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Project Report

Restorative Discipline Practices: An Action Research Project in Zimbabwean Primary Schools

Evernice Netsai Chiramba

International Centre of Nonviolence, Durban University of Technology

mevernicensai@yahoo.com

Geoff Harris

International Centre of Nonviolence, Durban University of Technology

geoffreyh@dut.ac.za

Abstract

Traditionally, Zimbabwe's teachers have used punitive measures to maintain discipline in schools. The global movement against human rights violations associated with corporal punishment has encouraged the country's ministry of education to advocate non-punitive approaches, but it has provided little by way of detail or support. In three primary schools in Harare, teachers were trained in two restorative discipline alternatives—peacemaking circles and peer mediation—which they used with 9- and 10-year-old learners between March and October 2016. On average, the learners had bi-weekly opportunities through the circles to tell their peers and teachers what they were experiencing and feeling, and peer mediators had an opportunity to mediate in conflicts affecting their age mates. Outcomes were assessed using interviews with teachers before and after the intervention. In terms of outcomes, peacemaking circles enabled teachers to get to know their students and to respond preemptively to potential problems, while peer mediation led to a small but noticeable fall in the number and intensity of playground conflicts. The study shows that such restorative practices can be a promising way of addressing school discipline issues.

Keywords: school discipline, restorative justice, peacemaking circles, peer mediation, action research, Zimbabwe

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Why This Study?

Much has been said about the punitive disciplinary measures used in Zimbabwean schools, which are seen as necessary to produce controlled and productive learning environments (Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014; Makwanya et al., 2012). However, such measures have been increasingly condemned, worldwide, as violations of learners' human rights—and Zimbabwe's Constitution (Section 53 of 2013) effectively outlaws corporal punishment, including that used by teachers.

At the same time, non-punitive methods are widely believed to have limited effectiveness, and two thirds of children in Zimbabwe reported that teachers use corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2017). While Zimbabwe's ministry of education has advocated the use non-punitive disciplinary methods, it has not provided specific suggestions of such methods, let alone training in their use.

What Theory Did We Use to Explain Our Findings?

Traditionally, criminal justice systems have been concerned with retribution and punishment. When a crime is committed, the state takes over to bring alleged offenders before a court where, if they are determined to be guilty, they are subject to alternative forms of punishment that may well include imprisonment. Society may feel a sense of satisfaction that the guilty parties have been punished and it is assumed that punishment will deter reoffending and send a message to others to avoid such behaviour.

By contrast, restorative justice focuses on building a sense of self-worth and personal responsibility among offenders, and often involves efforts to build or rebuild the relationship between offenders and their victims (Zehr, 2015). This may occur through mediation sessions where stories can be told and heard, apologies made, and forgiveness asked and given. Restorative justice can occur within an essentially retributive justice framework for certain types of crimes and allows for sentencing options other than imprisonment, for example, mandatory participation in a victim–offender mediation process.

Many of the methods used by African communities to deal with antisocial behaviours involve strong elements of restorative justice. Common features of these traditional approaches are the involvement of all community members with an interest in the conflict to make their experiences and opinions known, the seeking of consensus concerning what actions should be undertaken by the offender, and the imperative of restoring social harmony.

Restorative justice has been applied in schools through a range of restorative practices based on similar foundational principles to those used in criminal justice (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; McCluskey et al., 2008; Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2008). Restorative practices aim to promote accountability and responsibility among learners and thereby help to create a conducive learning environment. Restorative practices allow students to learn from their mistakes through encounters with their peers; as a result, friendships can be restored and new relationships created. Restorative language helps to improve emotional literacy for both teachers and pupils, and nurtures respect, responsibility, and empathy in the members of the school community.

Restorative approaches can be applied by any teacher at any school to any group of children. These approaches are not a soft option for offenders; they involve the difficult work of holding learners accountable for their actions and helping them to understand the impact of their behaviour (Hendry, 2009; Liebmann, 2010). Restorative practice can produce a calmer school environment where learners feel they have a voice. The present research utilised two restorative approaches—peer mediation and peacemaking circles.

Peer mediation is a process of conflict resolution facilitated by learners, with dialogue as its key tool. Typically, peer mediators work in pairs under the broad supervision of a teacher, and handle conflicts that occur outside classrooms. They may wear identification badges when they are on duty. In the present study, outside instructors trained teachers in peer mediation philosophy and methods and these then trained the peer mediators, beginning with conflict resolution in general and then moving to the skills involved in mediating various conflicts.

