

Restorative Practices for safe and supportive schools



by Angie Dornai

What draws people to work with youth? For many it's about the opportunity to offer the wisdom and benefits of our own experience while vicariously experiencing life's unfolding drama through younger eyes. There is no better feeling, whether in education, law enforcement or child and youth social work, than when we get to make positive contributions to shaping success in the lives of children.

In this fast changing world, children don't always find consistent support and appropriate expectations from each other or adults. Children too frequently are left to navigate their own paths, not always seeing clearly the potential in what lies ahead, or the impact of the footprints they leave behind. Adults too, with our own "inner child" frequently hushed, have encountered, or even unwittingly created, distressing setbacks. We all have experienced times when we couldn't see the silver lining in the dark cloud of crisis—the potential opportunities that lay in crises. (Some interpret the Japanese symbol for crisis as one which contains two entwined symbols: one for danger and the other for opportunity.)

Our work in education requires that we use all available means to help one another find opportunities for personal or professional growth, to effect positive change in all our interactions, and to capitalize on conflict-generated opportunities for growth in self-responsibility and learning. In Canada, great strides are being made in work with children to advance personal empowerment and personal responsibility-building. In the York Region District School Board, staff have been learning over the past three years to incorporate "restorative practices" in building safe and supportive school communities.

Superintendent of Safe and Supportive Schools, Helen Fox, explains, "Past ways of dealing with student conflict at school have often included blame, shame and outcasting of individuals. Because punitive consequences naturally position the 'wrongdoer' against the person in authority who imposes the consequence, the 'punished person' tends to focus on resentment and anger, rather than on accepting ownership of their behaviour. The offending action escalates or is played out in other damaging ways, leaving the root causes for the behaviour, thought processes, and related feelings unexamined and unresolved. Damaged relationships inhibit finding, much less correcting, the root cause of problems which, left unresolved, continue to interfere with successful learning."

Building on the justice practices of many aboriginal communities, educators around the world are now beginning to incorporate "restorative practices" that seek to repair harm done after relationships have been damaged. These restorative practices are based on inviting dialogue and encouraging ownership of behaviour. Focused questions such as *What happened?* *What were you thinking at the time?* and *What have you been thinking since?* replace accusation, blame and recrimination. Restorative questions reduce the defensive response so commonly associated with conflict situations and give the person who committed the harm an opportunity to consider their actions and their impact without having to become defensive.

"Restorative approaches to conflict at school focus on personal accountability and repairing relationships. They have far reaching implications for social and emotional learning, character development and student achieve-

ment," says Bill Hogarth, Director of Education for the York Region District School Board. "Our deliberate use of 'restorative' language speaks to our commonly held belief that character traits of respect, responsibility, empathy, honesty, courage and perseverance made explicit in environments of consistently high support and consistently high accountability are inherent in all of our interactions."

Restorative discussions might involve a group conversation prompted by the following questions:

- What is happening (in this group/class/staff)?*
- What part of it don't you like?*
- For what part of that do you take responsibility?*
- What is needed to restore (this class/group's/staff's) standing?*
- What can you commit to doing to make things right?*
- What supports do you require from us and others?*
- What will we see when we have achieved this resolution?*

Asking questions that seek ownership for actions and understanding of their impact allows movement away from blaming, punishing and alienating and encourages a broader exploration of underlying causes of conflict and ways to restore damaged relationships.

Consider the implications of restorative questions, posed in a safe and supportive environment where those in conflict are willing listeners. Around the world, people with even a preliminary understanding of restorative practice have eliminated the question *Why did you do that?* from their engagement vocabulary and now explore all aspects of *What happened?* *Who has been affected?* *What needs to happen to make things right?* These questions lead to an ownership of responsibility, the making of sincere amends, and ultimately, to restoration and re-acceptance. Principles of Restorative Practice and Restorative Justice align with and help inform the restorative work that we do in our Board. The use of our clearly delineated approach not only allows us to target and be explicit about the restorative processes for personal accountability in a supportive environment, but also assists us in accomplishing its seamless integration into all areas of curriculum and the science of teaching.

The Inukshuk is a stone landmark—an Inuit symbol used as a directional marker by the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic. It also signifies safety, hope and the critical nature of good relationships—relationships with ourselves, with each other and with the environment. Restorative interactions reflect the purpose of these Native directional markers. With each successful restorative interaction, we gain and learn from where we have been. We see and mark the way for others to see the impact of our footprints, the opportunity for growth and change, and the hopeful potential that lies ahead.

In York Region, we are working together to integrate various subject/grade disciplines with the social, emotional, and character aspects of education with a shared commitment to student achievement. We connect with others across Canada who aim to do the same, and we learn from one another as we share in numerous accounts of success. The passion and accomplishments of a growing numbers of practitioners beyond Canada's borders strengthen our belief that restorative approaches will have an increasingly important role for all of us who live and learn in our changing world community.

Angie Dornai is an author, teacher, mediator and consultant and has worked for three years as the Restorative Approaches Facilitator for the York Region DSB. She will be speaking at the Restorative Practices International Conference to be held May 31 to June 5 in Vancouver. For more information, visit <http://restorativepracticesinternational.org/9.html>

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