

Building Belonging & Connection with Restorative Justice Practices

By: Lori Lynass, ED. D., Sound Supports

The use of restorative justice practices (RJP) has a relatively short history in our school systems, but the practices and philosophies that constitute RJP are consonant with many Indigenous communities worldwide, including for example, Ojibwe, Tlingit and Navajo peacemaking circles, ubuntu communitarian approach found in many southern African traditions, and the Maori community living traditions, as well as many others. All these traditional practices centered the need to build belonging and connections within the community of people residing in it. For the most part, people seek and desire to be in community with one another and feel belonging. Within our schools, students are also craving and pursuing connection and belonging both with staff and peers. The data on belonging shows it is a strong factor for positive mental health and higher academic outcomes.

Right now, we are watching RJP grow from a promising practice into an evidenced based practice in schools as it is further used and researched within the school setting. What we do know is applying the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) three-tiered framework to restorative practices brings us to starting with a prevention first stance. Using restorative practices, this prevention is done through intentional relationship building in which we nurture a sense of belonging and the development of healthy relationships.

If schools only turn to restorative justice practices as a tool to solve issues around behavior, they miss the true value of these practices, which is to build a place where every person can feel seen, heard and valued. That's the power. Student's show up in schools for the connection and that connection serves as a powerful force to preventing conflict, increasing learning and building skills that will serve every student across their lifetime.

While many people think of restorative practices as happening when students sit in a circle, restorative practices are really about creating a restorative environment focused on an ethos of care and belonging. Within this environment there are several practices schools can do that are restorative in nature. Here are just a few to try:

- Greet kids at the door at the start of each day or period.
- Do social-emotional check-in with students to see how they are arriving.
- Hold class meetings.
- Use class community building activities.
- Model a calm presence.



- Use of affective statements
- Offer a calming or break space in the classroom or school.
- Multiple ongoing opportunities to connect and respond to the academic learning.
- For students who you are struggling to connect with try the 2×10 intervention (see resources).

When we take the time to get to know students for their passions, interests, and cultural backgrounds, we can use this information to create equitable learning environments. In a restorative approach to discipline, we repair relationships that have been harmed instead of focusing on rules that have been broken. We can't take this discipline approach until we have that relationship created. Thus, being restorative is who we are, not just what we do.