

Career Development Grant: Restorative Justice

My intention in focusing on and exploring restorative justice during my principal enrichment pathway was twofold: first, I hoped to find a tool to continue to promote a positive school environment (thus building upon steps previously taken in implementing PBIS) and two, I was interested in productive alternatives to punitive discipline. I started this pathway by reading about and researching restorative practices, but given the enormity of what I was hoping to implement and my concern surrounding implementing it effectively, I realized the need for more formal professional development. The career development grant allowed me to take the next step by attending an International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) conference on implementation in schools.

The conference, delivered over the course of four days, provided a thorough introduction to restorative justice and aimed to impart “practical knowledge and skills that could be applied immediately” in educational settings. The first two days, entitled “Introduction to Restorative Practices and Using Circles Effectively,” looked more deeply at relationship building and its impact on community climate, as well as how to promote and facilitate meaningful conversations. We participated in community-building circles as well as group discussion circles that promoted problem-solving. The activities and experiences during these first two days aligned perfectly with the plan to continue to promote a positive school environment. Daily community building circles, and in turn, community building discussions, are a perfect tool to engage students, foster relationships, and eventually solve classroom issues. At the same time, these not only empower staff to continue to build and foster relationships with students, but also address issues that arise in their own classrooms. It is these connections and the ability to respond to student needs that are so necessary in today’s classrooms.

The second two days, entitled “Facilitating Restorative Conferences,” focused more intensely on addressing harm and wrong-doing when it has affected a community. These conferences are what many people think of when they hear about restorative justice and having “perpetrators” make amends for their actions. Through role-playing, we participated in and facilitated conferences that allowed for productive, community-building outcomes. These activities also allowed us to experience the power of a restorative conference through the eyes of the perpetrator as well as a harmed individual. Most importantly, it also demonstrated the importance of pre-conferencing with all participants, the need to front-load all expectations, and the need to hold all participants accountable to these expectations. And while I came to the realization that not all situations will lend themselves to these restorative practices, given the right situation, conferences can provide highly-effective, non-punitive, community-building avenues for school discipline.

Looking back, this conference not only provided an effective introduction to restorative practices, it also allowed time to collaborate with colleagues at various stages of implementation of restorative justice in their own buildings. Their varying perspectives and valuable insights allowed me to further refine our implementation plan and hopefully avoid certain roadblocks encountered by others. In this way, I feel we are more prepared to effectively implement restorative practices here at Flex.

In the end, restorative practices will provide teachers and staff with the tools to create community, engage students, and solve classroom challenges. Perhaps more importantly, these practices will also provide students with voice in and ownership of their education, even when faced with disciplinary measures. In this way, student ownership of their education as a whole will become an end in and of itself.



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