

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN A DUTCH SCHOOL

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Introduction/Description of Context

Terra College, formerly TMO-College, is a secondary school just outside the centre of The Hague, in the west of the Netherlands, and is one of the four largest cities in the country.

The pupils are 12 to 17 years old, with ethnically diverse backgrounds. Most have immigrant parents. TMO-College emerged from an amalgamation of two schools in August 1998. In August 2003 the school will amalgamate with some other schools and change its name to Terra College. Terra College will have about 3,000 pupils and will be a broad-based, combined school, offering all types of secondary education, divided into five buildings, all in the same district of the city.



The Dutch educational system is changing continuously. The exam scores of the school are not very good. Three of the five participating schools get extra financial support from the city council because of educational priority areas policy.

The largest groups in the school population are from Surinam, Turkey and Morocco. In addition to some Dutch pupils, there are pupils from the Antilles, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, India, several African countries and others. Some people would call it a “black school.” We prefer “colourful.” Most of the pupils come to school from the centre of The Hague by public transport.

TMO-College has three school locations. Two of the schools—Thomas More and Beatrijs—have been implementing restorative practices in the culture of the school since September 2001.

Restorative Practices in a Dutch School

Increase in Problems

Over the last ten years, there has been a great shift in the population of the school. It turned from a “white” school into a colourful school. The teaching staff, many who worked at the school for more than 25 years, had difficulty adjusting to the changing population. These pupils were a challenge to teachers’ skills in class management, teaching methods and communication. For some, that wasn’t an easy task.



Some years ago the problems with pupils’ behaviour increased. There were increasing disciplinary problems, fights *in* as well as *outside* the school. That was also the time when the school started to cooperate with the police. One day a week, a policeman was in school, teaching about the consequences of theft, vandalism, lighting

fireworks (before New Year’s Eve), graffiti and so on.

He would also talk to young offenders and could write warrants. Slowly the distrust in the police diminished. Children came up to him and told him their worries. He could intervene more easily in neighbourhood fights and problems between families. He was a supplement to what the school already did.

Besides the fights, kids were being turned out of classrooms by teachers for being disrespectful to them or to fellow pupils, and for not doing homework or bringing their books.

The traditional approach to these situations meant talking to the pupils, giving them detention work, suspending them or even expelling them from school. Expelling children from school is very difficult because the inspectorate forbids schools to expel a pupil from school unless they have found him a new school. And that is very difficult.

Joke Henskens-Reijman and Roel van Pagée, each a principal of a school location, felt unsatisfied with this approach. The effects were minimal, and the teachers called for even stricter actions towards the troublesome pupils.

From talks with the pupils, they found out that the pupils:

- didn’t know how to handle difficult situations
- all had their own ways of dealing with conflicts
- didn’t realise the effect of their behaviour on others
- had a strong urge to feel respected and listened to

Many of the problems arose from communication difficulties between teachers and pupils and among pupils themselves.

For years we have had tutor lessons at school. Besides his own subject, a tutor teaches other subjects, including study skills and so-

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cial skills, through the “Lifestyle” lessons. Most teachers think these lessons are very difficult. They have no problem talking about their own subject, but it is very hard letting children talk to each other about things like relationships, problems and playing games. That demands more of a teacher.

Real Justice Conferences

In 2000 Roel and Joke heard of Real Justice conferences and were trained to be facilitators. They were then able to run conferences in which victims and offenders came together with their social networks to talk, using a scripted process, about what happened, everyone’s thoughts and feelings, what was needed to repair the harm, and to decide together what arrangements should be made.



Four more members of the staff were trained to be facilitators. At the same time, the rest of the staff were informed about this method and its merits. After a conference, a report was published in the weekly newsletter.

Many had their doubts about the effects and some called it “soft.”

Visit to the U.S.A.

