



## After Sticks, Stones, and Hurtful Words

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**A restorative approach can repair harm done to relationships and improve our discipline practices.**

The statistics are disturbing. Since 1974, suspension and expulsion rates have doubled in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The likelihood of being excluded from learning is higher among black, Latino, and Native American students, as well as for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Some of these students fall into one or more of the metrics associated with being at-risk for school failure, including those who are in poverty, in foster care, or homeless. And although boys in the general population are suspended or expelled at higher rates than girls, females in these at-risk groups are excluded from learning at rates that exceed those of white boys (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The loss of learning is profound: One estimate cites 18 million lost days of instruction nationally in a single year (Losen et al., 2015).

These findings are reported at the national level, and although important, our concern is that this distance lulls otherwise caring educators into a false sense of complacency. Do you know the 2015–2016 suspension and expulsion rates for your school or district? Unlike federal data, which can take years to compile, local data are easily accessible. Has your staff analyzed these statistics and made a plan to reduce inequitable exclusion rates?

The fact is that when students are not present, they cannot learn. A failure to examine exclusion rates and take action perpetuates inequitable institutional practices.

The loss of instructional days isn't the only cost. What about the social and emotional learning that students need to function more productively? It is certainly not to be found on the student's living room couch in the middle of a school day. Traditional suspension and expulsion practices do not result in changes in behavior. In fact, students who have been suspended three times are more likely to drop out of school (Skiba & Petersen, 1999), and suspension policies have been credited as the single greatest contributing factor to the widening dropout rate between black and white students (Suhyun, Malchow, & Jingyo, 2014). Further, these practices do not allow victims to learn how to advocate for themselves. Sending misbehaving students home is cheaper and more expeditious than teaching all students important social and behavioral skills.

Having said that, we recognize that students must learn from their mistakes and understand the effect that their actions have on others, which is why we have embraced a restorative approach at Health Sciences High and Middle College. That doesn't mean suspensions are fully eliminated. Rather, we focus on repairing harm so that problematic behaviors don't continue to happen.

At our diverse school that serves grades 6–12, 74 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch, 20 percent are English learners, and 10 percent are students with disabilities. A majority of our students are Latino and/or black, and a sizeable portion of the student body is Muslim. We have found success with four practices that teach students the social and emotional skills they need to resolve problems and repair harm. We will describe incidents that occurred at

our school—incidents that could have resulted in suspension, but instead ended with mended relationships thanks to restorative practices.

## 1. Make sure you have relationships to restore.

The relationships that students develop at school—both with peers and adults—are critical to reducing inequities. Students who do not have supportive relationships are at increased risk for disengaging in school and dropping out. But it's even more than that. When students feel valued, respected, and honored, they become more invested in learning, modifying their behavior in ways that communicate that they care about learning.

Unfortunately, in too many cases, relationship development and maintenance is left to chance or is offered inequitably, typically to students who are socially desirable to the teacher. In equitable schools, students say, "We all have some adults we're really close to."

There are plenty of effective ways to build positive relationships with students, including knowing all students' names, opening up about your own interests, eliminating sarcasm, knowing at least one thing about a student's story, and showing respect for students' perspectives in daily interactions. Positive relationships provide the groundwork for changing discipline policies. When positive relationships are harmed, the focus shifts to fixing that harm and learning from the harm that was caused.

## 2. Use impromptu conversations to maintain relationships and allow student voice.

Impromptu conversations are brief conferences between a teacher and a student or two that allow all parties to share feelings about what has happened and to discuss ways to resolve issues that are raised. They're not a time for a teacher to scold a student about what he did wrong. Some sentence starters useful during impromptu conversations include the following:

- *Anger and resentment.* I'm angry that \_\_\_\_\_. I'm fed up with \_\_\_\_\_. I resent \_\_\_\_\_.
- *Hurt.* It hurt me when \_\_\_\_\_. I felt sad when \_\_\_\_\_. I feel disappointed about \_\_\_\_\_.
- *Fear.* I feel scared when \_\_\_\_\_. I'm afraid that I \_\_\_\_\_.
- *Remorse, regret, and accountability.* I'm sorry that \_\_\_\_\_. Please forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_. I didn't mean to \_\_\_\_\_.
- *Love, compassion, forgiveness, and appreciation.* I understand that \_\_\_\_\_. I forgive you for \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you for \_\_\_\_\_.

