



TOOLKIT TOPIC 5

*Integrating
Restorative
Practices within
Social-Emotional
Learning*

Dr. Louise M. Yoho, Dr. Pamela Fenning, Travis Clayton

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Integrating Restorative Practices within Social-Emotional Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Restorative practices, rooted in Indigenous traditions, offer a holistic approach to addressing harm by emphasizing accountability, repair, and community restoration rather than punishment. Restorative practices, which were initially developed in the justice system, have been increasingly adopted in school settings worldwide as an alternative to punitive disciplinary measures. Promising outcomes include improved school climate, reduced disciplinary incidents, and enhanced relationships between students and educators. These practices align well with a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, particularly in fostering relationships and addressing social-emotional learning (SEL) goals. Implementation success hinges on building trusting relationships, sharing responsibility among stakeholders, and integrating restorative principles into existing disciplinary structures. Transitioning restorative practices from elementary to secondary levels requires adapting language and strategies to match students’ developmental stages, emphasizing responsibility, empathy, and community cohesion. When implemented effectively, restorative practices not only transform disciplinary approaches but also contribute to a more supportive and inclusive school environment.

INTRODUCTION

Restorative practices have existed for centuries in Indigenous communities,ⁱ with evidence of their use found in the early cultures of the South Pacific and the Americas.ⁱⁱ From a restorative perspective, “harm” is conceptualized in different ways than Westernized views that focus on the punishment of an offender. Building from Indigenous traditions, restorative practices center on “the offender’s accountability for the harm they caused, along with a plan for repairing the hurt and restoring the offender to acceptance” (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 5).

Restorative practices began in the juvenile and criminal justice systems in the United States as “restorative justice” or “RJ.” In recent years, restorative practices have begun transferring parts of the RJ framework into school settings in efforts to combat the negative impacts of traditional exclusionary discipline models.ⁱⁱⁱ Australia was the first country

Restorative practices require power sharing among everyone in the school community.



to implement restorative practices in school settings in the mid-1990s when the government funded use of them in hundreds of schools in response to violence at a school-sponsored event in Queensland.^{iv} Following this, restorative practices in schools spread rapidly throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, and later the United States.

Restorative justice practices are based on a philosophy of justice that centers on restoring a community through a relationship-driven approach rather than one focused on punishment. Restorative practices are a clear departure from zero-tolerance policies that concentrate on exclusionary discipline through suspension, expulsion, and related school pushout practice.^v Restorative practices, often used interchangeably with restorative justice, have institutional origins in the prison system and have been implemented in schools relatively more recently. The International Institute of Restorative Practices notes that when restorative practices are applied to schools, they are focused on ensuring an inviting school climate for all and restoring relationships from harm when it occurs. With restorative practices, it is important to address racial equity concerns to avoid replicating the same racialized power dynamics present in punitive disciplinary frameworks.

Discussions about restorative practices often center on urban areas like Oakland and Chicago, but they may also be implemented with fidelity in rural settings. This is because many rural communities reflect to some degree the structure and environment in which restorative practices were developed effectively. Rural communities are smaller and often more stable over time. There may be a degree of familiarity among community members, as well as existing models, of how to accommodate one another's differences within a community framework.

Small towns, churches, and trailer parks are communities in which differences and conflict must be accommodated and individuals reconciled. These present meaningful models for the classroom in that they also are, to some degree, “mandated” communities, whether by geography, faith, or economic circumstance. They represent environments in which reconciliation is a requirement for group function and in which there are few, if any, practical alternatives.

There are promising findings resulting from the use of restorative practices, such as improving school climate, changing the mindset of educators, reducing the use of exclusionary discipline, and somewhat improving racial disproportionality in school discipline; however, more rigorous research is needed.^{vi} Restorative practices hold exceptional promise as an alternative to traditional suspension and expulsion fueled by zero-tolerance policies and when aligned with a broader system of social-emotional and behavioral supports in schools. For example, restorative practices are part of an effective classroom management



system when implemented with integrity as part of schoolwide proactive discipline and social-emotional support structures. In the context of behavioral intervention, restorative practice comes into practical focus as a series of behaviors or decisions to be negotiated. The proactive aspect of restorative practice requires groundwork to be laid to the greatest extent possible to create a sense of community and belonging in the classroom that the student finds meaningful and emotionally significant by relationship-building, acting with integrity to establish trust and through demonstrative behaviors that signal trust and empathy whenever appropriate.

