

# Restorative discipline practices: an action research project in three Harare primary schools

By

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## Abstract

*Traditionally, Zimbabwe's teachers have used punitive measures to maintain discipline within schools. However, the global movement against human rights violations associated with corporal punishment caused the country's Ministry of Education to advocate non-punitive approaches but provided little by way of detail or support. In three primary schools in Harare, teachers were trained in two restorative justice alternatives - peacemaking circles and peer mediation – which they used with 9 to 10-year-old learners between March and October 2016. On average, the learners had bi-weekly opportunities through the circles to tell their peers and teachers what they were experiencing and feeling, and peer mediators had an opportunity to mediate in conflicts affecting their age mates. Outcomes were assessed using interviews with teachers before and after the intervention, and thematic content analysis was employed to analyse the data. In terms of outcomes, peacemaking circles enabled teachers to get to know their students and to respond pre-emptively to potential problems, while peer mediation led to a fall in the number and intensity of playground conflicts. The study shows that such restorative practices can be a promising way of addressing school discipline issues.*

**Keywords:** *school discipline, restorative justice, peacemaking circles, peer mediation, action research, Zimbabwe*

## 1. Introduction

Much has been said about disciplinary measures used in Zimbabwean schools, which are seen as necessary to produce controlled and productive learning environments (Chikwiri & Lemmer 2014). Most of the disciplinary measures used to date are punitive which, because they inflict pain on learners, have been increasingly condemned worldwide as violations of learners' human rights (Gershoff 2017; Zolotor *et al* 2011). Zimbabwe's *Constitution* (Section 53 of 2013) states that 'no person may be subjected to physical or psychological torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment', which effectively outlaws corporal punishment, including that used by teachers.

At the same time, non-punitive methods are widely believed to have limited impact in terms of learner compliance with authority. As a result, two-thirds of children in Zimbabwe report that teachers use corporal punishment as a method of discipline (Gershoff 2017). Against this background, the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education has advocated the use of non-punitive disciplinary methods but has not provided specific suggestions for these, let alone training in their use.

Corporal punishment occurs within a context of wider violence in schools. Little has been published on school violence in Zimbabwe, except for gender-based violence, although Dunne, Humphreys & Leach (2006), Leach & Humphreys (2007), UNICEF (2006), Saito (2011), UNICEF (2012), and Gershoff (2017) give some insights on its nature and prevalence. (UNICEF 2006) found that 51 percent of female and 60 percent of male learners had experienced bullying, and 31 percent of females and 45 percent of male learners had engaged in fights at school. In a comparative study of school violence in primary schools in southern and eastern Africa (Saito 2011), Zimbabwean students were found to experience very high rates of bullying (94 percent, compared with a regional average of 83 percent) and pupil fights (96 percent, slightly above the region's average of 93 percent). The extent of harassment of female learners by male learners and teachers is very difficult to quantify but is widespread.

It is essential to understand that violence in schools occurs in the context of violence in wider society. Indeed, Chitiyo *et al* (2014) suggest that the reasons for continuing use of

punitive discipline lie in the country's violent history which includes the liberation wars of the 1960s and 1970s, the *Gukurahundi* massacres during the 1980s, the clearance of urban shacks, and the eviction of informal traders (*Murambatsvina*) in 2005, widespread election violence since 1999 and the takeover of commercial farms beginning in 2000. It is perhaps not surprising that violence has come to be regarded as the normal way of dealing with the inevitable conflicts which life presents.

## **2. Restorative justice and restorative discipline practices**

Traditionally, criminal justice systems have been concerned with retribution and punishment. When a crime is committed, the state takes over to bring alleged offenders before a court where, if they are determined to be guilty, they are subject to alternative forms of punishment, which may well include imprisonment. Society may feel a sense of satisfaction that the guilty parties have been punished and it is assumed that punishment will deter reoffending and send a message to others to avoid such behavior.

By contrast, restorative justice focuses on building a sense of self-worth and personal responsibility among offenders and often involves efforts to build or rebuild the relationship between offenders and their victims (Zehr 2015). This may occur through mediation sessions where stories can be told and heard, apologies made and forgiveness asked for and given. Restorative justice can occur within an essentially retributive justice framework for certain types of crimes and allows for sentencing options other than imprisonment e.g., mandatory participation in a victim-offender mediation process.

