

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Building Peaceful Schools: Doing Discipline Differently

26 July 2018



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Setting the scene

Principals Upfront is a series of public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals and giving principals a voice and a platform to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership.

Dialogue 10, which focussed on **implementing restorative approaches to school discipline as a way of making schools safe environments for learning**, was held on 26 July 2018 at the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance.

Although corporal punishment was abolished in South African schools in 1994, it continues to be practised. Punitive discipline damages the relationship between teacher and learner, creates a climate of fear and resentment and obstructs effective teaching and learning. It also encourages the use of violence as a way of dealing with conflict. Restorative justice offers an alternative that focusses on repairing the harm caused by inappropriate behaviour, rather than assigning blame and punishment. The process of restorative discipline encourages accountability and fosters a peaceful, respectful atmosphere for teaching and learning.

Principals Upfront is presented by the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, Wits School of Governance, Catholic Institute of Education, Sasol Inzalo Foundation and BRIDGE.

This dialogue overview highlights the key themes and issues discussed, giving readers a taste of the perspectives and concerns of the keynote speaker, the panellists and the audience.

Keynote Speaker

Anne Baker is the Deputy Director of the Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) responsible for operations, policy and advocacy. She has been closely involved in developing and implementing child safeguarding, conflict management, school governance and restorative justice policies, practices and programmes in Catholic schools across South Africa. Her involvement in school leadership and teacher development has given her deep insight into the challenges faced by schools and school communities.

Anne Baker's presentation outlined the CIE's journey to change discipline in schools, particularly the use of corporal punishment, and shared some of the key challenges, lessons learned and methods used.

Restorative justice started in New Zealand in the criminal justice system when Maori elders called for a different way of dealing with young men who broke the law. Offenders, they felt, should not be sent to prison – instead they had to be accountable to the community by taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions and helping to put right the harm they had caused. From there the restorative justice approach spread to other First Nations people in Australia and Canada, and has since been picked up by school communities in the UK and USA.

In South Africa, schools continue to face the legacy of colonial and apartheid attitudes to discipline. Colonialism imposed the Victorian notion of school discipline which gave teachers and prefects an enormous amount of power and control through punitive systems. On top of that, during the time of apartheid school authorities socialised black learners to accept corporal punishment as a way of life.



Anne Baker, Deputy Director, CIE

"The time has come to de-colonise discipline in schools."

The CIE's journey to understand the issues and help schools become safe places for teaching and learning revealed that many of these aspects still have influence today. Many adults who experienced corporal punishment as children view it as 'normal' – but we are now living in the 21st century and understand more about the long-term detrimental effects of violence on children. At the same time many teachers report feeling disempowered without corporal punishment. The process of disciplinary hearings is also felt to be negative, with high levels of damaging antagonism being generated and dignity being lost on both sides.

In relation to school climate, research shows that a principal's greatest influence on learner achievement is through the climate of the school – and that improving the climate brings about the greatest amount of change. If the school climate is one of conflict, fear and corporal punishment, the quality of learning suffers. In schools where the climate is positive – where there is a sense of community, where members of the school community are treated with respect, rights are balanced against responsibilities and peace is promoted in a positive, action-oriented way – both teachers and learners are able to thrive.

These realisations prompted the CIE to introduce restorative justice approaches as a way of assisting schools to deal with issues of discipline and develop positive school climates. The restorative approach builds community by strengthening relationships and managing conflict and tensions. It is about forgiveness, taking responsibility and repairing harm done. While retributive justice focusses on how to punish the offender, restorative justice focusses on how to restore the wellbeing of the victim, the community and the offender.

“Conflict resolution and restorative justice is not an event but a process – it is something you grow into and the more you do it the more it becomes second nature.”

Oscar Apollis (Chief Education Specialist, Western Cape Education Department)

Key lessons, methods and tools:

While working with schools to implement restorative discipline the CIE gained some important insights into what worked.

An important lesson was that **transitioning from a punishment to a restorative culture starts with the individual**. Each of us has our own attitudes towards discipline and ways of dealing with conflict based on our unique experiences in our families of origin, schools and communities. What we believe about young people and children and to what extent we respect them is also an important factor. For this reason it is vital to prepare the ground with foundational activities that draw school staff into the process and help them reflect on their attitudes and beliefs.