When implemented with integrity, restorative practices require power sharing among everyone in the school community, including school-based professionals, administrators, students, family members, and the broader community.

Restorative practices work best in a philosophy where adults share ownership of the process with students.^{vii} Therefore, when implemented as intended, restorative practice requires buy-in from students and trusting administrators and school-based professionals. Administrators considering the implementation of restorative practice as an alternative to less effective zero-tolerance behavior response models are advised to begin by providing support and professional development to individual school-based professionals working to implement this approach at the classroom level and allow classroom teacher leadership to develop before implementing a coordinated, building- or district-wide approach to implementing restorative practices. Such an approach encourages greater staff engagement with implementation, greater fidelity in application, and creates a context of genuine relationships built on experience of and knowledge about one another as individuals within a learning community. The other stakeholders in the community (school-based professionals, students, and other staff) must be prepared to demonstrate their willingness to forgive when reconciliation has been achieved. Prolonged resentment, passive-aggressive behavior, or “reminders” will undermine the effectiveness of both the intervention and restorative practice.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH MTSS STRUCTURES

Restorative practices can be embedded in Tier 1 of the MTSS framework by focusing on relationship-building through community-based circles.^{viii} Forming positive relationships and listening to one another’s lived experiences are critical components of building the trust that promotes mutual understanding about an individual’s perspective and the strengths brought to bear in a classroom, entire school, or community. Resolving conflicts and restoring a community are more likely to be successful if effective relationships are developed before a misunderstanding occurs. Young people need help and support in building relationships, labeling, and understanding their own and others’ emotions. In addition, students require direct instruction and aid in building empathy for others, which does not occur automatically as children mature developmentally. Rather than punishing wrongdoing through zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline, restorative practices provide an opportunity for children to learn the impact of their actions on others in their school community when instruction is offered in a Tier 1 environment. Restorative practices fit well with

a developmental understanding of behavioral decision-making, which may be impulsive in young people.^{ix}

For example, one theory of development by Dr. Jeffrey Arnett proposed that young persons may not have the total capacity to understand the impact of their actions until they reach young adulthood well into their middle 20s.

Each student is valued in a restorative classroom/school community. The work of the community is to keep the student in the community, not condone behaviors that harm others; rather, it is to work with the student to repair and restore relationships without being excluded. When harm occurs, restorative chats and circle practice are more likely to be successful if foundational relationships are built. As a result, students feel valued in the school community, and their perspectives are valued. Generally speaking, more intensive restorative practices (e.g., a restorative circle) may be necessary roughly 20% of the time in systems where trusting relationships have been built at Tier 1,^x a rate similar to MTSS systems. Therefore, community-building circles, which allow time to form relationships, are critical to creating an inclusive community where students feel cared for while they are held responsible for making things right when they cause harm or are harmed by others.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AND SEL STANDARDS

There is a clear connection between restorative practices and social-emotional learning. In Illinois, schools can use the state’s required SEL Standards, which are organized by grade, as a springboard for teaching students the school’s behavioral expectations and helping educators to set clear expectations and foster positive relationships. Restorative practices are well-aligned with Illinois SEL Standards, which require instruction in developing positive relationships with adults and peers, resolving conflicts, recognizing one’s own emotions, taking the perspectives of others, identifying the contributions of various cultural groups, learning how to work with individuals from a cultural group different than one’s own, showing empathy, and recognizing the negative impact of stereotyping and prejudice.



Community building models move from elementary settings, with their circle language and emphasis on recognizing, name, and dealing with feelings, to middle/high school settings more



concerned with justice/fairness and group dynamics. Thus, the language in which community is negotiated needs to shift to reflect the growing maturity of the student stakeholders and the increased expectations of the adult members of the community. In fact, “if implemented together and implemented well, both can help to boost the same outcomes, such as improved school climate, student-student and student-teacher relationships, reduced conflicts and decreases in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions.” (Gulbrandson, 2018, p. 1.)

As community building models move from elementary settings, with their circle language and emphasis on recognizing, naming, and dealing with feelings, to middle school/high school settings more concerned with justice/fairness and group dynamics, the language in which community is negotiated needs to shift to reflect the growing maturity of the student stakeholders, and the increased expectations of the adult members of the community. Terms and ideas must shift from processing emotion, self-regulation, and meeting our needs to concepts of responsibility, empathy, and duty to the group.