Soon afterwards, in March 2001, we had the opportunity to pay a visit to a Community Service Foundation (CSF) school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Palisades High School and Palisades Middle School, both also in Pennsylvania. We were inspired by what we experienced at both CSF and the Palisades schools, and by our meetings with Ted Wachtel and Bob Costello, from CSF and the IIRP, and Dave Piperato, principal of Palisades High School. The group visiting the U.S. included four people from the school and four people from the Hague Police, including the two school officers. The police paid visits to CSF and the Philadelphia Police.

On returning home, we told everyone what we had seen. A report of the journey was published in our newsletter for staff.

Training on the Job

The school started talking to the city council in order to obtain financial support for developing restorative practices in The Hague and especially at our school. Many schools, and certainly those in the big cities with similar populations, experience more or less the same problems. We received extra money on the condition that our activities would lead to a product that could be used by other schools.

Restorative Practices in a Dutch School

We made a three-year implementation plan. Part of the plan was the training of school staff in November 2001 by Ted Wachtel and Bob Costello. That training would be the kickoff. We realized that it would probably take years to change the school's climate and to implement restorative practices, but we were very enthusiastic. Just before the Americans were to arrive, a second group of four school people visited the U.S. They were to make a plan of activities that would be appropriate for the Dutch situation, without literally copying from the American situation. The plan they made was called "Mission (Im)possible."

Bob and Ted were scheduled to come to Holland at the end of October to train the teaching staff of both schools on the principles of Real Justice and restorative practices.

The time wasn't a lucky one. In September 2001 was the attack on the Twin Towers. The impact worldwide was huge. In our school, with a multicultural population and many Muslim pupils, the reactions were varied—both pro- and anti-American. Many teachers felt very insecure because of these reactions. Two weeks later something else happened: Joke Henskens, principal of Thomas More, was beaten up by one of the pupils. It was a shock for the school.

Still, in October the whole staff was present for the training. It was an introduction to Real Justice and restorative practices. It was made clear that a mere punitive approach of disruptive behaviour has very little effect. Much more effect was to be gained by an approach with *control* as well as *support*. Through videos and role plays, people could experience the differences for themselves.



Implementation

Not everybody was immediately enthusiastic about the program. Some teachers felt that they would lose authority in the classroom and that administrators would act in favour of the pupils. Everybody agreed, however, on the fact that the traditional approach to problems and conflicts wasn't very effective, and we decided to handle problems in both an authoritative and supportive way. The pupils would be held accountable for their behaviour when they broke rules, started fights or were disrespectful. But at the same time they would be helped to become aware of the effect of their behaviour on others, giving them the opportunity to repair the damage and think of ways to prevent future problems.

In November 2002, one year later, Bob Costello and Dave Piperato gave another training to the staff of both school locations. They were in the school for a week. The week included:

4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONFERENCING & CIRCLES

1. an introductory session for interested parties from other area schools
2. a half-day introduction to restorative practices training for all staff hired since the on-site training the year before
3. a full day in-service for all teachers and administrators from both schools
4. a meeting with the Restorative Practices Leadership Team to discuss strategic planning
5. consultation with principals

During the meetings with the staff, people could discuss a variety of formal and informal restorative practices that they had tried and experienced that year. Although many teachers tried to do their best to use a restorative approach, there were big differences and some stayed resistant.

Restorative Practices Activities

We explored the use of *conferences* when serious problems arose. We emphasized the *values* in the approach: development of commitment, taking responsibility for one's own behaviour and that of others, helping young people (and teachers) develop social and communication skills.

The next step was the introduction of *circles*. Circles are very common in primary schools. For example, at the beginning of the week children tell what they did over the weekend or when introducing a new subject. In secondary education it is seldom done. Teachers often say it is impossible because the classrooms are too small to rearrange into a circle.



First we introduced *circles for teachers*. Once a month there was a voluntary meeting for those who wanted to share and exchange experiences with each other. The meetings

that were held were appreciated by those who participated but after a while the rate of participation diminished. People were busy, had other appointments or lacked commitment.

