Sorting things out

A: Ari Snider
Ad: Adam Gilbert (restorative conference facilitator)
G: Gwendolyn Rogers (restorative conference facilitator)
J: Julia Steiny (founder of Youth Restoration Project of Rhode Island)
K: Kinte Howie (current URI student, former Classical High School student)
N: Narration

K: I was late to class. It was snowing that day, and it was really cold and we still had to go to school, so…I was bundled up in my coat, and my hat and my scarf and I was like trying to run to get to class cause I hated being late to school.

N: This is Kinte Howie, a junior at the University of Rhode Island. The story that he's telling happened a few years ago when he was a student at Classical High School in Providence. Kinte lived far away from the school, so on this snowy day it took him a while to get there. When he finally arrived, Kinte passed one of the administrators in the hallway.

K: I said good morning to her and instead of saying good morning back to me, she said, "Take that hat off before I suspend you."

N: Kinte was shocked by this experience, but it was not an isolated incident for him or for other students at Classical high school. In the US, the traditional approach to school discipline is to punish kids by putting them in detention, suspending them, or expelling them altogether, and Classical high school was no exception. In this case, Kinte didn't get suspended, but the threat of harsh punishment still took a toll.

K: When you live in fear of being sent to the office, you live in a stressed environment all the time. Especially as a student of color, because the data shows that students of color, especially Black students, are more likely to be suspended and sent to detention than white students.

N: According to the American Civil Liberties Union, Black students are in fact three times more likely than white students to get suspended or expelled. Black students also account for 31% of school related arrests, even though they represent only 16% of public school enrollment. Punitive disciplinary policies are still widespread in the US, but Kinte sees evidence of that changing. Since graduating from high school he has gone on to study education and childhood development at the University of Rhode Island.

K: We learn, in our classes, that punitive disciplinary practices actually do destroy a student. And they destroy a student's ability to develop properly; it destroys a student's ability to actually have trust in their school system, and have trust in their teachers and even have trust in their administrators. It really doesn't help a student learn, it doesn't help a student want to be in their school environment, and it like i said it destroys that student's love of learning and it destroys that student's love of school.

N: Kinte is not the only one in Rhode Island who is concerned about the harmful effects of school punishment.

J: My name is Julia Steiny I am the director and founder of the Youth Restoration Project and here's how it all went down.

N: First, we need a little background info. The Youth Restoration Project works with schools in Rhode Island to change their approach to discipline, using what are known as restorative practices.

J: In Restorative, the question is: Who was harmed? What do they need? Have they been heard? And, what is the offender going to do to make things whole? And then the next piece is, that decision, whatever the offender has decided, how does that affect the larger community?

N: Before getting involved in restorative practices, Julia was an education reporter for the Providence Journal. She wrote a lot about discipline, and became convinced that the whole approach to punishment just wasn't working. Then, she was invited to Belfast, Ireland, to report on a restorative justice project that was going on there.

J: And after all the years of looking for some way of improving the mental and social health of schools, I went ok, this is it.

N: So, back in the US, Julia got trained as a mediator and began talking with local school administrators about these new ideas. She was able to get a few principals on board, and secured enough grant money to hire a handful of other facilitators.

Essentially, restorative practices are the opposite of the traditional approach to school punishment. Restorative is about building community, listening to people without judging them, and working together to repair harm when things do go wrong. These are lofty goals, but at a basic level, the techniques involved are fairly simple:

J: We listen very carefully, we ask open-ended questions, and we circle up. So questions, "I" statements, and circles are the three big skills and tools.

A: What do you mean by circling?

J: Circling generally involves a good question, and then everybody answers it. So that every single voice is heard. And that's a signature of restorative justice. Every voice is heard.

N: The Youth Restoration Project employs a team of facilitators who work at specific schools. Their job descriptions are varied, but one of their key responsibilities is to handle conflict. I spoke with Adam Gilbert, a Youth Restoration Project conference facilitator who also happens to be a friend of mine. Adam works at Nathan Bishop Middle School in Providence.

