenza or the managing editor Nelly Kelders at the CPCO office.

P: 416-483-1556 | 1-888-621-9190
E-mail: editor@cpco.on.ca | nkelders@cpco.on.ca
www.cpco.on.ca