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Exploring
Educational
Leadership



STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

**MENTAL HEALTH:
THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA**

**A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS:
BROAD APPROACHES TO MEETING
STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS**

**TODAY'S STUDENTS FACE SIMILAR
ISSUES BUT WITH A VIRTUAL TWIST**





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The high school student had earned his third referral for out-of-school suspension in a very short time. He was late to class, refused to take off his hood at times, and struggled to appropriately connect with adults in most settings. He was enrolled in our alternative education program and had already outlived more trauma than most of the adults I work with in school. He was a survivor. But, right now, he was acting out repeatedly and sabotaging any success that could be found. His principal and team considered referring him to PINS for probation and support to address his maladaptive behaviors. I asked the principal to allow me to arrange a restorative circle with the student and the teacher he most recently and significantly disrespected. The high school principal agreed.

Over the past few years, you've likely heard about restorative justice. In New York, Skidmore College leads the restorative project under the leadership of sociology professor Dr. David Karp. I've had the benefit of attending incredible professional development provided by Dr. Karp and his associate, Duke Fisher, on the topic of restorative justice. One of the resources this professional development provides to participants is the book, *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools* by Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet.

For the purposes of this column, I try to find resources that busy administrators can read and use quickly. This book is just under 80 pages and can serve as a manual for better implementing restorative practices, on large or small scales, in schools.

This book challenges the way misbehavior is interpreted. It also calls out zero tolerance approaches to misbehavior including repeated suspensions. It clearly defines the difference between punishment and self-discipline. "Restorative discipline, like punishment, concerns itself with appropriate consequences that encourage accountability – but accountability that emphasizes empathy and repair of harm (13)."

Chapters one through three provide the framework and understanding of theory behind restorative practices. Restorative practice is an approach that aims to repair relationships that have been damaged by the poor choices of an offender. It does this by holding the offender accountable for confronting the mistake through word, repair (to all those who were harmed), and remorse. It's different than the traditional understanding of school discipline where a referral is made to the office and the administrator assigns the consequence.

Chapter four challenges traditional thinking about how adults address misbehavior of students. It reminds leaders of a school's responsibility to meet our students where they are and to get them where they need to be with compassion and care. "When a child is disciplined, a withdrawal is made on the relationship account. The relationship account itself is based on respect, mutual accountability, and even friendship established within a caring community. If the substrata work of community building has not been done, the child is bankrupt and has nothing to lose by misbehaving or by being confronted. The child's motivation to change is limited (33)." The authors further state, "Even though relationship building may work

to create academic success, it is not the only reason we try to cultivate good relationships in schools. It is simply the right thing to do as human beings (34)."

Chapters five and six provide models for implementation and ideas for next steps beyond this book. In learning more about this practice, you'll discover it can be implemented in various ways and part by part. This book could serve as a key text for any administrative team looking to examine discipline data and trends within their building or wanting an additional tool to impact school climate around behavior.

Back to my story, fortunately, a middle school administrator was a skilled facilitator in restorative justice. He agreed to come to the high school to lead the circle. He remembered the student from previous years and wanted to help. The circle included the student, the teacher who was harmed, a facilitator, myself (as one of the supervisors of the alt ed program), and the student's school counselor (whom he identified as his ally prior to the meeting). In this circle, we took time to discuss the following questions:

- 1) What happened?
- 2) Who is being harmed when this happens?
- 3) What were you thinking about in the moment?
- 4) What do you need to do to make things right?
- 5) What support do you need to carry out your action plan?

A talking piece was used to run the circle and only the person with that item could speak. Every member of the circle took time to answer each question around the circle as it was asked. By the end of this hour, I knew more about this student's struggles than I could have predicted. He also knew more about each adult in the circle and could, hopefully, feel how willing we were to help. He wasn't sure how to accept that help but as the circle continued in an open and honest way, he began to loosen his posturing and let us in. Words don't do justice to the experience. The circle ended with a plan in place that required the student to make amends and the adults to assist in some of that work. He left knowing this circle of people cared about him and he was given the opportunity to turn the page and start again.

This circle required us to open our hearts to hear his story and to allow ourselves, when he left, the time to cry real tears about what was just witnessed. I won't pretend to imagine that this circle kept him or will keep him on track for the rest of this year. It won't. However, I do believe that we taught him more about responsibility and empathy in that circle than another day away from school ever would.

"When we rely on rules rather than relationships when harm has been done, we all lose (42)."

Find out more about the restorative justice project at <https://www.skidmore.edu/campusrj/>.

Reference:

Amstutz, Lorraine Stutzman, and Judy H. Mullet. *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools: Teaching Responsibility, Creating Caring Climates*. Good Books, 2015.

The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools

Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet

