

A CURRERE OF ACCEPTANCE

RE-STORYING PUNISHMENT AND TRANSFORMING CONFLICT IN SCHOOLS

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I rushed it! Life. Until recently anyway. Now, finally, semi-retired, I've slowed down. Now, I'm dwelling in the space between idleness and busy-ness, a space of growth still, of still growth perhaps. More authentic, more real, more "me" than ever before. Now with the time, I can reflect on my educative experiences in a way I have never been able to whilst teaching full time, so here goes...

CURRICULUM FRAGMENT: THE CARETAKERS TEARS

On a wet, windy Wednesday afternoon in a south Wales secondary school, Jack, a 14-year-old school boy who was looked after by social services and had a history of behavioural "issues" took a mug from the school canteen and decided it would be great fun to practise his rugby skills (this is Wales after all!) using the mug in place of a ball. Jack's friend, Rob, was not so sure but went along with it, and the two boys threw the mug to each other in the staff car park, out of sight of teacher, and with increasing vigour.

As is often the case, things got out of hand when Jack threw the mug too hard and the mug smashed through the back window of the Caretaker's car. Both boys ran away. The Caretaker came to my office spitting feathers! His anger was palpable—he nearly took my office door off its hinges as he entered and insisted that these boys, and particularly Jack who had a "history of offences," be excluded forthwith, as severe a punishment as possible, and that if I didn't do as he suggested, he would be taking advice from the Workers Union. In his mind, his only thoughts were of revenge and retribution for what had happened. This, he said, must never happen again!

I listened. I told him I agreed that it shouldn't happen again, and when the time was right, I asked his permission to take a different approach—an approach based on a paradigm shift in thinking, a changed mindset and language, but one that would help to ensure that this indeed did not happen again. I suggested we hold a restorative conference in which Jack would be held accountable for his actions and take responsibility for his (behavioural) learning.

I prepared well for the conference. During preparation interviews, I asked both the Caretaker and Jack to share their experience with me—not just the details of what happened that day, but I asked them to share their inner experience of how the event had affected them. When they were ready and willing to proceed, we set a date.

The conference was attended by the police liaison officer, Jack, the Caretaker, and a teacher advocate for Jack (his guardians did not want to attend), and I facilitated the conference. We met in a circle so that we could see one another, not just hear each other's words but see body language and emotional states. The circle enhanced the hearing and healing potential of the restorative process. Teachers had worked with Jack to help him, too. I used the five open questions known by

anyone familiar with a restorative approach. What happened? What were you thinking, and how were you feeling? Who has been affected and how? What is needed to repair the harm? And so, what's the plan?

I made sure I held the restorative mindset of openness, curiosity, and compassion. We heard Jack's story first, his voice breaking as he spoke about the incident—what led up to it and how he felt during and since, how he had run away from school when it happened, frightened and upset, and how he had been walking the streets and staying away from home and school for fear of what might happen. He feared the reaction of his carers and how he might be “re-placed” with a different family. Then, we heard from the Caretaker who told us that his car was his pride and joy and how he had saved up for it and how it was a lifeline for his wife who needed regular hospital appointments. He told us that seeing the cracked window had made him angry and that he thought the car had been deliberately attacked.

Then, I asked Jack what he thought should happen next to resolve the issue. By the time he had finished speaking there wasn't a dry eye in the room. He had, with the help of his teachers, written a letter to the Caretaker's wife to apologise for what had happened, he told his form tutor that he wanted help to raise the money to pay for the excess on the Caretaker's car insurance (£75), and he wanted to say sorry in person at that meeting to the Caretaker, which he did. Later that week, one of Jack's teachers arranged for Jack to help out in a fish and chip shop so that he could raise the money required for the insurance excess. And he paid every penny of that £75!

Suffice to say, the Caretaker and Jack are good friends to this day, some 10 years hence. Their humanity was connected. At that conference, their stories were told, their “biographic present” (Pinar, 1975, p. 7) shared. The process of estrangement halted. They share the same community, and now, they speak with pride about each other. Jack completed his school term with full attendance. Jack had taken accountability and responsibility for his actions; he further developed the lifelong skill of empathy, and he came out of what was a significant episode in his young life knowing he was a worthwhile and valuable member of a school community. Conflict transformed. He was throughout the process an accepted and acceptable member of the school community. He was learning to lead his life.

