

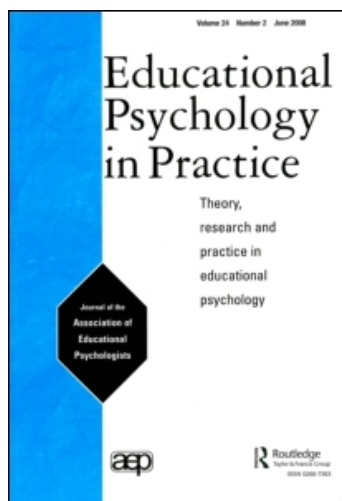
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Learning social responsibility in schools: a restorative practice

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Vygotsky regarded the site of learning to be within a matrix of relational action. From this perspective, learning social responsibility will involve a focus on the learning environments that are made available in schools. Adapting the concept of restorative justice to a school context, restorative practice offers a range of relevant learning opportunities. These learning opportunities relate to episodes of wrong-doing, and to actions that reflect the values and principles of a socially responsible school culture. The importance of dialogue, respect for “the other” and social collaboration will be evident in school-based restorative practices.

Keywords: learning social responsibility; restorative practice; social collaboration

Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) developed a theory of learning as a social and collaborative enterprise. For much of the rest of the century, the prevailing cultural assumption was that learning is an individual activity involving concepts such as intelligence, motivation, emotion, conditioning and cognitive skills (Gross, 1992, p. 4).

As well as academic concepts, it seems to have been assumed that social behaviour may be learned from approaches that rely on “one set of explanatory principles” (Danziger, 1997, p. 86). Rewards and punishments have been used to reinforce learning about the difference between what is socially responsible and what is socially irresponsible. When an individual contravenes a rule or a convention by adversely affecting other people, there has been an expectation that someone, representing “authority”, will make a judgement and impose a sanction or a punishment. Unacceptable actions are regarded as an offence against authority, and justice is deemed to require impersonal and objective judgement. One of the assumptions seems to be that individuals will learn social responsibility by learning to fear the consequences of social irresponsibility (Wilson & Hernstein, 1985).

Unfortunately, the evidence that rewards and punishments raise the level of social responsibility in society has not been supported by a decrease in the proportion of the population who are excluded from schools or who go through the criminal justice system (Youth Justice Board, 2003).

Reflecting concern about anti-social behaviour, successive governments have launched a series of initiatives – some of which seem to involve contradictory messages. Head teachers appeared to assume an increase in their power to exclude pupils following the Education Reform Act (DES, 1988), and subsequently they were

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expected to implement an Inclusion Agenda (DfES, 2001). There has been an expectation that schools will deliver a curriculum to promote social and emotional aspects of learning (DfES, 2005, 2007) although there is still no place for this work in the league tables that are published to identify successful schools.

Clearly, the Government would like to intervene early in the life of the country's citizens in order to develop more socially responsible attitudes. There has been an emphasis on exerting greater external control and on addressing the causes of irresponsible behaviour.

A perspective from criminology

An important contribution that takes account of reasons for socially responsible behaviour has been put forward in the criminology literature by John Braithwaite (1989). In line with common-sense thinking, Braithwaite proposes that the reason most people behave responsibly is their wish to avoid the justifiable resentment and disappointment of those people who matter most to them – their family, friends, or revered members of their community. However, socially irresponsible attitudes are fostered when individuals experience censure and punishment from people who do not matter to them. When this occurs, distancing in social relationships can lead to a negative cycle in which individuals seek solace and encouragement from those who share similar positions and attitudes.

According to Braithwaite's analysis, the task for schools is to create environments in which everyone feels valued and respected; where there are firm and clear expectations, and where negative responses to hurtful or harmful actions are combined with opportunities to re-integrate individual wrong-doers within a caring social network. Braithwaite describes this experience as "re-integrative shaming" which he distinguishes from "stigmatizing shaming". He considers that the former is associated with the development of social conscience, and the latter with the development of anti-social attitudes. As Braithwaite has pointed out, those families and schools that have not learned the trick of punishing within a continuum of love are those that fail in the task of socializing their children (1989, p. 56).