Peacemaking circles are common in traditional restorative justice practice. In school contexts, they can take the form of checking-in circles that allow the class to know any issue of concern before they start engaging with their day's activity or they can be used to address matters of concern to members of the class, including conflicts. In either case, each class member has the opportunity to make a contribution, which the other participants treat with respect (Boyes-Watson, 2005; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2010; Pranis, 2005, 2013). The circle process emphasises the communal aspect of individual experiences and communal responsibility for decisions, and can help develop active listening, empathy, cooperation, negotiation, and the appreciation of diversity.

The aim of the research project reported here was to introduce peer mediation and peacemaking circles into a sample of primary schools in Harare and to assess their outcomes.

How Was This Study Conducted?

The project took place in three primary schools in Harare, one in a medium-density suburb, one in a high-density suburb, and one in a semi-urban settlement between March and October 2016. The schools can be regarded as reasonably typical of schools in their locations. Twelve teachers—two men and 10 women—volunteered to participate in the project. Thirty-five 9- and 10-year-old learners were trained as peer mediators, and around 200 participated regularly in peacemaking circles.

Teachers were interviewed prior to the introduction of peer mediation and peacemaking circles with a focus on traditional discipline methods and at the end of the intervention, when the focus was on the operation and effectiveness of peer mediation and peacemaking circles. Each interview was conducted face-to-face, lasted between 30 minutes and an hour, and asked semi-structured questions.

What Did We Find Out?

Interviews with teachers prior to the intervention investigated ways of controlling children's behaviour at home and at school. According to teachers, parents and guardians required their children to behave well at home and corporal punishment was the only way to make sure this happened. All the teachers spoke of the effectiveness of corporal punishment and manual labour as discipline tools in homes and schools. Almost all the teachers admitted that they used corporal punishment on a regular basis.

Peer Mediation

The teachers reported challenges ranging from large numbers of learners per class to widespread misbehaviour during break times. They hoped that teaching mediation skills would improve learner behaviour and so relieve some of their stress. Several teachers suggested that learners often wanted a way out of the conflicts they found themselves involved in but could not see one; in consequence, they appreciated the intervention of peer mediators.

During the post-intervention interviews, most teachers reported a small but noticeable improvement in the way learners interacted with each other. Playground conflicts, they said, were less likely to become violent and turn into long-running feuds. The intervention seemed to have injected something fresh into each school—a way of effectively dealing with the conflicts that are part of everyday school life. They reported some specific benefits to learners, including the status that peer mediators were given by other learners, a growth in the self-confidence of peer mediators, and a bonding of peer mediators across classes, which ordinarily did not happen to any extent. One teacher observed that other learners observed the skills of mediation and then practised them on their own.

The teachers found that their involvement in peer mediation encouraged their own reflection on other professional areas. Every teacher said that the project motivated them to reflect on their challenges, and to think of workable solutions. The teachers admitted that they were used to a top-down system and that a bottom-up process led by learners was, in the words of one, “refreshing and inspirational.” It is worth noting that teachers continued to use corporal punishment during the course of the project.

Peacemaking Circles

In the post-intervention interviews, teachers spoke very positively about peacemaking circles in their classrooms, and nine said that they intended to make circles an ongoing part of their teaching. They appreciated how circles brought learners together and recognised how different the process was to the traditional teacher-dominated classroom; in particular, there was an opportunity for all voices to be heard. One noted that the process of taking turns to speak, and listening respectfully to each other, helped to some learners overcome a sense of isolation and encouraged the building of community.

Most teachers mentioned the value of hearing background information from learners as a major benefit of the circle process to them. This information helped them to prepare for the day ahead and to hear about issues that could be addressed later; these included reasons for non-punctuality, homework challenges, and cleanliness. In brief, circles allowed teachers to become better acquainted with their learners.

Significance for Social Change

Both peer mediation and the peacemaking circles in the three schools involved building the dialogue skills of learners, which are key components in relationship building and conflict resolution. Teachers noted a small but noticeable improvement in learner interactions in the school. They pointed to the status that peer mediation carried with it, the growth in self-confidence of peer mediators, and the bonding of mediators across classes as they engaged in a shared responsibility. They noticed that other learners were strongly attracted to mediation and practised it independently.

The teachers were also positively influenced by their participation. Their experience with the circle process encouraged them to reflect on issues such as the efficacy of teacher-dominated classrooms and corporal punishment. The circles helped them to know their learners better. The project started a conversation about alternative ways of carrying out their profession.

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