

# The Use of Restorative Practices in a Traumatized School Community

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April 20, 1999 – At that time this was the date of the most fatal school shooting in the United States. The tragedy that occurred that day in Littleton, Colorado and the consequent attempts to make sense of, heal, and attempt to forestall similar tragedies from occurring have changed the face of not only school security but schools themselves (Langman, 2009; Bartels & Crowder, 1999).

April 20, 2001 – Two years later a small group of junior high school students in a junior high school west of the Mississippi were planning another school tragedy set to occur on the second anniversary of the Columbine shooting.

Originally the name of the state flower of Colorado, then the name of a high school in suburban Jefferson County, Colorado, the word Columbine had experienced a semantic change. It now had a new millennium meaning: “To do a Columbine” (Kenneth Trump, 2008). In a nutshell, this describes the context of the event that forms the basis of this case study. This study considered responses to the harm experienced by a school community after an event of this type and examined how these responses were restorative in nature.

The effects of school violence are varied and far-reaching. An event involving school violence such as the one forming the basis of this study, which does not occur but is planned and becomes public knowledge through media exposure, has a detrimental effect on the school community. In this case, the planned school shooting by three students was interrupted several months before it was to take place and the planners, junior high school students, were dealt with strongly by the juvenile justice system. Since the incident was the first known “Columbine copycat”, the case became very public and was heavily covered by both local and national media. The effects of this situation on the families, school, and larger community were far reaching, severe and in some cases, life changing. The resulting investigation and court proceedings caused shock waves that rippled through the school and eventually, the community at large. Even though the planned attack was interrupted before it was to occur and no one was physically harmed, the school community was traumatized. The scope of this study focused on the responses to that trauma, in particular those responses that fall within the parameters of restorative justice philosophy.

## **Research Parameters**

Through the use of a case study method within a qualitative paradigm this research investigated the harm caused by the actions of those junior high students, the responses to that harm, and how those responses were restorative in nature. The methodology of the case study allowed for a particularistic, naturalistic interpretation of

events using thick, descriptive data. Through in-depth interviews with involved parties and a narrative reporting of their experiences, this study remained faithful to the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice, which value individual experience and the peaceful expression of those experiences (Johnstone, 2002; Zehr, 2005).

This research took an approach to the subject of school violence that sought to determine how recovery becomes possible. The planned violence in this incident was interrupted by a report to law enforcement. While the effect on the school community was nowhere near as devastating as if it had occurred, there was still substantial harm. By exploring how restorative justice principles can inform the behavior of those responding to these types of harmful incidents, it is hoped that others may use similar processes. The responders in this case were school administrators and juvenile justice personnel. The events were presented through the eyes of some of those who lived it: a principal, an assistant principal, a teacher, a school resource officer, a parole officer and a community restorative justice facilitator. The experiences of these persons were gleaned through an in-depth interview with each. The interview relied on storytelling to get to the heart of the matter. As an emergent study, it looked at how restorative justice practices were used in conjunction with and following the criminal investigation and prosecution. The research probed the circumstances surrounding a traumatized junior high school community and asked, "How is recovery possible?"

The case study was bounded in space as including the school community present at this junior high school in the western United States. In time, it was bounded from the time the report of violence at the school became public knowledge in January 2001 to the time of the restorative justice conference in which the school participated in 2003. The determined delimitation of this study included just this one incident. The interviewees were restricted to adults from the school staff as well as personnel from the juvenile justice system who were involved during the incident and its aftermath.

Being aware of the context of a case allowed the researcher to develop a holistic picture of what was to be studied (Patton, 1990). This case study took place in an upper middle class community. At the time of this event, the junior high school was not particularly diverse, either racially or ethnically, and ranged economically from lower-middle to upper class. The criminal case consisted of a police investigation of a "planned Columbine-like" attack on a junior high school, the court case and the subsequent rehabilitation of the juvenile offenders through the state juvenile corrections system (Police Records, 2001). The focus of this study was the healing the community underwent, concentrating on how that healing fit within a restorative justice philosophy. This case study became a vehicle to better understand restorative justice practices. It should be noted that this intersection of school violence and restorative justice was intrinsically interesting to the researcher and unique in the literature.

