



International Network for School Social Work

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Bullying and Restorative Justice: For the Development of School Social Work in Japan

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Bullying in Japan

Bullying in school has been a pressing issue in Japan as well as in other countries. Forms of bullying are almost the same in each country: one or more children bully a particular child (children) over a period of time physically and psychologically. However, there are some inherent characteristics depending on the culture of each country.

The nature of bullying in Japan has one obvious difference from bullying in other countries. What most differs is the homogeneity of the school children. Unlike other societies, there is a remarkable lack of diversity in Japanese schools. There were about 10,789,000 children in the compulsory school system - elementary and junior high school in 2005. The ratio of foreign children was only 0.2%, 21,192 students. Although it might be considered that those minority students are the targets of bullying, most of the cases occur among children whose race, language and lifestyle are the same. And further, the economic status is not necessarily the focal point of the issue as the disparity is not as wide as in other countries.

Because bullying occurs in such a homogeneous population, it is hard to tell what kinds of children are either the bully or the bullied. Every child has the possibility of being either.

The reason for being bullied can be anything if a child has a distinct trait. He/she can be the best or the worst achiever in academics, an excellent athlete or very poor one, a teacher's favorite or disliked, very rich or very poor etc. This trend makes every school child very sensitive about developing and maintaining his or her relationship with peers, which means he/she is very vulnerable. This vulnerability easily leads him/her to be desperate about the future and drives him/her to stay away from the school and in the worst case to commit suicide.

Suicide caused by bullying is a serious and very real problem in Japan. Reviewing western articles on bullying, I found out that suicide is not a major issue in the discussion. On the other hand, it is unavoidable to address suicide in the discussion of bullying.

In Japanese society, suicide provoked by bullying has been a sensational topic since the mid-1980s. In the fall of 2006 from August to November, there were a series of teenage suicides suffering from bullying- nine teenagers killed themselves of whom seven were junior high

students and two high school students. All of them left notes indicating their suicide was due to bullying.

Despite the continuous occurrence of suicides, Japanese society seemingly does not have efficient preventive and coping methods. Though the Ministry of Education and Science introduced school counselors in the late 1990's as the coping method for the bullying issue, we have not observed a positive outcome. Most of the responses to incidents of suicide in our society are very emotional. Educational administrators, teachers and media send message both to the bully and the bullies such as: To the bully, 'It is very bad to bully others. You must respect others.' And to the bullied, 'Since you are not alone, tell somebody near you. They will surely help you.' The intent of such message is not wrong. But it will never bring to the bully a sense of reflection and the bullied a feeling of a way out of the situation.

It has been frustration for me who has been working with children's issues not to have a specific preventive and coping method.

Restorative justice

I happened to learn about restorative justice in the late 1990s. Although not knowing much about its concept and method, I was very much interested in its way of mediating between victims and offenders in the field of criminal justice. Because of a lack of information about it in Japan, I didn't know how to connect restorative justice and social work.

Therefore I decided to study restorative justice and to explore the possibility of relating it to bullying in the United States making use of my sabbatical. I reviewed the literature, participated in the first National Conference of Restorative Justice and will visit Wanda Van De Hey, who is a school social worker and has been applying restorative justice in her practice. The more I learn about restorative justice, the more I am convinced of its potential efficacy in dealing with the bullying issue.

At this point a few schools in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and England have initiated a restorative justice program producing encouraging results among the stakeholders of the bullying problem - the bully and the bullied, schoolteachers and the parents, according to surveys.

The concepts of restorative justice - respect, equality, non-judgmental attitudes and self-determination - are really the same as the values of social work. Moreover, key aspects of restorative justice are mediation and coordination, which are also the function of social work. So there is no reason not to apply it to the practice of school social work. Since there is no specific countermeasure for bullying in Japanese society, the concept and the method of restorative justice can bring about a strong impact.

Future implication

School social work has received much attention in the past few years and has been expanding in Japan. However, there is little consensus about the role and the function of school social workers. It is still difficult for people to understand who the school social worker is and what they do. It is essential for us, school social work colleagues, to demonstrate our skills and methods. In that sense, I think that restorative justice is one we should explore.

