

B.C. educators look to bring restorative justice to the classroom



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Teachers discuss classroom discipline during a circle discussion at Minnehada Middle School in Port Coquitlam. Teachers are learning how to use restorative justice for classroom discipline. *ARLEN REDEKOP / PNG*

We are all familiar with traditional classroom discipline: punishing students by sending them to the office, keeping them for detention, or in extreme cases, suspending or expelling them from school.

Most of those methods involve isolating students, something a group of teachers at Simon Fraser University is learning to avoid. They are studying restorative justice and the use of circles as a way to keep students in line.

A “circle” is where a group of people sit in a circle and discuss something together. One person has a “talking item”, which is an object with meaning that signifies whose turn it is to speak. Circles can be either pro-active or re-active — when they are pro-active, they are regularly scheduled and people take turns to speak on whatever topic is raised that day. Re-active circles can be held impromptu and are used to put something right that has gone wrong.

Kate Jones, who teaches Grade 6 and 7 at Kwayhquitlum Middle School in Coquitlam, used the method last year when a student was involved in a destructive and unsafe incident. Jones said the experience was transformative, not just for herself, but also for the student and the student’s family.



Teachers use a bowl as a “talking stick” as they discuss classroom discipline during a circle discussion at Minnekhada Middle School in Port Coquitlam. *ARLEN REDEKOP / PNG*

Instead of perhaps suspending or expelling the student, all of the people involved, including the student’s family, were brought together in a circle to discuss what had happened, why, and what could be done about it.

“At first, I thought he needed to be punished. But by the end of it, I

thought, 'This kid needs to be hugged. This kid needs to be embraced,'" Jones said. "He was feeling so disconnected, and the thing he needed was to connect."

Instead of using a traditional punishment, connections were created for the student so he was not left alone at lunchtime. The outcome was decided at the circle, Jones said.

"I've had some really intense circles. In order to facilitate a strong, successful circle, I think you have to experience the power of a circle yourself," Jones said. "It's the strongest, most powerful learning or sharing strategy."

Bob Comartin, who teaches Grades 3 and 4 French Immersion at Nestor Elementary, also in Coquitlam, said that at the younger ages, disciplinary problems are more likely to be disruptive behaviour or one student picking on another. Traditionally, he might have sent a student to the principal's office or to the hallway when he or she was acting out. But now, he is going to use the circle method.

"In a circle, each student has an opportunity to say how they felt about what happened," Comartin said. "I had one student who was always calling out answers, and it was the circle that made him realize that he was stealing other students' voices. The circle kind of helped give the other kids a voice."

Comartin decided to take the SFU program because he found himself using a punishment model and it didn't feel right. "It almost precipitated worse behaviour in the classroom," he said.

The method works best when it's proactive — when circles are used regularly in the classroom so that all of the students are familiar and comfortable with the process and with each other. These circles are usually scheduled into the regular routine and include all students.

"It trains them in self-regulation, to think before they speak, and to listen intently so they don't repeat what others have said," Jones said.

When it is used to repair harm, a circle can be held with only the people

directly involved. For example, Jones dealt with students sharing inappropriate photos by holding a smaller circle.



Instructor Brenda Morrison. *ARLEN REDEKOP / PNG*

Instructor Brenda Morrison is a director at the Centre for Restorative Justice and an assistant professor in the School of Criminology at SFU. She is teaching the two-week summer session via circle, to give the participants first-hand experience with how it works. She has been practicing restorative justice for 17 years and said the idea is to build respect, responsibility and relationships.