Restorative ideas

The practices associated with the concept of Restorative Justice reflect the contention that socially responsible actions and responses are best learned in a relationship culture where individuals are respected and well integrated into a social network (Morrison, 2001, p. 196). Restorative practices seek to promote a context within which the following questions may lead to actions with positive outcomes:

- (1) How may we respond to actions that are hurtful or harmful for individuals and for relationships?
- (2) How may we create a school climate where there is a good sense of social connectedness combined with respect for all individuals?

In general, the former question will be concerned more with reactive practice, and the latter with proactive practice. One of the features of restorative practice is the way in which a reactive response to wrong-doing may also operate proactively in helping to

bring about an improvement in relationships. This dual process is evident in the following example.

When a student made hurtful comments to a teaching assistant (TA), rather than punish the student an agreement was reached that both would be willing to meet a facilitator in order to discuss the incident, and to consider whether anything may be done that would help to repair the harm (Milton Keynes Council, 2005). A key assumption in this reactive response was that people who have engaged in, and been affected by, episodes of hurtful or harmful behaviour, are the people who should be involved in deciding what may be done to make amends, and to ensure that similar episodes do not occur in the future (Zehr, 2002, p. 37).

A member of staff prepared both sides and led the discussion according to a protocol for such meetings. Essentially, the staff facilitator asked a series of questions that drew out each person's perception of what had occurred; what each was thinking at the time as well as subsequently; who else had been affected and in what way; and what both felt needed to be done in order to put things right. During the meeting, the student learned how the TA had not been able to sleep following the incident and was thinking of giving up her job. In addition, her husband and son had been upset and reminded of bullying that made the son's life a misery when he was at school. The parents had been unable to help with their son's situation and the present episode served to confirm their sense of failure and despair.

Answering the facilitator's questions and hearing the TAs story was an emotional experience for the student. He moved his position from being someone who liked "a bit of fun" and had responded to "a classroom dare", to becoming someone who described remorse and who wished to make amends. For the TA, an apology was all that mattered, although the student decided to write a letter to the family in addition to a spoken apology. Subsequently, both described developing "a little bond" which led to the student and several of his classmates enjoying a friendly and caring relationship with the TA. This improvement in relationships was sustained over time, helping to develop an affirming rather than a disaffirming identity for the TA and her family, and enabling the student to gain self-respect and an enhanced appreciation of the negative effect that his actions may have on other people.

Theoretical perspectives from Vygotsky and Kolb

The changes brought about in this restorative meeting support Vygotsky's (1986) premise that new understanding does not come about by the single consciousness of an individual, but in the interaction between individuals. Vygotsky proposed a "zone of proximal development" to describe the gap between what individuals know and are familiar with on their own account, and what it is possible for them to know and do with the involvement of other people. The concept of "scaffolding" was introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) in order to describe the collaborative support that may be made available for people in traversing this zone.

Michael White (2007) has applied the idea of scaffolding to help guide and explain questions in a narrative therapy context. He describes the importance of asking questions that enable people to feel comfortable yet somewhat stretched in their thinking and imagination. White's proposal is that it is helpful for questions to be organised according to their increasing distance from the known and familiar story of the client.

Within a restorative meeting, questions that reflect an increasing distance from the known and familiar may be represented as follows:

- Low-level distance questions: What happened?
What were you thinking at the time?
- Medium-level distance questions: Who has been affected by your actions?
How have they been affected?
- High-level distance questions: What are you thinking now about what you said?
What needs to happen to put things right?

Vygotsky proposed that the progressive and incremental distancing from the known and familiar, and from the immediacy of one's experience, is what makes it possible for people to develop new connections and greater complexity in their thinking.

For each of the participants in a restorative meeting, the responses made by other people are part of the scaffolding required for new connections and reflections to develop. Because of the tenacity of certain ways of "seeing" the world, moving from one way of "looking" to another may be described as a process that is "absolutely impossible for one person, but that becomes a reality for two" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 256).