Especially in classes with many problems, we introduced *circles with pupils*. In these circles, the class discussed the problems they had, what their role was in them, what they could do to solve them and what help they needed.

It was great to experience how their commitment to each other grew, even though it seemed very difficult to change the situation. In some classes many circles were held. We often invited other teachers to these circles to let them experience for themselves how children can be involved and take responsibility.

Restorative Practices in a Dutch School

We hired someone to work with the children who had been ejected from class. She speaks to these children and has them fill out the *time-out form*. By filling in the form, the pupils reflect on what happened, what their role was, who has been affected and in what way they want to repair the harm. They return the form to the teacher after class, talk together and restore the disturbed relationship.

We used the same values underlying the restorative practices for a new *teaching strategy*: cooperative learning. The teachers make use of a variety of teaching strategies in which the pupils play a more active role in their own learning process. They work together in groups and have different roles in the group. This year the teachers have had a training in the teaching strategies. Next school year this will be continued and followed up by a series of meetings in circles in which they can exchange positive experiences, ideas and problems. We will then have revived the earlier circles, but now connected to the teaching strategy.

We just started a *tutor training*, which will be continued next school year. Many of the children's problems originate from insufficient communication skills. The tutor has a key position in working with the school, pupils and parents. The training will contain elements of restorative practices, communicative skills, observation skills and running circles.

We distinguish three types of circles:

- a. *Study circles*—These circles will be used when introducing a new subject, task or project, or when evaluating them. What has to be done? How are we going to do that? Who needs help? Who can give support?
- b. *Sharing circles*—The topic of these circles will be the atmosphere in class, preparing activities together, sharing affective statements, seeking and giving support.
- c. *Caring circles*—These circles will be used when someone needs extra care, e.g., a pupil is bullied, a mother has died, a pupil has a broken arm and needs extra support with his bag.

We wrote a *newsletter* for the pupils just before the second visit from the American trainers to inform them about restorative practices and to emphasize our shared responsibility for a pleasant and safe school (see Appendix).

We cooperated in various contacts with the media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television), policy makers and other schools (secondary and primary) to inform them about Real Justice and restorative practices.

In school we encourage *pupils' participation*, e.g., in student council or editing the school newspaper. We have a credit-awarding system for all kinds of activities. This year 36 pupils cooperated on a project,

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together with the police and the board of public transport, addressing recent serious problems in public transport caused by young people on their way to and from school. The participants interviewed passengers, did observations, made recommendations and wrote a set of rules of conduct for people making use of public transport. These rules were offered to the mayor of The Hague, who had them installed in trams and buses.

Eleven pupils have been trained as *peer mediators*. They were chosen by their fellow pupils who thought them capable of mediating problems between pupils. When there is a conflict, the mediators can be approached by teachers, tutors, counsellors or pupils themselves to help them solve the problem. They have been active for about three months and are very convinced about the idea that since they have started offering their services, there are hardly any conflicts anymore.



At Last

After two years of trial and error, the school now uses a variety of restorative practices. A lot of activities have been explored. We can't say that the entire staff has embraced the method. Some of the resistance can be explained by the perception of some staff that the approach was owned by only the directors, not the entire staff. Another thing is the name: using the English words or a literal Dutch translation produces a feeling that the approach is from overseas and foreign. Together we need to come up with a Dutch name for this approach.

Still we see more and more examples of restorative practices, but we avoid using the name too often. It will be a long process.

Important principles in all the activities are clear values: commitment, awareness, responsibility for one's own behaviour and that of others, communication, social skills and relationships.



TMO-College, and soon Terra College, wants to make these principles the foundation for the pedagogical climate in the school, the way of teaching (cooperative learning) and the commitment of the school to the community.

Within the diversity of the school's population, the restorative approach is the linking pin to help prepare young people for further education, for their future and for their place in a multicultural society.

Appendix: Newsletter About Restorative Practices For the Pupils of Thomas More

Thomas More Is a Great, Safe School — Restorative Justice

Is a Safe School Important??

