USING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES WITH A VIRTUAL PEACE ROOM

A CSCH Brief by Caitlin Elsaesser, Aditi Das and Helene Marcy

Background

Nearly 75% of school-age youth experience cyberbullying at least once a year.[1][2] Social media can also cause conflict that can escalate to offline violence, sometimes called internet banging.[3] Although many school responses to cyberbullying and internet banging have been punitive,[4] an alternative to punitive measures can be found in restorative justice practices. Restorative Justice (RJ) is a "community-based approach that institutionalizes peaceful and non-punitive approaches for addressing harm and problem-solving in schools."[5]

In 2019, researchers Aditi Das, Jamie Macbeth, and Caitlin Elsaesser from the University of California, Smith College, and the University of Connecticut respectively, proposed virtualizing RJ practices and moving them online.[5] Their idea of establishing virtual peace rooms becomes especially important as schools and discussions move online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and cyberbullying or other online violence could become more prevalent.[6] This brief is based on that article.

What are Restorative Practices?

Restorative responses to misbehavior can take a variety of forms that are centered on several core principles:

- focus on relationships first and rules second;
- give voice to the person harmed and the person who caused the harm;
- engage in collaborative problem solving;
- enhance personal responsibility;
- empower change and growth; and
- include strategic plan for restoration/reparation.

> The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed schools to think of alternatives to in-person learning and supports. A virtual online peace room provides a potential solution.

A restorative justice approach "offers more active participation of students through rebuilding and strengthening relationships."[5] Although many schools now offer restorative justice practices in person, facilitators are limited by school hours and student attendance. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed schools to think of alternatives to in-person learning and supports. A virtual online peace room provides a potential solution.

A Virtual Peace Room

Considerations

There are some important considerations when moving restorative practices online. The article authors write that a virtual peace room should incorporate restorative justice (RJ) values and principles that seek to:

- strengthen student social and emotional skills at mediation and conflict resolution;

- address student privacy concerns regarding social media usage amongst students;
- equalize power dynamics between students and adults within schools; and
- supplement existing in school RJ practices by providing an additional tool to RJ facilitators.

The authors wrote their 2019 article before the COVID-19 pandemic with the intent that a virtual peace room would be akin to an asynchronous chat room. Especially in light of the pandemic and the new popularity and necessity of video calls, extensions might include synchronous video meetings. In addition, during a time of remote learning this online peace room could be a temporary primary resource as opposed to supplemental.

Key Components

One of the most important components to a virtual peace room is the presence of a skilled, experienced RJ facilitator. Virtual peace rooms should also incorporate a virtual talking piece (that allows one participant to comment at a time). When appropriate, a facilitator can invite peer jurors to the online discussion. In fact, "virtualizing the peace room provides opportunities for a greater appearance of fairness in peer juror selection process compared to biased in-person restorative practices wherein RJ coordinators or school official often promote prosocial students with good behaviour and good grades."[7] Because virtual peace rooms are especially appropriate for addressing instances of cyberbullying, they should be set up so that participants can easily share content from virtual social media networks.

The article authors recommended creating a new platform for this type of virtual peace room. In the current absence of such a platform, and with increased distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools have considered moving their restorative justice circles to video calls. Such online video calls could be an important way to continue more typical circles. However, coordinators must be careful to maintain practices similar to those of in-person circles, using online tools to replace talking sticks, for example.[8]

Additional Resources

Tutorial: Introduction to Restorative Justice
From the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation

Restorative Resources Educator Toolkit
Resources for implementing programs.

Peacekeeper Circles
Offers an introduction to circles and key terms.

Restorative Justice Implementation Guide
From the Oakland Unified School District

[1] Juvonen, J., & Gross, E. F. (2008). Extending the school grounds?—Bullying experiences in cyber- space. Journal of School Health, 78(9), 496–505
[2] Katzer, C., Fetchenhauer, D., & Belschak, F. (2009). Cyberbullying: who are the victims?: a comparison of victimization in internet chatrooms and victimization in school. Journal Oof Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications, 21(1), 25–36. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1027/1864- 1105.21.1.25
[3] Patton, D. U., Eschmann, R. D., & Butler, D. A. (2013). Internet banging: New trends in social media, gang violence, masculinity and hip hop. Computers in Human Behavior, 29(5), A54–A59.
[4] Shariff, S. (2009). Confronting cyber-bullying: What schools need to know to control misconduct and avoid legal consequences. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
[5] Aditi Das, Jamie Macbeth & Caitlin Elsaesser (2019) Online school conflicts: expanding the scope of restorative practices with a virtual peace room, Contemporary Justice Review, 22:4, 351-370, DOI: 10.1080/10282580.2019.1672047
[6] Patton, D. U., Leonard, P., Eschmann, R. D., Patel, S., Elsaesser, C., & Crosby, S. (2017). What's a Threat on Social Media?: How Black and Latino Chicago Young Men Define and Navigate Threats Online. Youth & Society, 0044118X17720325. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X17720325
[7] See Hirschinger-Blank, N., Simons, L., Volz, G. L., Thompson, R., Finely, L.,& Cleary, J. (2009). A pilot assessment of a school-based youth court in a resource-poor African-American urban school district: Lessons learned from youth court volunteers. Juvenile and Family Court Journal, 60(2), 31–47. The Das, Macbeth & Elsaesser article also outlines different ideas about juror selection.
[8] http://www.livingjusticepress.org/vertical/sites/%7B4A259EDB-E3E8-47CD-8728-0553C080A1B0%7D/uploads/Circles_Social_Distancing_4-6-20(1).pdft