



**Book Review – Meyer, Luanna H., & Evans, Ian M. (2012). *The School Leader's Guide to Restorative School Discipline*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The authors' credentials are impressive, some 66 books and more than two hundred articles on different aspects of education between them. They have spent their time between U.S.A. and New Zealand, and are evidently in demand in other countries. They obviously know stuff. This particular book is one of a set of three, this one being addressed to 'principals and other school leaders' (p. 1) both primary and secondary, on the topic of Restorative School Discipline. And there, is the problem, right there in the pairing of 'restorative' and 'discipline' in the same sentence let alone in the same book. The remainder of this review will seek to elaborate on that observation.

**A ROOM WITH A VIEW**

The book sets out to be practical and helpful to school leaders, and its assumed audience is clearly American, with a few token references to New Zealand. I have had experience only in New Zealand (secondary) schools, so my perspective is bound to be different, especially as I have never been 'a principal or school leader.' I mention this because it seems to me that perspective is pretty much everything in education. Meyer and Evans take the view from Mount Olympus, grand, all encompassing, knowledgeable. My view has been formed from the perspective one gets from being down and dirty at the coal face. Not necessarily any better, just different. I have spent the last four months, however, on a research project from Waikato University around restorative justice, and have therefore ascended some way up the Olympian mountain myself, mixing theory and practice.

**BOX TICKING**

The book ticks all the right boxes, being evidence based, culturally sensitive, user friendly, and with a listed number of 'outcomes'. Where they have borrowed ideas from other people, this is acknowledged in the usual way. The text is broken up into manageable portions with clear headings, and avoids theoretical complexity in line with its avowed intent. The program laid out in

Chapter One to introduce the idea of restorative justice (RJ) into a school, is admirably clear. First, the suggestion that RJ is a good thing (from the top of course) then the meeting, followed by discussion, and more meetings. If any staff are brave enough to still express reluctance and doubt over the value of the program, after this extensive and lengthy induction, then the advice to the principal is expressed like this:

Finally, an excellent fallback position whenever someone remains unconvinced that the school is taking the right approach is to ask for cooperation and support for an implementation trial period. (p. 17)

There is a very subtle discourse in operation here. The principal is being positioned as the person responsible for introducing innovation, and staff are arguably being positioned as the people who will oppose innovation. Faced with unyielding opposition, the principal can fall back on sweet reason, inviting 'cooperation'. Any teacher who continues to be oppositional, is immediately wrong-footed. As a management strategy, this is pretty good. RJ, however, is not about management, and that is a bit of a problem.

The issue, of course, is absolutely valid, how to get staff buy in to change. Blood and Thorsborne (2006) devote about 9000 words to this issue which suggests that it is a little more complex than Meyer and Evans are willing to deal with. It doesn't quite tick the right box here, then.

## **BEHAVIOURAL EXPECTATIONS**

Chapter Two is about how principals get kids to follow the rules, or in simple kiwi English, do what they are told. They note that every school will have a set of rules, and the test of how well they are working is to ask this question: 'Can typical students at any grade level in your school state the rules for how to behave in the hallway, restroom, etc.?' (p. 19). They then discuss how to make it plain to kids what it is that they are supposed to do, that there are restorative practices 'when things have gone wrong, and consequences that will be enforced at school whenever students do not meet behaviour expectations'.

Shorn of the edu-speak, this section is about compliance and punishment, and RJ stuff is somehow squeezed in there, even though it is diametrically opposed. RJ is actually about relationship and repair of relationship when needed through a structured teacher/student dialogue. Compliance and punishment are the very things that it is trying to do away with.

What are we to make of this? One of the stunning things that is coming out of the wider RJ literature, is just how resistant teachers are to RJ, how threatened they are by RJ, and of how determinedly schools as a whole resist change by taking on the language of the new idea, and then carrying on with doing whatever they were doing before. Meyer and Evans appear to be sliding RJ discourse into the traditional patter so that its genuinely radical implications are subtly neutered.

## PREVENTING TROUBLE

Chapter Three lists six things that any school can do to minimize the possibility of 'trouble in 'classroom'. It includes mediation, mentoring, home-school relations, cultural sensitivity, bullying, and RJ. This is the clearest possible sign that Meyer and Evans have taken a somewhat minimalist view of RJ; it is just one of six tools in the tool box. However, if RJ is implemented across the whole school then its structure and processes make all of these other things redundant.

The key aspect of RJ is its determination to treat all persons with respect. When this happens, peer mediation, home-school relations, cultural sensitivity and mentoring cease to be necessary strategies. 'Respect' trumps them all. As for bullying, my experience of this was that RJ was the only process which allows the bully to come to understand what it is that they are doing and then to choose to stop doing it. The bully too, has to be treated with respect.