The idea of the classroom (and potentially, later, the grade level/building/district) as a cohesive unit is one that readily appeals to middle schoolers and high school students as they become developmentally more aware of the significance of social roles and develop the skills required to establish belonging and roles within the classroom and social hierarchy that they increasingly recognize the significance of. Such a shift in language mirrors the change in perspective embodied in the progression of SEL goals across academic levels. Connecting SEL and restorative practices can result in greater buy-in, not only from students but from staff responsible for its implementation as well. Learning to forgive when warranted and to manage their emotional responses for the sake of the community are skills required to successfully implement restorative practice and meet the state of Illinois SEL goals particularly at the middle and high school levels.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Restorative practice must, if it is to be meaningful, be described in terms of what a student is being restored to. There are assumptions at work that should be examined if they are to be useful. The phrase “restorative practice” assumes that there is a community to be restored to. It assumes that the student has been part of that community, and that the student’s relationship to the community has been compromised by some action the student has taken. It assumes a shared perspective or understanding of the situation between the student and the community, that the student values the relationship to the community, and that they can trust the community to respond with integrity to a demonstration of repentance. It assumes that the other members of the community have agency in the restoration process, and that the student feels sufficient agency and efficacy to invest in their own restoration. Creating an atmosphere in which these expectations are valid requires enormous, sustained effort on the part of all those involved.

KEY TERMS

Peer involvement

The use of a student’s peers to influence behavior (e.g., cooperative group, peer modeling, peer tutoring).

Restorative practices

A strategy that aims to repair harm done to people and relationships that have been damaged.

Restorative justice

Based on a philosophy of justice that centers on restoring a community through a relationship-driven approach rather than one focused on punishment.

Suspension

Removal from school programs by administrative action for gross disobedience or misconduct for more than one full class period and not exceeding 10 school days.

An out-of-school suspension is typically served off school grounds; an in-school suspension is typically served on school premises. Suspension from transportation resulting in the student’s inability to attend their ordinary school program is a suspension from school. A student is not suspended when the nature and quality of the educational program and services provided during an in-school suspension are comparable to the nature and quality of the educational program and services required and otherwise provided to the student in the current placement. A suspension which constitutes a change in placement requires a revision to the IEP.

Zero-tolerance policies

Policies directed at student behavior that punish particular conduct – often severely -- without regard to the fault of the student or any extenuating circumstances.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

SELF-MANAGEMENT

The ability of individuals to independently regulate and control their own behavior, thoughts, and emotions. Self-management involves using self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control strategies to modify and maintain one's behavior in a positive and productive manner. Self-management encompasses various skills and processes that individuals use to guide their actions and make choices, including: being aware of one's own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses; setting clear and realistic goals that align with personal values and hopes; observing and tracking one's own behavior, thoughts, or emotions; engaging in critical self-reflection to evaluate one's actions, progress, and areas for improvement; exercising self-discipline and impulse control to manage one's behavior, and providing oneself with reinforcement for desired behaviors or progress towards goals.

Examples of Self-management:

A student may have difficulty staying on task during independent work time. To address this, the student can use a self-monitoring system where they record their behavior at regular intervals. They might use a checklist or a rating scale to assess their level of focus and engagement every few minutes. The student reviews their self-monitoring data, identifies patterns, and reflects on their behavior. They can set goals to increase their on-task behavior and develop strategies to improve focus and minimize distractions. Through self-monitoring, the student becomes more aware of their behavior, takes ownership of their actions, and actively works towards self-improvement.

Non-examples of Self-management:

If a teacher is solely responsible for monitoring and tracking a student's behavior without involving the student in the process, is a non-example of self-management. The teacher may observe and record the student's behavior, provide feedback, and implement consequences or rewards based on their observations. While this approach may be effective in certain situations, it does not involve active participation and self-regulation from the student. The student is not directly involved in monitoring their behavior, reflecting on their actions, or setting personal goals. In contrast to self-monitoring, this non-example relies solely on external monitoring and intervention rather than empowering the student to take ownership of their behavior and make self-directed improvements.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

TECHNOLOGY-AIDED INTERVENTION AND INSTRUCTION

Instruction or intervention in which technology is the central feature and the technology is specifically designed or employed to support the learning or performance of a behavior or skill for the learner. Technology-Aided Intervention and Instruction can have a significant impact on behavior by providing unique opportunities for engagement, motivation, and skill development.