In his theory of Experiential Learning, Kolb (1984) has described the way in which learning involves integrating meaning derived from different positions of participation. For the student, giving meaning to the experience of responding to the classroom dare (concrete experience) combined with considering the effects of this action on other people (reflective observation), evaluating the situation (abstract conceptualization), and considering the options for making amends (active experimentation), required him to integrate learning from different positions of observation and from different modes of learning (thinking, perceiving, feeling and behaving).

The idea of different positions of participation enriches the framework provided by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, and supports the relevance of questions asked within a restorative meeting. For all those involved in a conversation, questions and dialogue will involve integrating new information, and developing concepts that create new understanding and new possibilities for acting differently.

For Vygotsky (1978) the world was processed through language in contrast to the world of the senses. He considered that the language used in a social group is the means by which individuals learn new concepts, and it is the availability of relevant concepts that enables one to regulate behaviour and to solve problems. "I had no idea that he was getting upset" said one of the participants on the DVD (Milton Keynes Council, 2005). Learning this concept enabled him to solve the problem of what to do. Vygotsky considered that concept development enables personal development to occur – as opposed to believing that development is required before new learning becomes possible.

With the availability of relevant concepts, individuals are able to problem solve and to experience a sense of agency in their decision-making. According to this understanding, actions that are considered to be responsible and autonomous have their foundation in social collaboration. This has implications for the priorities and for the opportunities that schools make available for students to learn socially responsible concepts.

The relevance of Vygotsky

Viewed from an individualist framework, the self is primary and society is made up of individual actors. Within this perspective, relationships are desirable principally

when individuals are not able to function adequately alone. Practices that emanate from this premise will propose that individuals will be advantaged by developing skills associated with the making, building and repairing of relationships.

Vygotsky began with a different premise, which is that the social is primary and individuals become who they are as a consequence of social actions. Viewed from this perspective, restorative practices aim to create learning environments (zones of proximal development) rather than to achieve objectives for individuals. The making, building and repairing of social relationships will reflect the process, as well as the outcome, of participating in restorative learning environments. In a context where the social environment has primacy, there will be opportunities for individuals to be transformed in their thinking, as well as opportunities for relationships to be transformed within a school community.

The task for staff will be to generate and participate in a learning culture that privileges “relationship learning” at every level in the school community. This will involve creating learning environments that focus on tasks such as: how to resolve conflict, build understanding, increase mutual respect, demonstrate acceptance of difference, experience a commitment to fairness and equitable process, and maintain personal responsibility and accountability for actions.

As proposed by Vygotsky (1986), and more recently by social constructionist authors such as Gergen (1999), what is taken to be knowledge of the world grows from relationships and is embedded within communal traditions. Within an individualist learning tradition, students will learn to “look out for number one”. Within a learning tradition that privileges relationships, students will learn connection, inclusion and social responsibility.

For Vygotsky, learning involves not only a relationship between the individual and specific activities, but also a relationship between the individual and the culture of their community. Features of a restorative school culture will include the following.

An emphasis on respect for “the other”

In contrast to the bias of recent years in which “self-knowledge” and “independence” are dominant cultural values, restorative practice reflects a bias in favour of “knowledge of the other” and “inter-dependence”.

Martin Buber (1958) has referred to positioning other people in an “I–Thou” relationship rather than an “I–it” relationship. According to Buber, within an “I–Thou” relationship, persons are sensitive to the other’s whole being, whereas “I–It” relationships are characterized by objectifying and stereotyping other people.

Scheff (1975) has pointed out the consequences of “I–It” relationships in which individuals may be classified as “enemies, strangers and deviants”. With this type of classification, “members of the collectivity often do not personify them as human beings like themselves” (p. 78).

Restorative practices provide a framework within which individuals may move their position from having an “I–It” relationship to having an “I–Thou” relationship; for example, the student who responded to a classroom dare and viewed the TA as an object of fun was able to move to a position of empathy and connection. This may be regarded as an “I–Thou” relationship. His movement from an “I–It” position involved changing from a relationship characterised by objectifying and stereotyping to a relationship that was respecting and evolving.