Many of the methods used by African communities to deal with anti-social behaviors involve strong elements of restorative justice. Individuals are asked to take responsibility for their behavior (e.g., by apologizing and possibly making reparations) and the community is asked to forgive and accept the offender. Overviews can be found in Issifu and Assante (2016), Kariuki (2015), and Kiyala (2016). These processes include *Mato oput*, as used by the Acholi of northern Uganda, the *Baraza* system operating across central Africa, the *Fambul tok* in Sierra Leone, the *Gacaca* traditional courts of Rwanda, and the Shona system of *Nhimbe* (Benyera 2015). Common features of these traditional approaches are the involvement of all community members with an interest in the conflict to make their experiences and opinions known, the seeking of consensus concerning

what actions should be undertaken by the offender, and the imperative of restoring social harmony.

Restorative justice has been applied in schools through a range of restorative practices, based on similar foundational principles to those used in criminal justice (Amstutz & Mullet 2005, McCluskey *et al* (2008), Thorsborne & Vinegrad 2009). Hendry (2009: 5) has defined restorative practice as the application of restorative principles in schools through various approaches which acknowledge the central importance of positive relationships. Restorative practices aim to promote accountability and responsibility among learners and thereby help to create a conducive learning environment. Restorative practices allow students to learn from their mistakes through encounters with their peers; as a result, friendships can be restored and new relationships created. Restorative language helps to improve emotional literacy for both teachers and pupils and nurtures respect, responsibility, and empathy within the members of the school community.

Restorative approaches can be applied by any teacher at any school to any group of children. These approaches are not a 'soft option' for offenders; they involve the difficult work of holding learners accountable for their actions and helping them to understand the impact of their behaviour (Hendry 2009, Liebmann 2010). Restorative practice can produce a calmer school environment where learners feel they have a voice. The present research utilized two restorative approaches – peer mediation and peacemaking circles - the first of which is discussed in greater detail.

Peer mediation is a process of conflict resolution facilitated by learners, with dialogue as its key tool. Previous studies (e.g., Stacey & Robinson 2008; Hendry 2009; Liebmann 2010, Sellman 2011, Baruch, Bush & Folger 2013; Mason *et al.* 2014) have found that peer mediation can be learned and practiced by learners as young as eight years. Typically, peer mediators work in pairs under the broad supervision of a teacher and handle conflicts that occur outside classrooms. They may wear identification badges when they are on duty. In the present study, outside instructors, and teachers in peer mediation philosophy and methods then trained the peer mediators, beginning with conflict resolution in general and then moving to the skills involved in mediating various conflicts.

Peacemaking circles are common in traditional restorative justice practice. In school contexts, they can take the form of checking-in circles that allows the class to know any issue of concern before they start engaging with their day's activity, and/or they can be used to address matters of concern to members of the class, including conflicts. In either case, each class member has the opportunity to make a contribution that the other participants treat with respect (Pranis 2005, 2013; Boyes-Watson 2005; Boyes-Watson & Pranis 2010). The circle process emphasizes the communal aspect of individual experiences and communal responsibility for decisions. It can develop active listening, empathy, cooperation, negotiation, and the appreciation of diversity (Morrison 2011: 38).

Given this background, the research project reported here aimed to introduce peer mediation and peacemaking circles into a sample of primary schools in Harare and to assess their outcomes.

### **3. Research methods**

The study took place in three primary schools in Harare, one in a medium-density suburb, one in a high-density suburb and one in a semi-urban settlement. The schools were selected using convenience sampling to keep costs under control but can be regarded as reasonably typical of schools in their locations. Two schools hosted two separate groups of learners a day (known as hot seating). Twelve teachers – two males and 10 females – volunteered to participate in the study. All held permanent posts and had, on average, more than 20 years of teaching experience in primary schools across the country. Ten were classroom teachers and two were non-teaching deputy heads who chaired their respective school discipline committees. The school names are pseudonyms and teachers are identified by a letter of the alphabet. In addition, there were many learner participants over the eight months, from March to October 2016. Thirty-five were trained as peer mediators and around 200 participated regularly in peacemaking circles. Our impression is that learners were almost all enthusiastic about both the circles and the peer mediation. We chose to interview teachers because of their position of authority in introducing and overseeing restorative practices.