Concurrent yet unrelated to the increase in school violence alluded to earlier, is the growth of what was once considered a somewhat radical movement in the juvenile justice system called Restorative Justice. Restorative justice is a philosophy of social justice that is focused on repairing the harm caused by crime. It looks at crime as an act

that damages relationships between persons and within communities rather than as an affront to the state (Zehr, 2005). It seeks to repair relationships, heal the harm, and restore the affected parties and their community to pre-crime conditions if possible. A central tenet of restorative justice is the use of storytelling to develop empathy and build bridges of understanding between people (Pranis, 2002). A working definition of restorative justice may be taken from Howard Zehr (2002, p. 37):

“Restorative justice is a process which involves, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations in order to heal and put things as right as possible.”

The purpose of this study was to examine, through a storytelling form of interview, how restorative justice practices were used to affect the recovery from an incident of planned school violence and heal any harm experienced by the school community. The purpose and investigative focus of the study adds to the restorative justice field of study as it is applied within schools and as it is used in severely traumatic events. It also adds discourse to the field of school safety and violence reduction. In addition to continued cases of actual school shootings, there continue to be reports of threats of school violence:

Berlin (Reuters) March 13, 2009 - German police have received more than half a dozen threats of violence at schools.

Joliet IL (NBC5) March 9, 2009 - A student who threatened a Columbine-style attack at the school on his Facebook page was arrested Thursday police said.

How does a school community begin to heal from incidents of real or planned violence? One answer may be restorative practices. Using this case as an example, how were restorative justice practices applied to the healing process in this circumstance? This was the overarching problem addressed in this study. The purpose was to gain insight and understanding as to how restorative justice can be incorporated into the response to future events of this type. This study examined many types of restorative practices and the many forms these practices took. The accumulated wisdom of the participants in this particular event documented the potentially positive effect that restorative justice had on the healing process and on the community's sense of security.

## **Results**

In interpreting the data from this study, it first becomes apparent that persons playing a leadership role in this situation were well versed in restorative justice practices. Although in all cases restorative justice work was not their primary job function, each of the persons interviewed had received some sort of training in restorative justice or programs closely aligned with the restorative justice philosophy. The lead administrator received substantial training in restorative practices, even though that was not the main function of his job as a junior high school administrator. The assistant administrator was

trained in mediation practices and used mediation successfully in his current role as assistant administrator as well as in a previous role as a high school administrator.

Additionally he was versed in the Discovery process. A conclusion can then be drawn that he was a skilled mediator and comfortable in its common ground philosophy. The teacher, who was a part of the Summit meeting, while not in a leadership role, had just received training in the Discovery process. This process relies heavily on mediation and other types of conflict resolution including using circle formats for classroom meetings. These types of processes are heavily restorative in nature. Hopkins in her book, *Just Schools, A Whole School Approach to Restorative Practices* emphasized the importance of mediation and circles by devoting a chapter to each process (2004). Regarding mediation, she stated that mediation can span the spectrum from peer mediation, and facilitated mediation between students to mediation between student and teachers and staff to staff mediation.

Leaving the school district personnel and moving into the juvenile justice system, it can be seen that the statewide effort of the Colorado Division of Youth Corrections to incorporate restorative practices into its programs certainly paid off in this case. The Parole Officer hoped, from the start of his involvement in the case, that it might someday culminate in a restorative justice conference and he prepared for that day for more than a year. The restorative justice facilitator for that conference was involved in a school resource officer program in a supervisory capacity. Restorative justice was something she used in her day to day interactions; however it was not the main focus of her position. The conclusion can be drawn from this information that when persons are aware of restorative practices, or when they incorporate restorative philosophies in their day to day interactions; they are very likely to draw upon restorative practices when a traumatic situation arises.