At times, when there may seem no way of easing a hurt or repairing a harm, new meaning may emerge in a restorative meeting following a sense of “collective vulnerability” (McDonald & Moore, 20001) and the awareness that, despite individual differences, all share a common humanity. The culture of a school will be developed as a consequence of the messages that are received about what is valued in the school community. When common humanity is valued, individuals will learn to relate to each other from a position that acknowledges unique human qualities and responses. This is a position that will, at the same time, enable individuals to experience their own unique qualities and responsibilities.

An emphasis on dialogue and fair process

George Herbert Mead (1934) claimed that one can only have the capacity for morality and responsibility to the extent that one is able to place oneself in another’s shoes and see things from their perspective. This involves being capable of genuine dialogue or being able to temporarily abandon one’s own position and see how the world looks from the position of someone other than our own self.

While monologue is “finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 293), dialogue implies that one no longer takes one’s own position as final. Isaacs (1999) has described dialogue as “a conversation in which people think together in relationship” (p. 19), and Arnett and Arneson (1999) regard dialogue as “propelling us towards more respectful interactions with the other, even in painful circumstances” (p. 4). Thinking and talking together allows for meanings to be negotiated and re-negotiated.

When decisions are required, “fair process” describes the opportunity for those affected by the decision to have their views heard. The aim of fair process is not to reach consensus through dialogue, but to ensure that individuals are able to contribute their views, and to understand the reasons for the decisions that are made. As described by Kim and Mauborgne (1997), “individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems – whether they themselves win or lose by those systems – when fair process is observed” (p. 69).

From Vygotsky’s perspective, social dialogue and fair process become reflected in the internal dialogue or “inner speech” that is the main regulating tool of human behaviour.

An emphasis on structure and support

Wachtel and McCold (2001) have described restorative approaches as “simultaneously exercising high control and high support, confronting and disapproving of wrong-doing while supporting and acknowledging the intrinsic worth of the wrong-doer” (p. 121). This is an authoritative position in which all individuals are respected and held to account for their actions. It is not a permissive position in which students are granted allowance for their wrong-doing, nor an authoritarian position which demands conformity and compliance.

The framework presented by Wachtel and McCold reflects the finding described by Diane Baumrind (1973) in her classic study of parenting patterns. Baumrind distinguished three different parenting styles which she classified as: authoritarian, permissive and authoritative. In Baumrind’s study, authoritative parents are both controlling and nurturing. They accompany their control efforts with verbal reasoning,

willingly providing the rationale for their requests, commands and directions. An authoritative parenting style was strongly related to social responsibility, achievement orientation, and self-reliance variables.

Within an educational context, an authoritative position requires professionals to maintain the responsibility of their position, while allowing the child or young person a voice in what is happening. It will be characterised by an ethos of participation and collaboration. Authoritative restorative practice involves engaging people: “doing things with them, rather than to them or for them” (Wachtel & McCold, 2001, p. 129). When carrying out activities with others, one metaphorically steps outside the self and takes on some aspect of the other.

A relational perspective on behaviour

One of the ways in which people learn from their interactions with others is by monitoring their behaviour and by observing the reactions they get from others. This provides critical feedback that individuals need to know, regarding whether they are socializing in an acceptable or unacceptable manner.

Vygotsky explained that, “we are in relation to ourselves in the same position as others are to us” (Daniels, 1996, p. 100).

Michael White (1989) has described the way in which problem behaviours may begin to define persons as problems. From this perspective, people can come to believe that their problems are internal to their self or to the selves of others, and that they or others are in fact “the problem”. When the person and their behaviour merge into a unitary identity, it can be difficult for individuals to exert a sense of agency in their lives and in their relationships.

In all social communications, by maintaining a distinction in words between persons and actions, opportunities are created for individuals to reflect on their responses, to evaluate the effect of their responses, and to receive feedback from others. A relational focus on behaviour can support individuals with their inner dialogue.

The way in which people and problems are spoken about can reflexively generate positive relationships and a positive context. By viewing “problems as problems”, rather than “people as problems”, individuals are able to talk with each other in a respectful manner, and talk with themselves in ways that support their responsibility and their accountability.

