

Restorative Practices: Healing with Compassion and Connection

“I Am Because We Are.” This heartfelt philosophy reminds us of something we often forget: we are deeply connected. Our joy, our growth, and our healing are not separate—they’re woven together in the relationships we build and the care we show. When we stand by one another, embrace differences, and treat every person with dignity, we live the spirit of *Ubuntu*—“*I am because we are.*”

Let me share a story.

In a village in Africa, a group of children were asked to race toward a basket of fruit. The winner would take it all. But instead of running individually, the children joined hands and ran together. When asked why, one little girl replied, “*Ubuntu*—I am because we are. How can one of us be happy if the others are sad?”

This Ubuntu story captures the very heartbeat of restorative practices. Whether in schools, homes, or communities, they remind us that connection is the foundation of healing—and that real learning happens where people feel safe, seen, and valued.

The Heart of Restorative Practices

Restorative practices focus on building strong, respectful relationships before anything else—rules, punishments, or discipline. They create spaces where students and teachers feel they belong. When people feel safe emotionally, they are more likely to learn, grow, and take responsibility for their actions. Rooted in the values of empathy, dialogue, and accountability, these practices align closely with India’s **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and the **National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023**, both of which emphasize empathy, open conversations, and inclusive community-building.



They’re not just strategies—they’re a way of living that turns classrooms into a home away from home. Imagine a student shouting out in class, disrupting the lesson. A typical response might be a trip to the principal’s office, leaving them feeling pushed away. Restorative practices ask, “What’s going on? How can we fix this together?” Through restorative circles, affective statements, and impromptu conferences, students reflect on their actions, understand their impact, and take responsibility for repairing harm. The result? A classroom where mistakes become opportunities for correction and growth.

The Five Rs: A Framework for Healing

Restorative practices rest on five key principles, the “5 Rs”:

- **Relationship:** Strong connections between students, teachers, and families create trust and care
- **Respect:** Mutual respect ensures everyone’s voice is valued, fostering equality.
- **Responsibility:** Students learn to own their actions and their impact on others.
- **Repair:** Harm is addressed through dialogue and action, restoring relationships.
- **Reintegration:** Students are welcomed back, reinforcing belonging.

When practiced consistently, these values shift the culture of schools—from places of control to communities of care.

Bringing Restorative Practices into the Classroom

1. Affective Statements

Words can touch hearts. Affective (or **heartfelt**) statements allow teachers to express feelings honestly, without blaming or shaming.

Instead of “*Stop shouting!*”, try,

“I feel distracted when it’s loud because it becomes hard for everyone to focus.” This invites understanding instead of resistance.

They also help affirm positive behaviors:

“It warmed my heart to see you helping your classmate—that’s what makes this class feel like a family.”

2. Impromptu Conferences

Sometimes, a quick, kind conversation is enough to guide a student.

For instance: *“You seem eager to participate, which is great—but calling out means others miss their chance. How can we work on that together?”*

These brief chats—done privately and with care—build trust and prevent small issues from growing into bigger problems. These moments remind students they are cared for, even when their behavior needs redirection. Here, the teacher is a facilitator, not just a disciplinarian.

3. Restorative Questions

When conflicts arise, restorative questions help students reflect and find solutions. Questions like *“What happened?”*, *“How did it affect others?”*, and *“What can we do to make it right?”* encourage empathy and accountability. These questions turn conflicts into moments of learning and connection.

4. Restorative Circles

At the heart of restorative practices are circles—structured discussions where everyone sits as equals, facing the center, sharing their thoughts and feelings. They come in different formats:

- **Sequential Go-Arounds:** Everyone takes turns speaking by passing a talking piece around the circle.
- **Non-Sequential (Popcorn) Circles:** Students speak spontaneously, raising their hands when ready.
- **Fishbowls:** For larger groups, an inner circle discusses while an outer circle observes, with an empty chair allowing brief contributions from observers.

Circles are powerful because they create a sense of *Ubuntu*—a shared space where everyone belongs. A colorful cloth, a bowl of water, or a few meaningful objects in the center can make the circle feel sacred, a place where trust and honesty flourish.

The Talking Piece: A Bridge Between Hearts

The talking piece is what makes circles so powerful. It’s a simple object—a feather, a smooth river stone, a small toy, a coffee mug, a memento—that’s passed from hand to hand. Only the person holding it speaks, giving them space to share their truth without being interrupted. As it moves around the circle, it weaves a thread of connection, reminding everyone they’re part of something bigger.

Creating Safe Spaces – The Circle Keeper’s Toolkit

To guide circles with care, teachers often use a small toolkit:

- A bell to gently open and close the session
- Talking pieces that hold meaning or comfort
- Bright cloths, candles, or water bowls to create a warm space
- Clear guidelines like:
 - Speak from the heart
 - Listen with respect
 - Be spontaneous
 - Lean expression: Be concise, leaving space for all.
 - Confidentiality: Agree that “whatever is shared here, stays here.”



These rituals create trust and emotional safety—both essential for healing and connection.

Real-World Impact: Stories That Touch the Heart

As a Resource Person, I once led a training session on restorative practices, focusing on mental health and classroom dynamics. During one activity, we formed a circle and passed around a simple coffee mug as our talking piece.

What happened next was unexpected and deeply moving. As the mug made its way around, participants began to open up—not just about work, but about life. One teacher, holding back tears, spoke about the recent loss of a loved one. Another shared the long-held regret of never thanking the doctor who had once saved his life.

The circle became a space for **catharsis**—a gentle release of bottled-up emotions. It held them gently, like a trusted friend, letting them release their pain and feel truly heard. What began as a simple exercise turned into something transformative. Participants left feeling lighter, more connected, and profoundly moved—having witnessed how circles create trust and healing, and feeling empowered to bring that experience into their own classrooms.

The Way Forward: Embedding Restorative Practices in Schools

Adopting restorative practices means shifting from a punishment-based mindset to one that focuses on healing and connection. It takes commitment, but the impact is lasting.

Here are key steps to move forward:

- **Training teachers** in restorative strategies and language
- **Leadership support** to model the practices and allocate resources
- **Engaging students and parents** in building a restorative culture
- **Making circles routine**, not just for conflict, but also for joy, gratitude, and check-ins
- **Monitoring impact** through feedback, observation, and reflection
- **Bringing in mental health professionals and volunteers** to support emotional well-being

This change takes time and heart. It means moving away from a traditional punitive approach and embracing the Ubuntu way—knowing that we are all stronger together. Schools that invest in restorative practices will see not just better behavior, but a deeper sense of community, where every student, teacher, and family member feels they truly belong.

In a world that can often feel broken, restorative practices offer a way to heal—through compassion and connection. They remind us that mistakes do not define us, that every voice matters, and that we are all part of something greater. Like the children in the Ubuntu story, we too can hold hands and run together, knowing that our joy, growth, and healing depend on one another.

In schools, we are not just teaching subjects—we are shaping lives. As educators, our words and actions directly impact young minds, so we must approach every student with compassion and care.

Let us choose to be the sunshine in someone’s cloudy day. Let us walk hand in hand, like the children in the Ubuntu story, knowing that we are all *Better—Stronger—Together*.

Let us live the **Ubuntu** way:

“I Am Because We Are.”



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