Of course, not all stories end this way. Some young people take longer to learn the skills of appropriate behaviour. For some pupils, the highly complex needs they have are not met in a mainstream school. However, as we explore the reconceptualising of the curriculum, we must also reconceptualise behaviour as an integral part of the lived curriculum for harmed and harmer—ensuring that relationships are valued and nurtured and responses to behavioural mistakes are values-based and needs led. And like all lived experiences that make up a reconceptualised curriculum, behavioural mistakes can be seen as wonderful opportunities for deep learning.

REFLECTIVE INTERLUDE: JACK'S TEARS ARE MY TEARS TOO!

REGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

Nobody was surprised when I was excluded from school in my mid-teens.

I enjoyed school overall but mainly for the wrong reasons. My abiding memory of school was of being punished—weekly if not daily. It led to me being excluded from school and attending three different secondary schools in as many years. In the process, I positioned myself as an outsider, and my behaviour reflected my unmet need for acceptance and belonging. My father was

at least kind enough to call me to say he didn't want to see me ever again (I remember that day like it was yesterday) despite being just 11 years old at the time. Throughout my childhood, I had a visceral feeling of being unacceptable to others, a feeling exacerbated by being gay and growing up in the 1980s (the time of HIV and AIDS), trying desperately to hide my sexuality and deny it both to myself and to others. My punishments added to my shame and isolation.

Despite my behaviour, I managed to attend college and obtain my degree. I became of all things a teacher!! Ironically, some years later I considered applying for the headship of the school from which I was excluded—can you imagine? I started teaching in 1990 at the age of 22. I still hadn't come out as gay. I was still trying to come to terms with it. It preoccupied me. My feelings of confusion and “unacceptability” were reinforced by UK law and in particular Section 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 that prohibited the “promotion of homosexuality” in schools or the “acceptance of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (Local Government Act 1988, n.p.). I started my teaching career under a law— Education Reform Act, 1988—that told me I was unacceptable along with a highly prescribed and very “new” National Curriculum that told me what to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it, and how to assess learning. I was tied and bound to other people's norms and ideas of acceptability. I was a conflicted soul in a nightmarish culture of schooling (Pinar, 2004). To paraphrase Maxine Green (1973), I was subsumed and unsighted, consenting to being defined by others' views of what I was supposed to be; I had given up my freedom to see, to understand, and to be.

PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

Fast forward 30 years and now as a retired, Deputy Headteacher, I am keen to revisit some recurring, “sticky” fragments (Poetter, 2024, p. 1) of experience that have remained with me all through my life, to explore the *currere* of how my past lived experiences of being at school as a pupil had informed my aspiration to reform approaches to behaviour management in the UK and seek a more nuanced and sophisticated approach that aligned behavioural learning to a reconceptualised view of curriculum.

So I guess this is the story of how of how autobiographical reflection (using a *currere* frame) supported by mindfulness meditation alongside having the space and time gave me the confidence to access my past, to seek clarity and understanding in the “biographic present” (Pinar, 2004, p. 7), to be clear eyed about my hopes and dreams for the future, and to gain the confidence I needed to challenge the UK schools' approach to conflict and discipline.

It's undoubtedly true that the reflective capacity to change my own life began when I was introduced to mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness allowed me to see more clearly how I had been a slave to my emotions—acting on impulse according to the vagaries of my mood, tossing about like a bottle on a sea of competing anger and frustration, harming myself and those about me. Mindfulness allowed me to explore the fleeting nature of my thoughts and feelings and allowed me to experience being in control through awareness and acceptance. It allowed me to see more clearly the difference between a human “being” and human “doing.”

My educative experiences as a pupil and as a teacher had led me to challenge the one-size-fits-all behaviouristic approach to behaviour change—put simply, getting compliance through reward and punishment. And it starts with the end in mind. John Dewey (1899) says it beautifully,

If you have the end in view of ... children learning certain set lessons to be recited to a teacher, your discipline must be devoted to securing that result. But if the end in view is the development of a spirit of social cooperation and community life, discipline must grow out of and be relative to that aim. (p. 26)

