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**“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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Is it time for us to change the way we respond to discipline?

When it comes to managing discipline in our schools, punitive consequences have been the primary instrument in the toolbox of educators for decades (Swain, & Noblit, 2011). As Abraham Maslow once said, “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (1966). As we know, there is no single tool that can fix every problem. However, because of our over-reliance on punitive measures, especially suspensions, we have ended up causing more harm than good for those that we have committed to serve.

At its core, suspensions remove students from the classroom and ultimately from their opportunities to learn. Students who are routinely suspended end up missing out on crucial instruction time which often leads them struggling to get through the remainder of their course. Research has indicated that there is a direct correlation between students who are chronically suspended and high school dropout rates (Barr & Gibson, 2013). When these students begin to fall behind, they become more likely to act out in the classroom, which then creates a vicious cycle within the discipline system.

To further compound the issue, national data has revealed that our current punitive practices have created a discipline disproportionality among various groups of students. Minorities as well as students in special education programs are suspended two to three times more often than their white counterparts (Skiba et al., 2011). Also, these same students are three times more likely to be introduced into the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014).

It is easy for us to forget that schools also serve as a protective factor for our students. For many of them, it may be the only protective factor they have. Today's students have experienced a variety of adverse childhood experiences, and in many cases, the home may not be the safest place for them to be. Also, more and more schools are becoming the primary source of nutrition for our students. When they miss school, they miss out on meals.

When students return from a suspension, the relationships that may have been harmed by their initial behavior have not been repaired by their consequence. This, in turn, creates tension not only for the student but for the teachers as well as the student’s peers. Due to the lack of a proper reintegration back into the classroom, the student may lose the sense of belonging they once had and may find themselves struggling to succeed and once again acting out as a result (Barr & Gibson, 2013).

With all the adverse effects of punitive discipline, we need to find a way to create equitable opportunities for our students to succeed so that our already disadvantaged children don't become even more disadvantaged. One method that has been studied and shown to be successful is transitioning away from punitive practices in favor of restorative ones (González, 2012). Restorative Practices focus on the idea that school is a community and when harm has been done to that community it has a significant impact on its members. To repair the harm that has been done, a variety of practices are recommended including formal conferencing, community service (which directly benefits those harmed), and other alternatives to suspension.

The Restorative Practices philosophy focuses on the idea of "building social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making" (Wachtel, 2012). It stresses the importance of building and maintain relationships while at the same time holding students accountable for their actions and repairing the harm that they have caused not only to individuals but also their community. The fundamental philosophy of Restorative Practices is that,

Human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them. This hypothesis maintains that the punitive and authoritarian *to* mode and the permissive and paternalistic *for* mode are not as effective as the restorative, participatory, engaging *with* mode. (Wachtel, 2012).

Restorative Practices can be broken down in to two main components; the proactive social emotional learning aspects and then the reactive Restorative Justice element. The proactive elements includes using circles to build and maintain community, using affective statements (statements that express how you feel), and using affective/restorative questioning.

The Restorative Justice element helps to open dialogue between those that have been harmed and those that have done the harm by giving everyone a voice and letting them reflect on the incident. Formal conferencing works *with* all parties involved through a method of mediation. This process helps to peel the onion and highlighting underlying issues while at the same time facilitates a conversation on what needs to be done to make things right so that everyone's needs get met, relationships can began to repair, and the students can be reintegrated back into their community.

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