As mentioned earlier, apart from the conference which was held at the school approximately a year and a half after the accident, the other actions that were taken do not, strictly speaking, fall into the realm of what is commonly referred to as restorative justice practices. However, looking beneath the surface of these actions, it is very clear that a restorative justice philosophy informed those actions (Pranis, 1999). In the first case, the Tree represented the ability for all community members involved in this situation to be heard. It was an innovative way of having these people heard, since because the criminal investigation and the disciplinary investigation were continuing, there was very little opportunity for the school administration or the justice system to offer a standard restorative justice conferencing response. It was also impossible for the offenders to meet with the community and make things right, because they were involved in a criminal investigation which was ongoing.

### **The Tree**

Leadership at the school recognized that the community needed to speak out and be heard and this was accomplished through the posting of thoughts, poems, pictures, and songs on a paper-mache tree constructed for this purpose and placed in an open area of

the school. It was available for all to use, whether to post thoughts or to read others postings. This seemed to allow the emotional pressure that had been building up to dissipate in a healthy way. Although, strictly speaking, the Tree was not narrative, it was certainly an open, safe, and respectful means of communication. And in this case, it fit the bill perfectly. It also fulfilled a basic premise of restorative practices, in that all persons in the community have a right to be heard with respect and that the community has a responsibility to hear all with respect (Zehr, 2002).

### **Open Community Meeting**

Not all the interview subjects mentioned the community meeting which was held within a month of the incident. However, it is important to note the significance of this meeting. This meeting included the District Attorney in this community as well as representation from law enforcement, juvenile justice and the school district. Being held so soon after the initial incident occurred is certainly an anomaly given the juvenile participants and the confidentiality usually afforded them. However, this meeting also addressed a primary facet of restorative practices and a value held strong in restorative circles, that is, the idea of safety, both in a community and safety as it applies to discourse. The variety of views expressed in this open meeting was reported to have been heard respectfully by all parties. This meeting provided a forum similar to the Tree but was addressed more toward the community at large, meaning the community outside the actual school building. Persons were encouraged to express their thoughts and concerns regarding the incident and regarding the justice system's involvement in the situation as well as to ask questions. Additionally, the juvenile justice system and those participating in the investigation and prosecution of the case both needed and wanted to hear from the community what they thought about this incident. Having been present at that meeting, it seemed as though this also provided an emotional release valve for community members, parents, neighbors, and other interested parties; a release valve that allowed them to be heard, they could ask questions directly, and they could have their feelings of insecurity regarding the safety of the school addressed.

### **The Summit**

The next action, which according to the lead administrator, came out of an idea he had while at this community meeting, was the meeting of students commonly referred to as the Summit meeting. Again, restorative justice philosophy provided the structure for this meeting and the values behind it. The lead administrator spoke very eloquently about how the idea for this Summit came about. The Summit was one of the first responses to the restorative justice question, "How can the harm be repaired?" Additionally it sought to address how a situation like this could be avoided in the future. Both these ideas are basic restorative justice philosophies (Pranis, 2007). While the actual Summit was conducted in a way consistent with Discovery process practices, there were also many elements of restorative justice present. The Summit meeting can perhaps be most closely compared to a peace circle (Stuart & Pranis, 2006). Like what traditionally happens in a peace circle, plans were made to extend the power of the peace circle to the larger community, in this case the junior high school student community. School administration

worked with the students involved in the peace circle to incorporate the ideas developed at the Summit into the mainstream student body. An example given was the fact that the talking piece, which was a piece of rock from the mountaintops, became representative of a touchstone. The students' idea was that through touching this rock, a person was committing to participating in a safe, inclusive, and peaceful school community. The current administrator who was a teacher at the time of the Summit and who attended the first Summit, equates the work done at the Summit with the adoption of Rachel's Challenge and other programs that are today active at the school such as the WEB; Where Everyone Belongs. He mentioned specifically the mentoring of younger first year students by older students and a welcoming attitude at the very beginning of the school year so that all students are brought into the school community on an equal basis and all students are shown that the school is a safe and peaceful place. What was particularly significant about the Summit is that it was a grassroots effort by students. Although the administration was instrumental in helping facilitate it, this was not something that was determined by staff, teachers, or administrators. All the school administration did was give students the space and time to come up with their own suggestions and their own vision of what they wanted their peaceful school to look like.