**Restorative Justice in School Communities:
An Alternative that is Fair, Constructive and Inclusive
Wanda Van De Hey, School Social Worker
Oshkosh Area School District, Oshkosh, WI, USA**

Restorative justice is a philosophy that seeks to repair harm following a wrongdoing. It takes into account everyone who has been impacted by the situation. Victims have a voice in discussion about how best to repair the harm and restore relationships. Restorative Justice provides opportunities for the victim, the offender, their families, representatives of the school community as well as the greater community to come together, air feelings, and work together to find solutions.

Restorative practices can be used in many different ways and in numerous kinds of situations. They include a continuum of activities. On one end are simple statements and questions that can be asked by a teacher, parent, or a friend such as: who was affected, how were you affected, what was your part in it, and what needs to happen to make things right? In the middle of the continuum are practices such as mediation and classroom community circles. On the far end of the continuum are more structured and formal practices such as Circle Conferences.

Circle Conferences

Everyone who has been affected by a conflict or wrongdoing is brought together into a circle. Referrals are accepted from students, family members, staff members, or community members. Circle Conferencing is a voluntary process and only done if the key players (which may include family members and teachers as well as students) in a situation are willing to participate.

The facilitator talks to all concerned ahead of time to insure they are willing to participate and that the rules of attentive listening, no put downs, mutual respect, confidentiality and the right to pass are agreed upon. During this initial contact the facilitator determines whether or not the offender(s) is willing to accept responsibility for his/her part in contributing to the problem.

All participants are told what questions will be asked. It is explained that time will not be spent on details about who did what but instead we will be listening to feelings from those impacted and work together to find solutions for repairing the harm.

At the beginning of the session the facilitator summarizes what has occurred and the reason for meeting. The facilitator then asks those in attendance to answer a series of questions. A talking piece is passed around the circle, giving everyone a chance to answer each question from his perspective. Everyone answers the first question (or uses their right to pass) before going on to the second question. The questions typically include:

- Who do you think has been impacted by this situation? (The wording for this question can be adapted to the age i.e., for very young children it can be worded “Who do you think got hurt or hurt feelings?”)
- What are your personal feelings about what has happened?
- What do you think needs to happen to repair the harm that has been caused?
- What are you personally willing to do to repair the harm and solve this problem? (Depending on the situation I sometimes ask the participants to write their answers for this question on an index card that I pass out at this point in the process. When all are finished I ask them to read what they wrote to the group. The students’ cards are left

with the most appropriate staff member, who follows up to make sure that commitments are adhered to.)

- Does anyone have any final statements you want to make?

I typically conclude the process by thanking everyone for their participation and complementing them on how well they worked together to reach a resolution. Ideally it is helpful to have some treats available for everyone to share following the circle, giving them time to interact in this safe setting.

Examples of Circles Conducted

- It is not uncommon for students, and especially those who have been best friends, to experience conflict. In many of these kinds of situations a circle conference will allow students and their parents to have an opportunity to talk about hurt and angry feelings and restore the relationships that have been damaged.
- Several circles have occurred because of bullying behavior. It can be extremely helpful for family members to hear about the situation from various perspectives. It is important for offenders to take responsibility for their actions and to hear about the impact they have had on others.
- Circles have been helpful in cases of low academic motivation and chronic tardies and truancy. Students often express surprise that school staff and family members care enough to participate in a circle. The support they feel is empowering.
- Circles have been used in classrooms to deal with lack of respect for people or property.
- Circles are especially effective for use in vandalism situations as long as the offender is willing to admit to their part of the wrongdoing.
- Our District has revised our AODA Policy so that it now allows for the option of using the circle process for student alcohol and drug violations.
- Circles have been used to address student/teacher conflicts.

Benefits of Restorative Justice

- Problems that are not fully dealt with resurface over and over.
- Punishment frequently results in anger.
- Our goal is to change behavior and teach students how to solve problems, rather than create anger.

Results

Anecdotal comments from persons participating in Circle Conferences have been overwhelming positive. Details regarding project statistics can be found on the District website at <http://www.oshkosh.k12.wi.us/aboutus/restorative.cfm>.

Questions can be addressed to:

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