Examples of Technology-Aided Intervention and Instruction:

Behavior Tracking Apps: There are various apps available that allow students to track their behaviors and monitor progress towards specific goals. These apps provide allow for data collection, visual representations (graphs) of behavior, and offer reminders and prompts for increasing independence.

- **Social Skills Apps:** Technology offers a range of apps specifically designed to teach and reinforce social skills. These apps may include social stories, video modeling, interactive games, or virtual scenarios that provide opportunities for practicing appropriate social behaviors.
- **Self-Regulation Tools:** There are apps and wearable devices that support self-regulation and self-management of behavior. For example, a mindfulness or relaxation app can guide individuals through breathing exercises or provide visual and auditory cues to help them regulate their emotions and behaviors.
- **Video Modeling:** Technology allows for the creation and use of video modeling, where students can observe desired behaviors modeled in video format. This can be particularly helpful for teaching social skills, daily routines, or specific behavioral strategies.
- **Visual Schedules and Timers:** Technology tools such as tablets or smartphones can be used to create visual schedules or timers to support individuals in understanding and following daily routines and managing their time effectively.
- **Augmented Reality (AR) or Virtual Reality (VR):** AR and VR technologies provide immersive and interactive experiences that can be used to simulate real-life situations and teach appropriate behaviors. For example, individuals can practice social interactions, public speaking, or problem-solving in virtual environments.
- **Online Behavior Management Systems:** Schools and classrooms may utilize online behavior management systems that allow school-based professionals to track, monitor, and reinforce positive behaviors. These systems often provide visual rewards, progress tracking, and communication tools to promote positive behavior in the school and classroom settings.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

DIFFERENTIAL REINFORCEMENT

Reinforcing a desirable behavior in a particular context while withholding reinforcement for any undesirable behaviors.

Examples of Differential reinforcement:

A student yelled out in a high-pitched scream to get a drink of water. The student was taught to hand a picture of a cup to the teacher to get a drink of water. Now when the student screams out that behavior no longer results in receiving a drink of water. Instead, the student receives a drink of water when they hand the picture to the teacher.

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The Power of Restorative Practices video:



RESOURCE LINKS

- » [CASEL - Advancing Social and Emotional Learning](#)
- » [ISBE Social and Emotional Learning](#)
- » [ISBE SEL-Standards](#)

This is not an endorsement nor an exhaustive list of possible resources. Please consult with your individual district, Regional Office of Education, and the Illinois State Board of Education for additional resources. [Illinois State Board of Education](#)

CREDITS

Authors:

Dr. Louise Yoho, Assistant Professor, Southern Illinois University

Dr. Pamela Fenning, SOE Associate Dean for Research, Professor, School Psychologist, Loyola University Chicago

Travis Clayton, Special Education Teacher, Carbondale Elementary District #95

Behavior Assessment Training Project Staff:

Dr. Daniel Brown, BAT Project Manager, Southern Illinois University

Michelle Connet, BAT Project Coordinator, Southern Illinois University

Anurag Yendamuri, SERC Media Specialist, Southern Illinois University

Angie Hargrave, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Jillian Hulcher, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Nhi Nguyen, Undergraduate Researcher, Southern Illinois University

Addison Wainscott, Undergraduate Student Worker, Southern Illinois University

Madison Warnick, Undergraduate Student Worker, Southern Illinois University

Additional Contributors:

Melanie Ernst, Assistant Director, Autism Professional Learning and Universal Supports Project, Illinois State University

Dr. Miranda Johnson, Clinical Professor of Law, Director of Education Law and Policy Institute,
Loyola University Chicago – School of Law

Brandon Wright, attorney, Miller, Tracy, Braun, Funk & Miller, Ltd.

Publication Design Direction:

Corey Tester

Publication Concept Design:

Corey Tester and Melissa Boyster

Custom Bat Illustrations:

Lauren Clark

Video Production:

NextThought

Stock Illustrations:

Iryna Petrenko — stock.adobe.com

ENDNOTES

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