Those who are “always at the tip of the iceberg, helping things go right and addressing things that go wrong” need to **replenish their own resources**. These reflective questions can help one to gain clarity of mind when involved in restorative processes.

- *Is my heart at peace?*
- *Is there something creative I can do about the situation?*
- *Who can I approach who may have influence?*
- *Is there a relationship I need to build?*
- *Am I willing to learn? What might this process teach me?*

Confrencing forms an important component of the restorative approach and involves using ‘what’ questions to **uncover the issues and reach agreement on restorative action** to be taken. The process goes well beyond simply establishing what happened and involves exploring the thoughts and feelings of those involved to reach a deeper understanding of the consequences. Conferences can range from informal chats to formal discussions, depending on the need. [For more information on conferencing and restorative questions, [click here](#) to view Anne Baker's presentation.]

The circle is central to the restorative process:

- When sitting in a circle, everyone is on the same level and able to have eye contact.
- People speak one at a time, using “I” messages – this supports owning their issues and taking responsibility.
- The group awareness encourages respectful interaction.
- The focus is on putting things right, and how the group will do this together.
- There is a sense of fairness and empathy toward others in the circle.
- There is a focus on listening.
- There is joint ownership of the process and outcomes.



More lessons for transitioning from a retributive to a restorative approach:

- The move towards restorative practices takes time as people need to build a deeper understanding. **Reflective action learning**, using a continuous cycle of reflecting, distilling the lessons and applying them, has proven effective.
- **Role playing** of conferencing effectively gives people a glimpse of the alternative to punitive processes.
- Learners enthusiastically embrace the use of **trained peer mediators**.
- **One-minute conversations**, during which the principal gives the staff member complete, present attention, are effective in developing positive relationships.
- While corporal punishment continues to be used in homes, children will be more likely to use violence themselves – so actively **partnering with parents to reduce violence in the home** is an important part of the transition.
- In place of an imposed code of conduct which has fixed rules for transgression, rather **involve the learners** in developing an **agreed set of classroom behaviours** and standards
- And finally, restorative processes encourage the development of several important **21st century competencies** such as creativity, collaboration and communication.

If you would like more information on this topic, the following user-friendly resource is available from the CIE: *Fairness for All: Doing Discipline Differently* by Anne Baker and Mark Potterton, Johannesburg, Catholic Institute of Education, 2013



Programme Director:
Mduzuzi Qwabe, CIE

“One of the most persistent myths is school discipline is that punishment is a way of “holding students accountable”. But punishment only works when the authority is watching and relies on external control. Restorative methods impose a consequence rather than a punishment and help to create empathy and active involvement. A consequence dramatically improves the chances that positive attitudes and behaviours will be internalised and that young people will behave well, not merely out of fear, but because they want to feel good about themselves and have a positive connection to others. From *Restorative Practices Handbook for Teachers Disciplinarians and Administrators*, by Bob Costello, Joshua Wachtel and Ted Wachtel

Input from the Panellists

Kope Malatsi, Principal of St Paul's High School, Limpopo, since 2000, has won numerous awards for teaching, school management and leadership at provincial and national levels including 1st place in the 2015 National Teaching Awards for Excellence in Secondary School Leadership. He was a founder member of the Catholic Principals' Forum in Limpopo and has served on the Board of the Catholic Institute of Education for the past five years.



Gladys Tibane, Principal of Thulisa Primary School, Katlehong, has been in teaching for nearly 30 years. She is a strong advocate for gender equality and women's rights and has played, or currently plays, a prominent and active role in numerous professional and other organisations such as the South African Council for Educators (SACE), the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), the Progressive Women's Movement of South Africa (PWMSA), and the Ekurhuleni Aids Council.

Learner discipline is a challenge – why do you believe restorative approaches offer a better opportunity for schools in terms of discipline?

- A restorative approach to discipline is more affirming to all parties involved and builds self-confidence. Because learners are taken seriously, they believe in themselves and that what they say has value.
- It promotes peace within those directly involved as well as others.
- It promotes mutual respect across all levels of the school, creating synergy and encouraging people to cooperate with and care for one another.
- It builds better understanding of why people behave in particular ways and results in greater empathy.
- It helps learners to develop their capacity for positive human relationships. They learn to live with one another, to accommodate one another and to take responsibility for their actions.