Meyer and Evans seem to subscribe to a particular view of the educational institutions; that they are basically ok, and just need a little bit of tweaking here and there. Actually, RJ is a profoundly different way of going about things: its focus on relationship is a sharp challenge to existing procedures, which are about the exercise of authority, compliance and control. Modern secondary schools are tension ridden, highly stressed, often thoroughly unpleasant places to work in as teacher, and to be in as student. RJ offers a solution to the greater part of this, but it does require a frontal lobotomy for most principals and teachers.

## INTERVENTIONS

Chapter Four has some very interesting material about teacher assumptions and language. 'Why we should watch what we say' is the title of one article about RJ (Drewery, 2005). If you are not sure what this means, try asking a teaching colleague to describe some sort of confrontation that they have been caught up in, in completely neutral language. Without special training, this is almost impossible. It is one thing that RJ trainers have to focus on. The (teacher) language in the classroom is riddled with subtle forms of disrespect towards students. Some are moved to respond with various forms of resistance, others are silenced.

When an RJ trained teacher runs a class restoratively, it is astounding to watch and hear the student response. This is most marked in those Year 10 classes which have been labelled 'difficult', and are driving their teachers mad. The difference in behaviour, and climate, and learning, can only be described as transformative, as students who have been silenced for years suddenly find their voice in a classroom relationship that is accepting and welcoming of what they have to say. This cuts across all barriers of gender and ethnicity.

When Meyer and Evans talk about 'Old fashioned and outdated behavior management practices...' (p. 61), they are talking RJ language. Their vignette of a negative classroom interaction is really helpful in showing how a typical teacher's set of responses actually creates the situation for which the child is disciplined. At that point, however, they begin to pull back into conventional understandings: 'Restorative school discipline does not mean that there will be

no consequences ...' (p. 64). One of the standard teacher clichés is that 'there must be consequences'. Here the authors still fall into this trap of conventionality. What it is invoking is the standard teacher discourse of punishment being the only way that kids can learn what is right and wrong. In any RJ training course, this is the giant roadblock that has to be bulldozed out of the way before the journey to the restorative classroom can begin.

Punishment does not change behaviour. The evidence is overwhelming. Teacher disciplinary techniques are substantially unchanged since 1945 (yes, even including the abolition of caning), so that if those techniques had been effective, the behaviour of the current set of students would be very different. And it ain't.

## **CONFERENCING**

Chapter Six is helpful at outlining how to go about setting up and carrying out a 'conference'. The problem is, it is only an outline, covering a few pages. Its actual example of school violence is excellent in detailing the complexity of trying to sort out who done what but the actual experience of running a conference really cannot be imparted like this. The Australian trainer Margaret Thorsborne takes three days to bring her trainees to this point, and even then they lack confidence. The Ministry of Justice training programme takes five days, and is quite ruthless, involving much video-ing and play-back with attendant criticism. In comparison, Meyer and Evans' work is relatively lightweight.

There is a further difficulty in that the authors have drawn on a study of RJ conferencing that was quite radical in its day, but is now more than ten years old, the study emanating from Waikato University in 2004. This study reflected the perspective of its practitioners, being heavily dependent on one school of counselling, the narrative school. This is a splendidly useful approach, but not necessarily for RJ. In my opinion, it can be a bit clunky and mechanical. The actual RJ script does all the work by itself without having to draw diagrams on a whiteboard, making it (to my taste) uncomfortably like a conventional classroom lesson. This is just one model, and that in the last ten years a number of alternative models have become available.

## **CONCLUSION**

This appears to be a somewhat confused book. It is directed at principals but much of it is about the classroom teacher. It is concerned with restorative justice but addresses all sorts of other (unnecessary) stuff. It recognises that RJ has radical implications but mostly buries it as one way to go among others. When it talks about RJ conferencing it uses just one model. Its main confusion is in the title itself. Putting 'Restorative Justice' and 'Discipline' together in the same sentence is like putting vanilla essence in the casserole. One could have hoped for more from such prolific commentators on the educational scene.

## REFERENCES

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rod Holm taught History for so long that he eventually became history. He then retrained as a (school) counsellor until he felt that he had reached his use-by date. He is now tempted just to go fishing but has taken a year out to do an MEd by research on the topic of Restorative Justice Conferencing. He spent three years introducing his secondary school colleagues to Restorative Justice and runs regular conferences in the criminal justice system where he works as an RJ facilitator.

He has become the worst kind of born again convert to the practice of RJ and wishes that he had known about it 40 years ago.

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