

Wholesome Discipline

The aim of punishment is often framed in terms of retribution for past wrongdoing and deterrence of future wrongdoing. A rapidly spreading alternative to these traditional conceptions of punishment is known as restorative justice, which does not primarily aim to “inflict punishment on the offender, but rather, to restore all parties to a prior state of ‘wholeness.’”¹

In response to dissatisfaction with zero-tolerance policies in schools and their disproportionate impact on disadvantaged students, educational leaders have turned to restorative discipline. Many use mediation between victims and offenders, between a group of offenders, or between the community and the offender as a vehicle for healing and growth. For example, if a student is guilty of bullying, school leaders might facilitate a conversation between the bully and their victim(s), or a discussion among a group of bullies in order to unearth their motivations, to educate them on the harms of bullying, and to repair injuries caused.² While a more punitive model of discipline in schools would use familiar modes of punishment (detention, suspension, shaming, legal citations), restorative practices aim for reconciliation, reform on the part of wrongdoers, and collaborative problem-solving to address infractions and their causes.

Advocates argue that such restorative practices lead to increased accountability, more supportive school environments, positive social and emotional learning, and a more equitable distribution of punishment in schools. There is a distinctive educational value, too. Restorative practices present opportunities for students to learn the sorts of social skills and character traits necessary for students to flourish as adults. However, restorative practices in schools are not yet well understood by researchers. One study found that restorative practices in Pittsburgh public schools improved school climate and decreased the average suspension rate, but also that those same programs led to a worsening of academic and disciplinary outcomes.³ Another study found that restorative intervention “did not yield significant changes in the treatment schools,” but self-reports by participants showed signs of positive impact on school climate for the future.⁴ Yet another study found that “students attending schools with collaborative climates and less punitive approaches to discipline have lower risk of being suspended and better academic outcomes.”⁵

Some take the widespread support for such practices in the absence of a solid body of research to be a sign that moral sentiment has moved ahead of demonstrable results.⁶ Critics also worry that leniency in punishment does not sufficiently penalize students who misbehave and fails to deter future misbehavior. Some also see restorative practices as a way of artificially driving the number of reported school suspensions down, thereby papering over underlying problems among students and within schools. When minor behavioral problems are ignored, they may turn into serious infractions, thereby exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a morally significant difference between the use of restorative disciplinary practices on young children in schools as opposed to adult offenders?
2. What obligations do victims (whether individuals or communities) have to offenders?

¹ "Prisons Today and Tomorrow"

² Colorado School Safety Resource Center, "Examples of Restorative Justice Actions in Schools"

³ RAND, "Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?"

⁴ Evaluation of a Whole-School Change Intervention: Findings from a Two-Year Cluster-Randomized Trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention

⁵ Discipline in Context: Suspension, Climate, and PBIS in the School District of Philadelphia

⁶ The Cart Before the Horse: The Challenge and Promise of Restorative Justice Consultation in Schools