Kliebard's (2004) work similarly highlighted that schooling through an unreflective emphasis on efficiency, productivity moulded schools to be mirrors of factories, that same "unreflective" approach that I would argue moulded our schools to be mirrors of the criminal justice system. This symmetry in mindset, language, and approach, a one-size-fits-all approach, caused exclusions and suspensions from school in England go up by more than a fifth in the 2022-2023 school year with a record of 787,000 fixed term exclusions—the equivalent of 1 in 10 pupils in England being sent home and 9,400 permanently excluded. Up 44% compared to 2021-2022 (UK Department of Education as cited by Standley, 2024),

It's an approach to behaviour that makes detectives of teachers and their assistants as they seek to establish what happened, who's to blame, and what the requisite punishment might be. Schools mirror the language of "offender" and "victim," isolation and detention, sanctions and privileges, red cards and yellow cards, three strikes and you're out!

A RESTORATIVE LENS FOR TRANSFORMING CONFLICT AND RECONCEPTUALISING BEHAVIOUR

In broad terms, restorative approaches in schools are an innovative approach to inappropriate behaviour. They put repairing harm done to relationships and people over the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment. Even more simply it's about asking the following questions:

- What happened?
- Who has been affected and how?
- How can we repair the harm?
- What have we learnt so as to make different choices next time?

This approach allows people, when they have been harmed, and their harmer to have their story listened to. Ensuring the needs of the harmed person are understood. A restorative approach allows conflict to lead to deeper understanding—an understanding that draws on a pupil's life stories and personal subjectivities; understanding is only understanding when it evolves in the context of an individual's life story (Pinar, 2004). A restorative approach acknowledges that behaviour is learnt and, like any academic learning, mistakes are common and can be an opportunity for support and guidance to correct the mistake and ensure repeated mistakes are avoided.

Behaviour learning takes time and skill to master, and for some pupils, for many different and often complex reasons, it takes longer than others. Behaviour (alongside all learning processes) is impacted and influenced by affect. Schools need consistency between a teacher's responses when young people get things wrong in terms of their academic work and their responses when young people get things wrong with their behaviours (Hopkins, 2003).

Perhaps the most important dimension of restorative conferencing like the one Jack engaged with was how his feeling of guilt was understood and accepted through the conferencing process. Helen Block pr (1971, as cited in George, 2014) proposed the most useful and commonly accepted distinction between the emotions of shame and guilt:

It is proposed that a person is more likely to feel the emotional state of shame when they evaluate the *whole self* against a particular standard, but they would be more likely to experience the emotional state of guilt when they are able to evaluate *their behaviour* against the standard. (p. 204, emphasis mine)

When people feel shame, they feel bad about themselves; whereas, when they feel guilt, they feel bad about a specific behaviour.

When schools align their approaches to academic and behavioural learning and align the five key questions of a restorative approach alongside a compassionate mindset, then there is congruence. Conflict, which is inevitable in schools and in all life, can be seen as an opportunity to augment and develop learning as part of the planned, enacted, and lived curriculum for life. The relationship between the cognitive and affective alongside life story and experience is articulated and builds self-acceptance, making possible a new synthesis of primary and secondary experience from the self-alienating to the self-knowing engaged person in the world (Pinar, 2004).

A SYNTHESIS

I have a dream, clarified and synthesised through my *currere*. My dream focuses on the need for acceptance and belonging. It is a fantasy of the future in which conflict in schools can be seen through a different lens. It is a paradigm shift in thinking that sees conflict at school as an opportunity for learning—a natural part of running the race. It is a future where the time and energy and resources are deployed to support and develop young people who accept themselves and who learn the skills of behaviour regulation as part of the reconceptualised curriculum.

Through our approach to learning in the classroom we can model what is required for transforming conflict in schools. This approach can encourage young people and adults to share their experiences of life including those of conflict—both inner and outer conflict—and, supported by this affirmation, feel good about themselves. Yes, sometimes they might feel guilty about their specific behaviours but never ashamed of themselves, never shamed in their “self.” In my dream, the restorative questions asked by a curious caring professional reinforce learning through developing a reflective student who makes sense of their actions and the actions of others and develops that most import of all skills, empathy—empathy that is developed in classroom approaches and further developed when conflict occurs.

Post pandemic, as we support pupils’ return to school, we need this different paradigm more than ever, so my dream alongside that of some likeminded professionals from across a range of settings will support schools as they continue to support pupils post pandemic. The web site can be found at www.restoreourschools.com.

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