“In schools we work with the adults of tomorrow, those who will be responsible citizens of our country when the adults of today are old. Therefore, as much as we equip our learners with knowledge and skills, it is also important to develop their ability to form positive human relationships.” Gladys Tibane

What challenges do schools face in implementing restorative disciplinary practices?

We are dealing with communities and a society where many families are differently structured, or where family members live separate lives. This makes it difficult to use restorative approaches that involve parents. Many parents, when invited to school to discuss their children, display a negative attitude before they have even heard what the issue is.

A diverse learner population makes implementation more challenging:

- When learners are from different language and ethnic groups, communication can be difficult and it is harder for them to reach out to one another. Poor communication is especially challenging in conflict situations and can lead to misunderstandings, frustration or physical violence because heightened emotions make it more difficult for learners to express themselves.

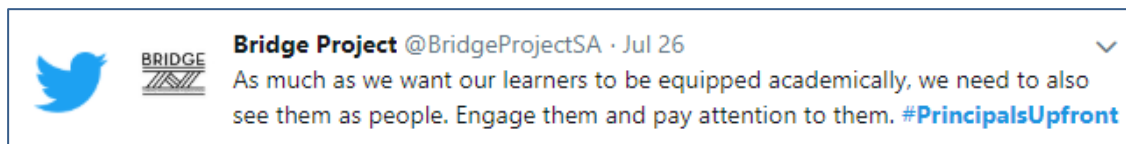
- When children are from different social backgrounds and have been brought up differently, it is more difficult to bring them to the same level and ensure that they adjust to their new school circumstances together.

Fear is a factor for both teachers and learners. Teachers who see restorative discipline as 'giving in' to learners are likely to fear losing their authority. Teachers are human and have their own challenges – and may hold back for fear of exposing their weaknesses and problems. Learners may be fearful of exposing their social backgrounds or family shortcomings. All these factors mean that people are not ready to share their thoughts and feelings, which is vital for achieving restorative outcomes.



Panellists Kope Malatsi and Gladys Tibane

Many teachers are focussed solely on the demanding primary responsibility of curriculum delivery, and do not want to be concerned with the learners' broader social and emotional issues.



It takes time, effort and patience to implement a restorative approach. Schools need to invest in preparing the ground, which should be done holistically. It also takes time to carry out restorative discipline processes, and it can be difficult to find adequate time to really go deeply into issues.

What critical and practical steps do schools and teachers need to take, to make the paradigm shift from a punitive to a restorative system?

Steps taken by **St Paul's High School** to create a solid background for restorative discipline:

- Embark on an awareness and advocacy campaign to the school community (including parents) to make them aware that past practices were not necessarily the best way, especially in terms of punitive punishment, and of the need to build peace in families, the community and society.
- Build bridges between teachers and support staff – help support staff to develop self-esteem so that they are able to interact with teaching staff on a more level footing.
- Encourage learners and the school community to be more tolerant, open and accepting of other people's views. Introduce reflection on the school ethos and positive values that help to build good relationships.
- Introduce an information programme on restorative justice. Do this in an on-going way to build up awareness and understanding over time. Make sure that the programme includes the relationship element to build bridges and help sustain a spirit of tolerance.
- Arrange team building activities that include components on restorative justice.
- Share positive stories showing that things can be done differently – and discourage the sharing of negative messages.
- Invest in the teachers through intensive training so they are confident and effective in developing learners.
- Develop peer mediators. They play an important role in making restorative discipline processes effective as they are able to interact directly with their peers, exert a positive influence, help uncover the root causes of conflict and intervene timeously to prevent situations escalating.

At **Thulisa Primary School** the focus is on creating an environment where all members of the school community feel acknowledged and supported. The school had been working on implementing a restorative approach for some time and ‘while not there yet’ their efforts are yielding results. This has highlighted the importance of:

- Being present and available to the learners and investing in them – for the little ones this means showing them affection and letting them know that when they come to school there is someone who cares. For the older learners this means taking time to engage them and respecting their thoughts, feelings and opinions.
- Building good relations with staff, taking time to understand their circumstances and individual challenges.
- Talking to learners who have done something wrong in an unthreatening environment and paying careful attention to what they say. “It is a major mistake that we don’t listen to children, but judge them without knowing what lead to that action, before they even articulate why they did what they did.”
- Create a safe environment when interacting with learners by handling them respectfully and enabling them to express how they feel.

