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**Restorative Practices for Positive
Classroom Management**

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Punitive or Restorative: The Choice Is Yours

A colleague of ours once projected the following quote, widely attributed to Frederick Douglass, onto a screen at the start of a professional development session:

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.

She then asked the assembled faculty to write down their own reactions to the statement and discuss them in small groups. The reactions our colleague heard were both positive and predictable: a lot of talk about the influence of students' family, school climate, and a sense of connectedness within the school on academic achievement.

When the conversations drew to a close, our colleague shared the school's discipline data from the previous year, which showed that suspensions occurred at rates disproportionate to the student population. In a majority of cases, the most serious offense was identified as *defiance*—a nonviolent act, and one that is broad and vaguely defined. This is not an uncommon finding: According to a report of suspensions in California schools, 34 percent of suspended students were punished for defiance or disruption (Losen, Martinez, & Okelola, 2014). Our administrator friend had calculated the number of instructional days lost to suspensions and provided comparative data on

the grade point averages of suspended students versus those who had never been suspended. She then asked the faculty whether they were building strong children or ensuring that their communities will have future broken adults in need of repair. The frank 30-minute discussion that ensued inspired the school's staff to create a culture in which restorative practices could thrive. Over countless department meetings and informal exchanges, the staff performed yeomen's work analyzing and redefining classroom and schoolwide practices.

Our own experience has been that while our collective hearts as educators are in the right place, we tend to make decisions based on past experience. After all, we began our on-the-job training as teachers when we were five years old. Our beliefs about school, classroom management, and discipline have been shaped by decades of experience, starting in kindergarten. What we need is an effective classroom-management system—one that we can hold onto in times of stress and strife.

Effective Classroom Management

The term *classroom management* is confusing and misleading, mainly because it has no clear and widely agreed-upon definition. For some, the term refers to general control of students; for others, it refers to discipline procedures; for others still, it refers to both routines and procedures. Up until recently, we have avoided using the term, but we finally came across a definition we could stand behind: Cassetta and Sawyer (2013) define classroom management as being “about building relationships with students and teaching social skills along with academic skills” (p. 16), and we couldn't agree more.

There are two aspects of an effective learning environment (and, by extension, successful classroom management): *relationships* (specifically, the range of interpersonal skills necessary to maintain healthy relationships) and *high-quality instruction*. When students have strong, trusting relationships both with the adults in the school and

with their peers, and when their lessons are interesting and relevant, it's harder for them to misbehave.

We don't expect an effective classroom-management system to eliminate all problematic behavior any more than we expect a new set of standards to raise all students' scores by leaps and bounds on the first try. Students are going to misbehave as they learn and grow—it's how we respond to their misbehavior that matters. We believe that students should have a chance to learn from their mistakes and to restore any damaged relationships with others. Our view is known as the restorative approach to discipline. The table in Figure 1.1, developed by the San Francisco Unified School District, illustrates

1.1 Traditional Versus Restorative Approach to Discipline	
Traditional Approach	Restorative Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools and rules are violated. • Justice focuses on establishing guilt. • Accountability is defined as punishment. • Justice is directed at the offender; the victim is ignored. • Rules and intent outweigh the outcome. • No opportunity is offered for the offender to express remorse or make amends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People and relationships are violated. • Justice identifies needs and obligations. • Accountability is defined as understanding the effects of the offense and repairing any harm. • The offender, victim, and school all have direct roles in the justice process. • Offenders are held responsible for their behavior, repairing any harm they've caused and working toward a positive outcome. • Opportunities are offered for offenders to express remorse or make amends.

Source: Adapted from San Francisco Unified School District. (n.d.). Restorative practices whole-school implementation guide (p. 19). San Francisco, CA: Author.

the differences between the restorative approach and the traditional approach to discipline.