### **School Mascot Dedication**

The eventual dedication of the statue of the school mascot remains a touchstone for the school community. Although the original talking piece rock is still present in a display case at the school, the sculpture is a much larger symbol of the trauma the school went through and more importantly, the strength that developed as part of the healing and rebuilding process. The school mascot, a full size puma situated just inside the main entrance, is carved in a particular stone that is formed under heat and pressure, and is a daily reminder to students that negative situations can be turned around resulting in positive circumstances.

### **Restorative Justice Conference**

The eventual restorative justice conference, happening as it did a year and a half after the event, provided a final acknowledgement of the healing and closure that needed to occur. The conference was perhaps the first public acknowledgment on the part of the offenders in this situation. By participating in the conference, two of the offenders acknowledged and took responsibility for their part in the events that led up to the incident. The school community acknowledged that they were welcomed back into the school community they had left a year and a half earlier. The facilitator recalls the energy of acceptance and closure, no matter what that closure looks like. She opined in her interview, that the mind and spirit needs closure. In looking back on the conference, she is sure there was closure that night.

The in-depth examination of the responses to the harm caused by this incident show that on many levels restorative philosophy infused the responses both of school district personnel and juvenile justice personnel. The interview of the teacher, provided a view of the school community as strongly seeped in inclusion, in providing a safe

environment, and in recognizing and holding dear the lessons and the symbols of lessons learned from past experiences. The culture of the school was changed by the traumatic incident, but changed for the better. Attempts were not made to restore the school to pre-incident condition but steps were taken to improve the school community, to critically examine what had happened. Then, taking input from the student and staff community, action was taken to devise ways to address issues such as exclusion, bullying and clique behavior which were seen as detrimental to the school climate.

The community was the focus here; the harm caused to the community as well as the community's response and need for healing. In that way, this situation is similar to restorative justice practices used in large-scale political conflict such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (Froestad and Shearing, 2007). In cases such as these, community as a whole is harmed. This study concludes that restorative principles infused the responses of the school community in repairing the harm and setting the school on a better footing concerning inclusivity and true community. The conclusion is that the Tree, the community meeting, the Summit, the sculpture, and the restorative justice conference were all restorative in nature and helped to repair the harm the school suffered as a result of the plans act of violence.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations that come out of this study have to do with the importance of receiving restorative justice training prior to when trauma or conflict occurs. The organic way in which the responses to this situation came about may be result of the fact that decision-makers, both within the school and the juvenile justice system, had a restorative justice background. There did not seem to be a conscious decision made by the school administration to use restorative practices to recover and heal from this event, however, prior trainings and experiences allowed for administrators to be comfortable with the quite unique ideas they implemented. Additionally, administrators mentioned that they had used mediation and restorative justice on a daily basis in their interactions at school. It seems to be the consensus of the persons interviewed here that these ideas and the actions taken that led to restoration were more successful for having been informed by restorative principles. The first recommendation, therefore, is that restorative justice training be extended across disciplines particularly in school settings. Even if there is not a specific restorative justice program in place, an exploration of restorative justice philosophy should be available, especially to those in leadership roles; in schools, communities, law enforcement and the criminal justice system.

The next recommendation is to acknowledge the importance of the Discovery program in the school response to this incident. This was an exiting finding, in that it was unexpected. All three school based interview subjects mentioned the important role their knowledge of Discovery played in the response to the trauma of this incident. More detail regarding the Discovery process may be found at [www.thediscoveryinstitute.com](http://www.thediscoveryinstitute.com).

The final recommendation outlined here is that the importance of school memorials and the symbolism associated with them should not be overlooked when

responding to and healing from traumatic incidents. The interview subjects currently at the school referred to the rock and later the statue as a memorial, not of what happened but of how the community healed. By memorializing the healing, one necessarily needs to look at the precipitating incident and commit to a new future. One interview subject referred to “not sweeping it under the rug”. A failure to acknowledge that anything happened would be harmful to the healing process and disrespectful to the suffering of those involved. Schools however may be tempted to keep unpleasant happenings quiet, to project a facade that everything is fine. In the case researched here, the harm was acknowledged and plans were made to recover. Over time an even stronger school community developed and was marked by the commemoration of the school mascot carved in stone.