The selection of peer mediators was based on the parental support of the programme, and not on academic performance. The trained mediators were free to wear identification badges when they were on duty. Two trainers with postgraduate qualifications in peace studies helped to train teachers in peer mediation. The teachers, in turn, trained the peer mediators, beginning from conflict resolution in general to specific skills in addressing various scenarios. Mediation was carried out in the playground under the strict supervision of teachers. Cases of bullying and other instances they regarded as requiring higher-level attention were referred to teachers. Peer mediators met weekly for debriefing and to discuss any challenges.

Table 1. Profile of teachers in the experimental schools

<b>School/Teacher</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>	<b>Teacher responsibilities</b>
<b>Peace School</b>			
R	F	28 years	Deputy head/ head of discipline Grade 2 /discipline committee
N	F	22 years	member
K	M	25 years	Grade 5 Grade 6 /discipline committee
P	F	33 years	member
<b>Praiseworthy school</b>			
C	F	27 years	Deputy head/ head of discipline
M	F	27 years	Grade 4
S	M	30 years	Grade 4
T	F	25 years	Grade 4
<b>Wellbeing School</b>			
G	F	24 years	Discipline committee member
H	F	26 years	Grade 4
E	F	23 years	Grade 4
O	F	25 years	Grade 4

Teachers were interviewed before the introduction of peer mediation and peacemaking circles, with a focus on traditional discipline methods, and at the end of the intervention, when the focus was on the operation and effectiveness of peer mediation and peacemaking circles. Each interview was conducted face to face, lasted from 30 minutes to one hour, and asked semi-structured questions. The research met the ethical guidelines of Durban University of Technology including confidentiality, voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, trust, and safety in participation. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and the data was analyzed thematically.

#### **4. Results and discussion**

##### ***Teachers' views on discipline***

The teacher interviews held before the intervention concerned ways of controlling children's behavior at home and school. According to teachers, parents and guardians required their children to behave well at home and corporal punishment was considered to be the only way to make sure this happened. Parents were in no doubt as to the effectiveness of corporal punishment and had no reservations about its use in school. They expected their children to work hard and behave well at school and wanted teachers to use corporal punishment to this end, irrespective of the law. All of the teachers spoke of the effectiveness of corporal punishment and manual labour as discipline tools in homes and schools. Teachers and parents agreed on this matter, as was noted by Makwanya *et al* (2012).

One interesting insight was a recognition, at least by one teacher, that children learned to be violent.

*From my observation and from the way the pupils play, I think parents use corporal punishment all the time ... [this explains why] most of our children are so violent. They fight ... and they use all other physical violence even amongst themselves. They think 'If I do a physical, physical retaliation, I think I will have done better...' because at home what they know is the whip (Teacher R).*

Despite such an awareness, which might be expected from experienced educators, and official decrees against corporal punishment, almost all the teachers admitted that they used it regularly. In their view, the type of learner they had to teach average class sizes of over 50 in the three schools necessitated the use of harsh methods of discipline. That said, several teachers suggested that the counselling of problem learners could be expanded if punitive methods were to be more strongly condemned.

##### ***Teachers' hopes for the project***

In the schools included in this project, teachers reported experiencing problems that ranged from high numbers of learners per class to widespread misbehaviour during break times. They hoped that teaching learners' mediation skills would improve learner behavior and relieve them from some of their stress. They also hoped that the practice of peer mediation in schools would spread into the homes of these learners, especially those without adult heads.

The teachers understood that peer mediation stressed dialogue as a way of settling disputes between learners, with a focus on safety, confidentiality, and impartiality. While the mediators had no power to impose a resolution, learners involved in a conflict frequently used their assistance to find a solution. Several teachers suggested that learners often wanted a way out of the conflicts they found themselves in but could not see one; in consequence, they appreciated the intervention of peer mediators.

### ***Teacher perceptions of the project outcomes***

During the post-intervention interviews, most teachers reported a small but noticeable improvement in the way learners interacted with each other. Playground conflicts, they said, were less likely to become violent and turn into long-running feuds. The intervention, even though directed at one grade, seemed to have injected something fresh into each school – a way of effectively dealing with the conflicts which are part of everyday school life.

Teachers also reported several more specific benefits to learners, which were often interrelated. The first was the status that peer mediators were given by other learners. They noted that at this age, learners want to be viewed as doing something important and consequently admired those selected as peer mediators.