The Restorative Practices Movement in Schools

In its contemporary incarnation, the restorative practices movement is an offshoot of the restorative justice model used by courts and law-enforcement agencies around the world. In the restorative justice model, mutually consenting victims and offenders meet so that the former can be given a voice and the latter can have an opportunity to make amends. Importantly, this approach empowers a community to take an active role in resolving problems. Cultures throughout the world employ restorative justice to create peace among adversaries, ensure restitution, and make decisions at times of community crisis.

Restorative practices in schools cast a wider net than restorative justice in the courts. Whereas justice is by its nature reactive, restorative practices also include preventive measures designed to build skills and capacity in students as well as adults.

Restorative practices are predicated on the positive relationships that students and adults have with one another. Simply said, it's harder for students to act defiantly or disrespectfully toward adults who clearly care about them and their future. Healthy and productive relationships between and among students and staff facilitate a positive school climate and learning environment. In the restorative approach, when relationships in the school become damaged, the parties involved are encouraged to engage in reflective conversations that help offenders understand the harm that their actions caused and provide them with opportunities to make amends. As we describe further in this book, there are a number of ways to build relationships and create healthy learning communities.

Circles. Teachers in the restorative practices movement promote a sense of family in the classroom by having students sit in circles

to discuss both curriculum-related topics (e.g., the role of genocide and war in a World History class) and noncurricular issues that bear discussing (e.g., how students might manage stress on the eve of a major state exam).

Individual conferences to address problematic behavior. We'll explore the details of these high-stakes meetings in greater detail further in the book, but for now know that restorative practices are not about letting things go or ignoring when harm has been done. Individual conferences require intense preparation on the part of the victim(s), the perpetrator(s), witnesses to the conflict, and anyone else who's been affected by it. In some cases, conferences involve two sets of parents or guardians who are very much at odds with each other: it's common for the offender's family to lobby for mercy and for the victim's family to demand retribution. To ensure that conferences run smoothly, it is crucial to engage with families preventively, before crises occur.

The criminal justice system. In a small number of cases, the criminal justice system will play an important part in a restorative approach to student discipline. We have found that strong ties to our local police department and juvenile justice system have enhanced our ability to play a meaningful role in the lives of adjudicated youth, allowing us to partner with families and the courts to positively affect students' lives. In fact, many youth court systems follow the restorative approach to justice, which mandates therapeutic interventions over retributive ones. We have personally been fortunate to work with skilled police and youth probation officers who have received formal training in restorative practices.

Teaching Rather than Punishing

Traditional school discipline practices are considered separate from the academic mission of the school. By contrast, *restorative practices are interwoven into every interaction in the building.* At your

school, is a specific administrator assigned to disciplinary matters? This might be the principal, vice principal, or dean of students. Ask a few students at your school, “Where do kids go when they misbehave?” If you keep hearing a specific person’s name—or worse, a specific *practice* (e.g., “Kids go home ’cause they get suspended”)—then you know that your school is pursuing a traditional approach to discipline. If this is the case, it’s time for a change.

It’s far too common in schools for educators to wait for discipline problems to emerge and then handle them on a case-by-case basis. Such an approach leaves adults exhausted and children with limited skills development. We don’t leave the acquisition of reading or mathematics skills to chance; we engage in explicit, systematic, and intentional instruction to ensure that learners progress academically. So why wouldn’t we do the same to ensure that students progress socially and emotionally? The social and emotional development of students is often poorly articulated in schools—relegated to an assembly and a few accompanying lessons. Traditional tools for addressing behavioral issues among students—rewards and consequences, shame and humiliation, suspensions and expulsions—run counter to a restorative culture and do not result in lasting change, much less a productive learning environment.

Rewards and Consequences Don’t Work

Right now you may be thinking to yourself: *I’ve got a whole list of rewards and consequences in place to manage behavior.* To be sure, nearly every classroom-management book will have a section devoted to the use of rewards and consequences. But there’s one problem: *Rewards and consequences don’t work*—or at least, they don’t *teach*. They may result in short-term changes, but in reality they promote compliance and little else.