## **Summary**

In summary, this research showed that restorative principles could be used to repair the harm caused by an incident of planned school violence. The five subjects interviewed were consistent in their recollections of the event. They all had background knowledge and experience in one of the following areas; restorative justice, mediation, or the Discovery process. It was not surprising to determine that they had knowledge of restorative justice. The inclusion of the Discovery process, however, was unexpected and further research regarding the connection between restorative values and Discovery is recommended.

Research also showed that the incident of planned school violence caused harm to the school community. The interview subjects thought the harm stemmed primarily from a loss of trust in the school and fear regarding whether the school was a safe place. School leaders recognized this trauma and steps were taken to address it. It is the researcher’s assertion that the previous restorative justice training and experience of the school leadership played a part in determining a restorative response. Future research could explore the benefits of restorative justice training in other circumstances in school settings or in other venues such as higher education, workplaces, or international relations.

Looking at the responses of interviewees showed that the following actions taken at the school all addressed members of the school community as potential victims of this event; the Tree, the community meeting, the Summit, the talking piece rock, and the symbolic sculpture of the school mascot. Restorative values of respect, inclusion, mutual care, truth telling, listening and understanding infused these responses. Much has been written about restorative values and the beliefs underlying those values. The underlying beliefs were present in the responses studied here; the importance of relationships, interconnection and interdependence, the fact that wisdom resides in each person, and the understanding that justice is healing. The offenders were not involved in any of these processes however, which differs from most restorative processes. In fact for most of the actions taken immediately following the event, it would have been impossible to include the offenders because the criminal court proceedings were still in process. The school leadership recognized, however, that something needed to be done immediately to start

the healing process at the school and prevent further trauma. The restorative justice conference held at the school, more than a year after the event, included adult community members who felt victimized and two of the juvenile offenders. This conference was for the joint benefit of the victim community as well as the offenders. The conference facilitator revealed that from what she observed, the immediate result for all parties involved was positive. One of the administrators referred to how the offenders, former students at the school, were welcomed back to the school community and could then move on and put the situation behind them. Overall, the effectiveness of the juvenile corrections process with all three offenders is an area for future research.

The final area of interest was whether these actions, which were rooted in restorative values, actually helped heal the harm experienced by the school community. The interview subjects were unanimous in asserting that the actions did help heal the harm. The subjects who were part of the school community went one step further. They articulated that the school is now a better place because of the community building responses to this traumatizing incident. It is interesting to note here that the words *restorative justice* refer to justice which restores the victim, offender, and community, as much as possible, to pre-crime conditions. In this case, the community, guided by the actions of the school leadership, went beyond restoring - to actually developing a new vision of what they wanted the school to be. In this situation, the school community actually experienced *transformative justice* (Harris, 2006). Morris writes on the subject of transformative justice and talks about victims and communities recognizing that they can “transform the world positively from their pain” (2000, p. 19). The word transformation means to change in composition or structure, to change the outward form or appearance, or to change in character or condition. Transformation has meaning in the fields of mathematics, natural science, computing, law, warfare, anthropology, spirituality, fiction, and the visual and auditory arts. In the field of social justice which is the area into which this research falls, transformational justice is often a goal but seldom achieved. It became apparent through this research that a paradigm shift occurred within this school community. The shift was based on the knowledge, experience, and capacity of the school leaders and served to enlighten the response to the trauma they saw in the school. This type of paradigm shift is often what leads to a transformation. A transformation seems to be exactly what the administrators and the teacher referred to when they talk about the positive steps that were taken as a result of the Summit, steps that led to a school that is perceived as safer, more welcoming, and more inclusive of all students.

This research recognizes that restorative practices were used to heal the harm of this traumatized school community and that actual emotional healing occurred. The truly exhilarating outcome of this research is that the restorative process was transformative for the school community. Transformations of this kind are rare and it has been an honor to document this recovery and the community of people who played an active part in the school’s transformation and who continue to work on behalf of a more peaceful world.

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