



## The Transformative Nature of Restorative Narrative Justice In Schools

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**Abstract:** Restorative justice (RJ) over the last decade has had a positive impact on school cultures that have begun to shift from cultures of punishment and exclusion to ones of understanding and compassion. This article provides the tools to continue this transformation through an understanding of how narrative processes when merged with neuroscience help us gain deeper understandings of the effective use of restorative processes. Narrative processes encourage the examination of the whole person and his or her identity. Our lives are lived within a socio, cultural, and gendered setting. Being aware of this context, and recognizing the often problematic nature of educator-student relationships, we need the skills to try to prevent problems from arising, and when they do arise, respond to them with compassion, not react to them with anger. Narrative processes encourage and promote the separation of the problem from the person, and the deconstruction of power dynamics that allow for a more equitable, non-judgmental educational pedagogy to emerge. Neuroscience lends strong scientific support for our compassionate nature.

### Introduction

Restorative justice in schools is a process that is based on relationships, not rules. The restorative practices and processes that have grown out of restorative justice are designed to teach empathy and understanding, as well as to *respond* to conflict by empowering those who cause harm to make things right, and in the process, heal those who were harmed. By contrast, traditional school discipline practices *react* to conflict by excluding students from class or use rewards to gain compliance to rules. The use of suspensions and expulsions create a process of banishment that both deprive students of an education and stigmatizes them as being morally deficient. Giving students rewards for good behavior is akin to buying them off and is just the other side of the punishment coin. Neither approach prepares young scholars for a future where self-control and pride in achievement for its own sake become her or his guiding light.

Restorative justice presents schools with both the opportunity and the means to change the punitive paradigm and to substitute it with a pedagogy of ethical values that promotes social and emotional learning and other compassionate practices that address the whole student. Those who are harmed and those who cause harm are given a voice and an opportunity to heal. This does not happen when resentment building suspensions or expulsions are the only choices. RJ and the restorative practices and processes that have grown out of it represent a paradigm shift in both prevention and response to actions that cause harm (Zehr, 2002; Amstrutz & Mullet, 2005; Evans & Vaandering, 2016).