In order to feel comfortable and to be able to study well, it's important to be in a safe, trustworthy environment. Only in a nice and positive atmosphere will you dare being open to others, say what bothers you or what you don't understand and make friends easily. The school staff want, together with you, pupils, to work together to get such a nice school. That's what this newsletter is all about. After reading it, when you feel like you would like to know more or would like to join in a discussion about it, please let us know and you'll certainly be invited soon.



Safety...Also Your Responsibility!!!!

Where many people get together it often happens that *conflicts* arise.

Sometimes a pupil looking a bit too long at someone else or *gossip* ("She told me that he... and he heard that from the sister of...") is the cause of a *conflict*. If only people would first try to find out the truth...but no way: two girls are already pulling each other's hair out, two boys are fighting like dogs, other pupils are standing around cheering.

Everybody—fighters, gossipers, bullies, spectators, friends—contribute to the feeling of (un)safety. There are other solutions possible: talk quietly to each other or ask a tutor, counsellor or one of your friends to listen.

Is Punishment the Solution???

There are people who say that children should be severely punished when they break rules.

They think that detentions, staying late after school, suspension or expulsion from school are good ways of teaching children how to behave. Maybe you have experienced some of these yourself. And...was it effective? Did you change your behaviour? Hopefully that happened sometimes; other times it probably only made you angry. At school we think it is important that you learn to make the right choices. Choices concerning your subjects,



4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONFERENCING & CIRCLES

further education, a profession or going to another school. But also concerning your behaviour. Do I join my peer group, or do I dare making my own choices? You also should take responsibility for your choices. If you make the wrong choice, then you'll have to face the consequences. Maybe you have to apologize or you'll get punished. We would like to help you deal with difficult situations and make the right choices. How do we do that?

Rules and Regulations

Everywhere where people mix and mingle, there are rules and regulations: in sports, in traffic, at work and also in school. Those rules make sure that everyone knows how to behave. That's how the school's climate stays pleasant.



Restore When Things Go Wrong

In spite of all the rules and the things you learned in tutor lessons and Lifestyle lessons, things can go wrong in class or with a fellow pupil. We expect you to reflect on what happened and to make it up, to restore the situation.

The following questions are important then:

- What happened?
- What was my role in it?
- Who has been affected and in what way? (e.g., your classmates, the teacher, your tutor, your parents or maybe all of them)
- How am I going to restore?
- What have I learned from this?

You can learn a lot from mistakes and also from wrong decisions, so you can prevent it from happening a second time.

This way of thinking and restoring is what we call "restorative justice."

Restorative Justice

This way of coping with difficult situations and restoring is also what you encounter when you get expelled from class. You have to fill out the *time-out form*, which has the same questions.

Also, in talks with your tutor, the whole class, a counsellor or another member of staff, you encounter these questions. By answering them you learn more and more about dealing with difficult situations.

Pupils as Mediators

Not only adults, but pupils too can help in conflicts and other problems between pupils. They can do it very well and sometimes even

Restorative Practices in a Dutch School

better than adults. Soon you'll get the opportunity to choose fellow pupils whom you think are capable of doing so. They'll get a training to be a *peer mediator*.



Television, Film, Radio and Newspapers

Thomas More and Beatrijs are the first schools in Holland to work with restorative practices. That's why we were visited by several radio and television crews and other journalists. Last year we had an Australian filmmaker at our school for a few days. Some pupils participated in it.

Visit From the U.S.A.

Some members of the school staff were in the U.S. to see American schools that work with restorative practices. We learned a lot there. Also, the rest of the staff will participate in a training. Next week, two American trainers will be guests at our school to train all the teachers of Thomas More and Beatrijs. That's why you will have a day off next Tuesday. The teachers will be working hard that day on restorative justice. Wednesday morning, some classes will have the opportunity to meet one of the American trainers and to think and talk about a pleasant and safe school.