Developing a restorative school culture

In developing a restorative school culture, it will be relevant for participants in the school community to move from their known and familiar practice to what it is possible to know and do, in a process of scaffolded learning. This process will involve dialogue and a willingness to build on what is familiar and working well. Awareness-raising and training opportunities will assist this process, initially involving the leadership team and subsequently all members of the school community.

Examples of different restorative practices involving collaborative social activity are described by Hopkins (2004), Lloyd, McCluskey, Riddell, Stead, and Weedon (2007), Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2004), Warren and Williams (2008), and in the DVD “Building Our Community” (International Institute of Restorative Practice, 2008). These practices include: whole-school, class and playground activities to

promote and practise social and emotional aspects of learning; developing restorative language and restorative conversations; peer mediation; classroom circles; restorative thinking plans; checking-in and checking-out circles for students and staff; small and large group restorative meetings; formal restorative conferences; and restorative ethos building.

Restorative meetings may be convened with varying numbers of people, ranging from just one person to a large group that may include family and peer support for both sides in a conflict. With one person, a restorative response may be a statement such as, "What you have said makes me feel disappointed", or it may involve a question such as, "Who has been most affected by what has happened?" When a group meeting is being convened, it will be important for the facilitator to prepare people for the meeting in a transparent manner. Everyone will be offered an opportunity to consider the questions they will be asked in the formal meeting. The central issue is the willingness of participants to find a way of putting things right in a fair and just manner. This may simply be an agreement to avoid close contact for a period of time, or it may involve reparative actions that are undertaken voluntarily.

Restorative practices provide opportunities to learn about the views and priorities of other people; for example, adapting a circle technique and inviting everyone in a class group to contribute an opinion can create a sense of community among students, and help to stimulate an ability to take other people into account as equally valued members of the class group.

Circles techniques may be used to generate learning goals, provide feedback on lessons, problem-solve in relation to behavioural issues in the classroom, or help to resolve an incident that has affected everyone in the group. Small group restorative meetings may be convened in response to hurt or harm in relationships between students, or between students and members of staff. Family members and individuals affected by hurt and harm may contribute to the learning process in small group restorative meetings.

Restorative practices will be reflected in school behaviour policies, or in relationship management policies as suggested by Cameron and Thorsborne (2001, p. 193) and Hopkins (2004, p. 166). A restorative school culture will represent a way of thinking and being that is a relevant context for meeting objectives in national initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004), the Anti-Bullying Agenda (DfES, 1994, 2000, 2002), and the SEAL Curriculum (DfES, 2005, 2007).

Conclusion

Gergen (1999) has questioned, "what is the fate of close and committed relationships, and how can we build co-operative relations on a global scale, if the dominant orientation to life is of independent and self-contained individuals?" (p. 119). Schools have an important role to play in providing a community culture where children and young people may learn the value of relationships and of social cooperation.

Restorative practice gives primacy to social relationships. Rather than support monologues of knowing, the aim of restorative practice is to create contexts for learning in which the voice of the other may be heard, and where dialogue and reflective enquiry prompt learning that is inclusive and socially informed. This focus reflects Vygotsky's contention that our learning is built from the outside in, through our relations with others.

In fulfilling their responsibility to create environments for development, it will be important for staff in schools to clarify the values and principles that will inform the learning possibilities they wish to make available for children and young people. When these values include respect for other people, collaborative learning, the primacy of relationships, and learning from experience, a range of restorative practices will be coherent with their aspirations.

When hurt or harm is repaired within restorative meetings there will be learning about social responsibility. Similarly, when children and young people are living in a socially responsible culture in which all individuals are valued equally, where respect for others is expected in all day-to-day activities, and where social justice is a priority for everyone in the school, conditions will be favourable for a decline in the levels of hurt and harm within and beyond the school community.

Restorative practice offers opportunities for learning social responsibility both at a reactive level of specific and unique episodes of interaction, and at a proactive level that will reflect, as well as constitute, the values and principles of the school community. As a practice with a social purpose, these learning opportunities are consistent with the psychological theory that was developed by Lev Vygotsky.

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