For example, world history teacher Marco Carbajal met with Gio, a student who had disrupted the lesson, saying, "It hurt my feelings when you continued to talk during my modeling. I worked really hard to plan an experience that would allow you to try some historical thinking. I'm wondering if my lesson was boring, or if you already knew about this period in time."

Gio immediately took responsibility for his actions, first apologizing and then adding, "Mr. Carbajal, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I know that was not good, and I'll work harder to pay attention. You give us good information, but today has been really hard for me. My mom was in an ambulance last night, and I was telling Joshua about her because I'm scared."

As a result of this brief conversation, Mr. Carbajal was able to express his hurt, maintain his relationship with Gio, obtain a commitment from the student, and understand the motivation behind the behavior. In doing so, both he and Gio had a chance to voice their concerns and have their feelings validated.

## 3. Repair harm when it is done.

Anyone who interacts with others will occasionally cause harm—sometimes intentionally, other times accidentally. It's how we respond to the harm that's important. Too often, victims never get closure or a chance at restoration. Similarly, those who cause harm are not given the opportunity to make it right. Instead they serve their time, and then the issue seems to be ignored. When people have the opportunity to make amends, they are less likely to cause that same harm again.

Repairing harm starts with understanding the perspective of the perpetrator, victim, and possibly bystanders. We have found the following questions, developed by Costello, Wachtel, and Wachtel (2009, p. 16), to be particularly helpful in preparing students for a victim-offender dialogue focused on repairing harm.

For the offender, we might ask, What happened? What were you thinking at the time? What have you thought about since? Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way have they been affected? What do you think you might need to do to make things right?

For the victim, we might ask, What did you think when you realized what had happened? What effect has this incident had on you and others? What has been the hardest thing for you? What do you think needs to happen to make things right? When the investigation has been completed and the parties are ready to meet, they are brought together in the same room.

Sometimes these formal restorative conferences, which typically last up to an hour, are extremely effective the first time. This was the case with Miguel, a student who decided to get drunk on the way to a team-building field trip. He was a member of Doug's group, and Doug was not able to compete with his team because he had to supervise Miguel until his parents arrived.

There was no reason to try to negotiate with an intoxicated student. The time to discuss the harm this caused was the next school day. Doug spoke with two students who agreed to represent the class and talk about the harm that was done to them when they lost members of their team. Doug was also a victim and decided not to facilitate the meeting, asking Dominique to do so instead. In addition, we invited the principal to represent the school as another victim.

Doug talked with Miguel's stepmother, letting her know that Miguel was not going to be expelled but that he needed to take responsibility and make some specific commitments. Doug asked if she would speak at the meeting as a victim, and she agreed.

During the meeting, we gave each victim time to share his or her perspective. The two students from Doug's group said Miguel could have hurt himself or someone else during the trust activities if Doug hadn't noticed he had been drinking. In addition to expressing his concerns about safety, Doug said, "Miguel, I feel hurt because I thought you and I were getting along great and that we had developed some trust. I liked hearing about your interest in Camaros and your hope to be a mechanic. We even talked about you meeting my mechanic."

Miguel's stepmother spoke about her fears for Miguel's future, saying, "You didn't go to a single day of 10th grade after you were expelled last year. This new school is another chance for you. I don't want you to be a statistic, dead on the street or homeless. I'm worried every day when I go to work that something will happen. *Mijo*, your dad and I love you." Miguel broke down crying. He made a series of commitments and offered heartfelt apologies to everyone in the room. He also suggested a series of consequences that would help him remember his commitments.