*Almost all kids like to be peer mediators. They like to lead. Some will feel jealous that someone was chosen instead of me so they will try and show good behaviour so that they can be the mediator next time*  
(Teacher G)

A second outcome was a growth in the self-confidence of peer mediators, who took their role seriously. Self-confidence seemed to be linked to their confidence in the power of

mediation. Teachers who had peer mediators inside their classrooms reported that every peer mediator in their classrooms was very willing to handle conflicts. Some teachers reported that they had to counsel learners to concentrate on conflicts of some significance and avoid becoming obsessive about mediation at every turn. Some teachers noticed that the personal behavior of peer mediators improved, possibly because they felt they had principles to live up to. Several teachers also mentioned that the academic achievement of mediators improved.

A third outcome was the bonding of peer mediators across classes. Teachers indicated that by undergoing the training programme and working in collaboration, children developed relationships and bonded with each other. Some teachers noticed the development of 'strategic pairing' by peer mediators which resulted in better mediation results as well as providing mentorship to mediators who were still struggling. The benefits of building relationships across classes were noted in a study of peace clubs in South African secondary schools (Harris and Moyo 2019).

Another teacher observed that other learners observed the skills of mediation and would practice them on their own without the mediators, an indication of the perceived benefits of the practice and that more learners aspired to become peer mediators.

The teachers found that their involvement in peer mediation encouraged their reflection on other professional areas. Every teacher said that the project motivated them to reflect on other aspects of work where they were perhaps lacking and to think enthusiastically to come up with workable solutions. In other words, teacher involvement in this project led to an enhanced sense of their other professional duties and what could be accomplished. 'Some new conversations seem to have started', said Teacher P. The teachers admitted that they were used to a top-down system and this bottom-up process led by learners was, in the words of Teacher P, 'refreshing and inspirational'. It is worth noting that teachers continued to use corporal punishment during the project, such as the productive labour mentioned earlier.

Less positively perhaps, most teachers viewed peer mediators as another form of prefect or class monitor. For this reason, there was always a temptation to use them for

classroom control duties inside the classroom when teachers were absent. This tendency was also apparent in the selection process where fast learners were more likely to be chosen.

### **Peacemaking circles**

In the post-intervention interviews, teachers spoke very positively about peacemaking circles in their classrooms. Nine teachers indicated that they intended to make circles an ongoing part of their teaching. They appreciated how circles brought learners together and recognized how different the process was from the traditional teacher-dominated classroom; in particular, there was an opportunity for all voices to be heard. Teacher M noted that the process of talking in turns to speak and listening respectfully to each other helped some learners overcome a sense of isolation and encouraged the building of community. Teacher H observed that while ‘some children are very comfortable to express their feelings, some of them are very shy initially ... but as time goes on, they begin to open up.

Most teachers mentioned the value of hearing background information from learners as a major benefit of the circle process to them. This information helped them to prepare for the day ahead and to hear about issues that could be addressed later; these included reasons for non-punctuality, homework challenges, and cleanliness. In brief, circles allowed teachers to become better acquainted with their learners. Two teachers (N and H) found that the circles made them aware of home situations that were outside their job description or competence to handle.

The most commonly-mentioned challenge was the number of learners in each class. One response was to have several smaller circles operating at the same time in the classroom. The two schools with hot seating held their circles outdoors.

### **5. Conclusion**

Both peer mediation and the peacemaking circles among the 9 to 10-year-olds in the three schools involved building the dialogue skills of learners; these are key components in relationship building and conflict resolution. Teachers noted a small but noticeable improvement in learner interactions in the school. They pointed to the status which peers’

mediation carried with it, the growth in self-confidence of peer mediators, and the bonding of mediators across classes as they engaged in a shared responsibility. They noticed that other learners were strongly attracted to mediation and practiced it.

The teachers were also positively influenced by their participation. Their experience with the circle process in particular encouraged them to reflect on issues they were dealing with in their profession, including the efficacy of teacher-dominated classrooms and corporal punishment. The circles helped them to know their learners better. A conversation was started, it seems, about alternative ways of carrying out their profession.

There were suggestions to scale up restorative practices. Teacher G proposed giving all learners peer mediation training and changing mediators regularly so that all would have a chance to practice the skill. This would move restorative discipline practices to a higher level, perhaps to the whole-school approach which, as Sellman et al (2014) have noted, is far more likely to move a school in a more peaceful direction.

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