Ad: So there were two kids. A sixth grade girl and a seventh grade boy. And they got into a fight on the bus.

N: The bus driver had to break up the fight, and the two kids got suspended. Pretty straightforward. But the school principal didn't want to leave it at that, so he referred the case to Adam. After getting parental consent, Adam started meeting with the kids.

Ad: What was their side of the story? And I got, you know, "He came up to me, and he tried to take my phone, so I like went over to him and I accidentally elbowed him in the neck and then he just came at me and I don't know what happened."

So then I take that story and I go to the other kid and I'm like so what happened from your perspective? "You know she took my phone, and came up to me, and I might have maybe bumped my hand into her face." ~~Ehch.~~

N: After meeting with the kids on and off for about three weeks, it's time for the culminating event—the restorative conference. The conference brings together everyone that was affected by the incident, in this case, the two kids, their parents, the school principal, and the bus driver who had to break up the fight. Every conference is unique, but in general the goal is to hear each person's perspective, talk about how the incident or problem is affecting people, and figure out a way to make things better for everyone.

Ad: And we have this conversation, you know look at these different stories. Is the important part the story or the fact that we are here right now, all hurting? And trying to heal and move on from the situation? You'll always have different stories and that's ok, but the point is thinking about how it's affecting you, and how it's affecting everyone else.

So I get them thinking about that. And they're eleven and twelve and I was very impressed. They made this agreement at the end of the conference to write apology letters to each other, to the bus driver who had to break up the fight, to the principals. And now, whenever I see those kids in the hallway, you know, whenever they're getting

into conflicts with other students, I always hear them like “make sure you use your ‘I’ statements and make sure you ask questions and you don’t assume things.” And it’s beautiful.

N: Of course, not every restorative conference has such a clear and happy ending. Gwendolyn Rogers, another conference facilitator at the Youth Restoration Project, said that teachers and administrators will sometimes expect restorative practices to fix problems instantly. But that’s just not the case.

G: The changes are gonna look small.

N: For example, one time there was a student who kept disrupting his math class. Gwen went through the whole process—talking with the student, the parent, and the math teacher to come up with a plan. A week or so later, she checked in with the teacher, who said that the student still wasn’t doing much work.

G: I said, has his behavior changed? And he’s like “Yeah but I’m not seeing enough of a change.” There are little moments like that where I see the victory and I’m excited about it and I only just wish that other people would recognize that it’s gonna be a process.

N: That is key to this whole thing—at the end of the day, restorative practices are a process. The process can be long and complicated. And even after all those circles and check-ins and conferences, the results may be incremental. Julia says that, for a lot of people, that’s a tough sell.

J: Americans always talk about wanting to fix things as though it were mechanical. Well we’re not! We’re organic. The British, I love this, always talk about “sorting things out.” And they need to you know come up with what on earth is going on so you can sort things out. We wanna fix. And so we jump in. Usually too fast.

N: Back at the University of Rhode Island, however, Kinte is seeing a new approach to discipline starting to take hold.

K: You begin to see restorative justice practices seeping into our newer textbooks and newer curriculums for new teachers. Cause there is a specific way you talk to students, a specific way that you discipline students that’s appropriate for their age. And there’s you know different strategies to help correct behavior other than yelling at them and sending them to the office.

N: Kinte is well on his way to becoming a teacher. He’s completed a couple practicums, and if all goes to plan he’ll have a class of his own after graduating. Regardless of school policy, he plans to bring a restorative approach to his future classrooms.

K: I'm glad that there are people who are still interested in implementing restorative justice practices and helping to improve our schools, to make them communities. Cause that's what a school should be it should be a community of people working together to raise the children of the village. You know it takes a whole village to raise a child, so why don't we take that ideology and make it known, and put it into practice. I mean that's what I've learned and that's what I plan on doing when I become a teacher and when I work in a school. That's what I'm gonna do in my individual classroom and that's what I will encourage my entire school to do.