Miguel was never again in a restorative conference. He had excellent attendance for the remainder of 11th grade, attended summer school, successfully completed 12th grade, and graduated on time. Rather than being a statistic, he's a mechanic working full-time for a car dealership.

It doesn't always work this fast, but holding students accountable for the harm they cause is a long-term strategy.

Nancy was involved with two girls who bullied one another verbally, physically, and online. They were both victims and

perpetrators, and it was hard to figure out where and when it started. As Andrea said, "We've always hated each other." Jacqueline added, "Our old school suspended us lots of times for this, but she makes me so mad, and then I post again."

Over the course of several restorative conferences, Nancy learned that both girls felt justified in their actions and that they believed the conflict was only between the two of them. At their next meeting, Nancy brought in several bystanders who had observed the bullying and who shared how the bullying was affecting them. Tanya said, "I hate how you treat each other. It makes me upset because I'm friends with you both." Lillian added, "You make us all feel unsafe. Like you could turn on us any time. It's hostile and toxic."

With the bullying subsiding, Nancy started to feel that the girls were gaining a better sense of the negative consequences of their behavior. At their next meeting, Nancy asked them to use a sentence starter, taking turns completing the sentence with new information: "If you knew me, you would know \_\_\_."

At first they shared superficial information, such as their favorite colors. At one point, with tears in her eyes, Jacqueline said, "If you knew me, you would know my dad's in jail, and I really miss him."

Andrea responded, "If you knew me, you would know that I worry about my dad going to jail because he's in a gang and doesn't come home at night."

At this point, both girls started crying. Nancy reached for both of them. "It's hard to hate someone when you know their story," she said. After two months of restorative conferences, the bullying ended, and the two girls accepted one another. Two years later, there is no further evidence of the girls taking part in bullying.

## 4. Develop re-entry plans.

The return to the classroom after restorative conferences—with or without suspensions—can be fraught with misunderstandings that can lead to further problems. The student may look forward to moving ahead, but her peers may keep the drama going by wanting to know all the details. Her teachers may walk on eggshells for fear of triggering another incident, or they may have their own questions that remain unaddressed. In an effort to reduce the likelihood of future problems, we have instituted re-entry plans for students:

- *Rehearse with the student.* After those involved have reached a resolution, we discuss how the student will respond to possible scenarios, such as friends asking if he "got in trouble" or classmates egging him on to seek revenge. These rehearsals include how the student will speak, act, and look when he re-enters the classroom, and what he will say to the teacher.
- *Identify a lifeline.* Even with rehearsal, re-entry can be complicated. In situations where this is likely to occur, the restorative meeting also includes identifying a lifeline—an adult who can serve as a buffer. In the case of Miguel's highly public infraction, Doug was someone Miguel could turn to in the week or two that followed.
- *Schedule short follow-ups.* Dominique schedules check-ins with students in the coming days and weeks to help them problem solve. These short follow-ups allow him to ask how things are going, what's working, and what struggles remain.
- *Close the loop with adults.* Problems can arise when a student has committed a serious infraction, and adults are not informed of the outcomes. This can understandably cause them to believe that nothing has been done, especially if the behavior did not result in a suspension. (One reason suspensions persist is because they allow principals to show staff that they have taken concrete action.) Be sure to let staff members know about steps you have taken, follow-ups you have planned, and commitments the student has made.

## Changing Trajectories

In our school, these four principles helped us reduce the number of suspensions (only 10 last year) while building students' academic, social, and emotional abilities. It is imperative to know the effects of school exclusion practices at the local level and to act on them in ways that reduce lost instruction and repair relationships. We need to interrogate data, examine our own cultural proficiencies, and above all, talk with colleagues about these topics.

Restorative practices are not easy—they are messy and subject to the complexities of human relationships, but they are worth the investment of time and energy. They begin as all worthy causes do—with a shared commitment to change the trajectory of human lives. In this case, they begin with a determination to disrupt inequitable applications of school discipline.

## References

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