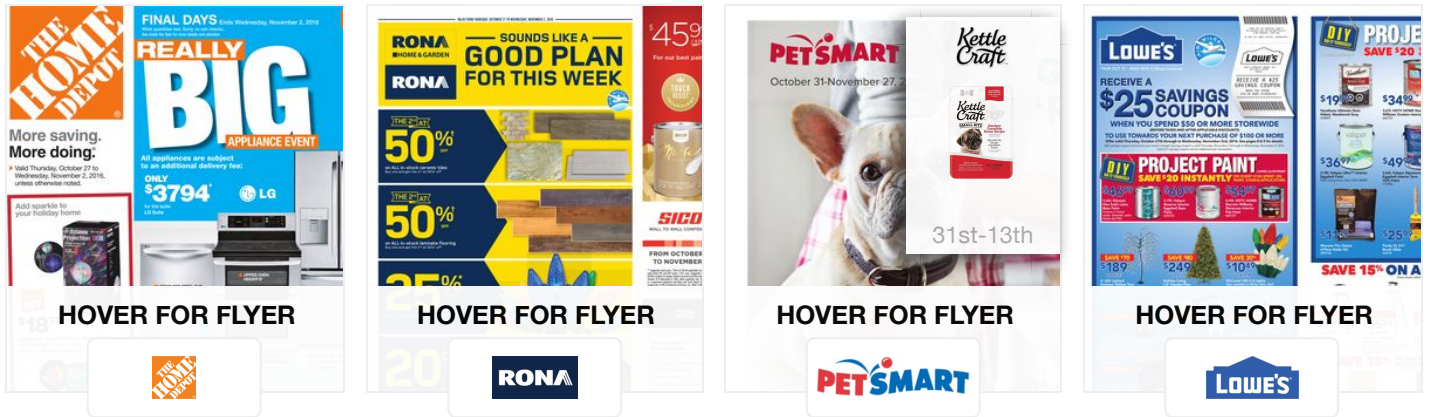
“The circle process helps us find our centre. When we find our centre, we can find our best self. We definitely want our best self to show up when we are in a conflict,” Morrison said. “The circle process is the best vehicle I’ve found to know who you are and where you belong.”

The method is born out of indigenous teachings and grew out of an alternative to punishment as a response to misbehaviour, Morrison said, adding that using it with children is more pro-active than waiting and using it in the justice system.

Many of the teachers participating in the course said that they were amazed at the power of the circle and the connection they felt with the other participants, even after just a week together and even if they had never spoken directly to each other. Many of them spoke of their hope of creating similar connections among their students, so that everyone feels safe in their classrooms.

The two-year graduate diploma class will meet weekly throughout the school year, followed with another two-week intensive session next summer. It is a partnership between the Coquitlam School District and SFU.

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Glenn MacKenzie · Qualicum Beach, British Columbia

There should always be a place in school for everyone to learn about justice. Social studies curriculum prescribes this as part of students' learning about and practicing social responsibility. This is simply a more relevant way to do it, with the careful guidance of trained teachers. It's good for everyone to learn about restorative justice and to practice it.

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Craig Brett

Isn't the point of removing a student from class to remove a disruption to the learning process of others? If the student is instead dealt with inside the class, the learning process is still disrupted.

We often hear about a shortage of resources, and of course Canadian students continue to slide down the international PISA rankings. This story seems to be another example of core academics

being subordinated to a teacher's desire to socially engineer.

Time spent conducting restorative justice in the classroom is time not spent doing math, science or English.

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Maureen Sullivan · Victoria, British Columbia

Agreed that it takes time, but the idea is to reduce or eliminate future disruptive events by changing the culture within the school environment. Overall, saves time and produces better results, better learning environment

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Craig Brett

Maureen Sullivan Assuming 25 kids per class and one hour of restoration justice that is 25 hours of learning time sacrificed to dealing with one student. And I wonder at your statement of eliminating disruptions at school. Surely, disruptive students are bringing problems from home, not from within the school so these disruptions will always exist. What's being done now is increasing the overall disruption to the entire class for a sustained period. Kids who make the effort to be considerate are being sacrificed to cater to a single student who will not. The school is not the place for this.

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Alison Malis · Scopist at Scopist

Craig Brett I agree with you. This seems to me to be a classic example of "everybody is responsible for me but me," in that the whole classroom learning process is stopped while a disruptive student or a problem is dealt with. I can't see that that's an effective use of instruction time. Or is school now in the business of being an emotional healing centre or something.

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Francis Cheesman · University of British Columbia

I'm glad to hear that the students will be able to both have restorative justice circles AND learn the

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