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What if every school had a restorative justice circle?

From Punishment to Restoration: Reclaiming the School as a Site of Healing

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Discipline is often framed as control, rules enforced, infractions punished, order restored. But what if we reimagined discipline as restoration? What if, by 2030, every South African school had a restorative justice circle, a space where harm is acknowledged, relationships are repaired, and dignity is restored? In a country shaped by historical violence and ongoing trauma, this shift would be more than procedural. It would be a declaration: that healing belongs in the classroom.

The Scenario

By 2030, the Department of Basic Education, in partnership with the Department of Justice and Social Development, rolls out the Restorative Schools Framework (RSF). Every school establishes a restorative justice circle, facilitated by trained staff and supported by community partners. These circles include:

- Structured dialogue spaces for learners, educators and families to address conflict
- Peer-led mediation programmes grounded in Ubuntu ethics
- Restorative conferencing for serious incidents, involving all affected parties
- Integration into disciplinary policy, replacing zero-tolerance with relational accountability

Pilot studies in KwaZulu-Natal show reduced violence, improved trust and stronger learner engagement. The initiative draws on South Africa's legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, adapting its principles for everyday school life. However, implementation varies: some schools embrace the model, while others struggle with training, time and cultural resistance.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals the limits of punitive discipline. Suspension and expulsion may remove the problem, but they rarely resolve it. Restorative circles offer a different logic: one that centres relationship over retribution, dialogue over decree.

From a systems-thinking lens, restorative justice is not just a method, it is a mindset. It requires cultural change, emotional literacy and institutional courage.

Why It Matters

South African schools are often sites of unresolved harm, bullying, corporal punishment, racial tension, and intergenerational trauma. Restorative circles offer a way to name the wound and begin the repair. They affirm that justice is not about punishment, it is about restoration.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on Ubuntu, peace education, and transformative justice. It asks us to see discipline not as control, but as care.

Reflective Responses

What does a restorative justice circle look like in practice?

It looks like a learner facing those they've harmed, speaking truth, hearing pain, and committing to repair. It means guided dialogue, mutual accountability and emotional safety.

How do we embed restorative justice in school culture?

By training staff, modelling relational leadership, and aligning policies with restorative principles. By making circles part of the rhythm, not just the response.

What risks emerge if restorative justice is poorly implemented?

Superficial dialogue, retraumatisation, and loss of trust. Without depth and care, circles become performance, not transformation.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Restorative Justice Research (2024–2025):

- The Restorative Justice Centre calls for finalisation of the National Policy Framework and systematic implementation across sectors
- A Springer study at Mbambangwe School in KZN found restorative circles reduced violence and improved relationships
- The Child Justice Act (2008) embeds restorative principles in juvenile justice, offering a model for educational adaptation

“Restorative justice is not a technique, it is a way of being. It invites us to see conflict not as a rupture, but as a call to repair.” - <i>Dr Primrose Sibusisiwe Mlambo</i>
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