An example of restorative discipline from Thulisa Primary School

We experienced a problem of bullying. The particular learner is older than average for his class. He lives with his granny, who is bed-ridden. The father stays elsewhere and the mother has passed on. We had to help the learner to understand that what he was doing was not right. We also realised that he was being mocked by others because of the way he dressed. I told him that he could ‘be my child’ – I would make sure he had the full uniform, he would come to my office every afternoon and we would sit together to do his homework, and whenever he needed something he was to come to me. For his part, he would go around to all those he had bullied to say he was sorry and to tell them he was now a different person altogether. He would also tell them that he wanted to help them so they would also help him. He might find they were going through the same experiences he was, but because they were managing, they were doing better in class. We also agreed that we would ask the other learners to assist him to do his work – and he would behave as a big brother to them.

Questions, Comments and Panel Responses

Members of the audience formed groups to discuss their own experiences. The resulting questions and comments related to:

- ways of activating restorative justice and ensuring sustainability
- accountability and values as key factors in restorative approaches
- meditation as an effective and easily accessible tool in restorative processes
- the importance for boys of male mentorship and non-violent models for dealing with conflict
- responsibility for discipline shared by the principal and the deputy
- the negative impact on school discipline by children from ‘broken families’
- pairing senior learners with younger learners as ‘big brothers’
- the challenge of bringing family members from ‘unstructured households’ on board to help bring about restorative justice

Responses by the speaker and panellists included:

In terms of sustainability, restorative discipline is not just in the hands of principals and deputies – once teachers have learnt how to handle the restorative approach they play an important role in its implementation. Rotating roles and empowering other staff members also means that the culture and systems will be maintained.

In terms of accountability and values, it is important for school leaders to remain true to their own values while inviting input from and working closely with their staff. Consistency is important, as is ensuring that the ethics of the school are not compromised. Good relations with staff and learners are needed to produce results.

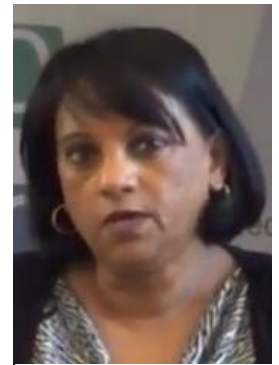
On the issue of 'broken families', St Paul's is successfully using 'mother figures' from the school community, who have received training in counselling, to visit families and assist learners in a variety of ways.

Anne Baker urged people to consider the negative impact of the term 'broken families'. It would be helpful to change our language and refer instead to 'different kinds of families' which recognises that nowadays there are many variations on the traditional family unit. Calling them 'broken' implies that children growing up in these families lack care – and while this is true of many, it is not always the case. Anne also offered a word of caution regarding older learners mentoring the younger ones – while this could work well, it is crucial to ensure safety as one of the greatest increases in danger to children is child-on-child sexual abuse.

Conclusion

Dr Anusha Naidu of the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance shared these reflections:

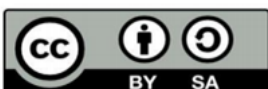
- Despite the continuing problems in school discipline, there had been progress in that the issues were now being aired and examined.
- Meditation offered real benefits in the school setting. A good example was provided by Actonville Primary School where, in the face of serious societal challenges the principal, Venessa Moodley, had used values and the principles of meditation to create a nurturing environment.
- Corporal punishment was a reality in many schools. Overcoming this would have to involve the entire school community. It would require individual awareness and an holistic approach to caring for everything around us – not only for each other but also for the environment. This was part of our being and was essential for restoring society, community and the country.
- Many of the approaches used in restorative justice were already familiar to South Africans. The practice of sitting in a circle to give everybody a voice and then making a decision as the leader based on what had been said was a very African principle of leadership. It would be beneficial to use this approach, rather than the western meeting format, when discussing challenging issues.
- It was crucial to share the message of this dialogue – especially with those who did not yet have a concept of this topic – and to begin using restorative approaches more widely, not just in schools but also to deal with some of the other issues facing our country.



Dr Anusha Naidu:

The next Principals Upfront dialogue will be held on 11 October 2018.

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If there are any burning issues you would like to have addressed, or if you would like more information on this dialogue series, contact Patience Voller at patience@BRIDGE.org.za



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