

Where You Are

S6 Episode 5 — From Conflict to Connection: Restorative Practices in Schools

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Restorative practices increases a student's feeling of belonging in schools. When we feel that as an individual in these nested communities that make up our schools, it allows us to be our best selves and our unique self as well.

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Bryn Askwith: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Bryn Askwith. Before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge with respect and gratitude that the BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre is located on the unceded, traditional, and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. We know that many of our listeners might be joining in as well as our guests from different lands across the province, and we invite you to pause and reflect on the lands from which you are joining as we begin our conversation today. Each season on the podcast, we produce an episode for school professionals. After all, teachers, administrators, counselors, and school staff spend a lot of time with students working to promote and support child and youth mental health and well-being. And so I'm very happy to have Dr. Alex Gist here to help co-host this episode with me. Alex, thanks for joining me behind the mic today on Where You Are.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Bryn. It's really great to be here for those listening, I work as part of the BC Children's Health Promotion and Schools Team. Our team works collaboratively to enhance capacity for system-wide changes in school communities to improve student mental health and well-being. And I'm really excited to learn from our guests today about restorative practices in schools. And when we say restorative practices, what we're talking about is an approach that focuses on building healthy relationships, building supportive equitable school communities, repairing harm and resolving conflict.

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Bryn Askwith: So in our episode today, we'll take a closer look at what restorative practices are, discuss the importance of restorative practices, including their connection to mental health and well-being, learn about what restorative practices look like in schools, including examples from the BC context, discuss factors that may help and hinder the use of these practices in schools. Explore how restorative practices relate to and intersect with indigenous knowledges and the First Peoples principles of learning. And of course, share resources that school communities can look to. So let's get into that conversation.

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Dr. Alex Gist: So our first guest today on the podcast is Dr. Brenda Morrison. Brenda is the director of the research and engagement, Center for Restorative Justice and an associate professor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University. Welcome to Where You Are.

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Great to be here.

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Dr. Alex Gist: So Brenda, can you start us off by telling us what restorative practices in schools are and why they're important for mental health and well-being?

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Off to a great start. Restorative practices in schools sort of grew out of an extension of this idea of restorative justice, which is about repairing the harm done in the aftermath of crime and conflict. But what are we restoring? And I think it's about safety and it's about in all its dimensions because we often default to physical safety and physical safety is important, but so is our social, emotional, and psychological safety. So restorative practices in schools are about facilitating that. And it also relates to this idea of communities because a school community is just not one community; it's a nested range of communities. And so we need to be restoring psychological and physical and social-emotional safety to a range of people that make up the various communities within our schools. When we do that well through the practices that we'll learn about today, then we have a range of amazing outcomes that relate to mental health, including reducing emotional distress and anxiety, but also adhering to what schools are meant to do. When we practice restorative justice in schools, then we increase academic outcomes as well.

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Dr. Alex Gist: I was using the term restorative practices. You've used the term restorative justice. Can you maybe speak to some of the common terms when we're talking about this area and maybe a little bit about the differences between them?

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Well, it's actually a nested web of practices because restorative practices in schools isn't just one thing, but this idea of restorative justice grew out of dissatisfaction with certain aspects of our criminal legal system, but we realized that these ideas and this approach is relevant to schools and even our healthcare system. And so when we think about it, behind this idea of restorative justice, because restorative justice is like an outcome, it begins with each and every one of us. So it's a restorative approach first, and then we can think about it and measure it in different ways. So it's also restorative measures, but it's a range of practices. Some involve two people, some involve a circle of many people. So it's many different things and they're all nested together under this word restorative.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Brenda. Can you share more about some of the other benefits of restorative practices? You mentioned academics, but what are some of the other positive impacts you've seen in the research or in the literature?

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: When we practice restorative justice in schools, that actually increases a student's feeling of belonging in schools, and that increases a range of healthy outcomes. And so along with academic achievement, we increase attendance, we increase engagement, we increase motivation, and we reduce a lot of things like bullying in school, disruptive behaviors, referrals to the principal's office because we have a sense of belonging and purpose in the school. And when we feel that as an individual in these nested communities that make up our schools, it allows us to be our best selves and our unique self as well.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much, Brenda. I definitely have a feeling our other guests joining us today are excited to be jumping in on this topic as well. Also joining on the podcast today is Cory Hartling. Cory is a principal of the St'a7mes School in Squamish, BC. He's been an administrator, educator, and practitioner of restorative practices within the district since 2011. Cory, thanks very much for joining us on the episode.

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Cory Hartling: Thank you very much for having me.

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Bryn Askwith: Cory, you heard Brenda at the stage in terms of explaining what restorative practices are and why they're important in schools and to mental health and well-being of children and youth. So I'd like to focus now on what these practices can look like in schools and unpack that a little more with you. So can you tell us how your school and your district approaches restorative practices and could you share an example or two of what that looks like?

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Cory Hartling: When I think about restorative practice, I bring it back to the concept of the circle. So for us, the circle is the vehicle through which we have so many conversations within our school district. So kids will meet in their classroom, they'll talk about their day and they'll use circle as a way in which to build connection and belonging. And restorative practice can flow from that concept. So in our district, we've been really thoughtful about how are we teaching our kids to be in circle so that when these bigger events occur that may require restorative justice, they're prepped, they know how circle works, they know protocols. And we've taken a really thoughtful approach as well in our school district on looking at circle restorative practice as a vehicle for curriculum, but then also how do we use it to welcome a student back from a suspension? How do we use it to navigate conflict between students? How do we use it to repair harm that may exist between a teacher and a parent? And so we've really thought about

it as this all-encompassing means in which to address a variety of conflicts within our system. We even use it at the district level for our district level meetings. So a lot of our admin meetings are done in circle, and so we've really taken this idea that if we are going to be asking our kids to do it, then we are doing it ourselves. The end of the day, I think about circle and I think about restorative practice as really just the art of conversation. So how do we get human beings to have conversations with each other in a thoughtful structured way? In our society, we tend to shy away from conflict. We tend to think of conflict as a negative thing. And in our school system, it's a big topic, right? Bullying is a big topic, conflict in schools, but circle is a vehicle through which that we can hold that conflict and teach kids to navigate conflict in a thoughtful, reasonable way.

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Bryn Askwith: I love how you gave examples about how you've used this at the student level, at the school community level, and even at teacher-parent level. Does it look any different from your perspective at say an elementary school level age versus a high school level age? And if so, could you talk a little bit to that?

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Cory Hartling: Yeah. I mean, the structure is essentially the same. So we follow the Peace Circle process, which was developed by Dr. Evelyn Zellerer, but there's lots of different processes that people use for circle, but the format's essentially the same. You start the circle with a welcome, you do an opening, you share values. Values is so important because no matter what conflict people are having, you can find common ground. And then you would have your dialogue depending on the topic of the circle, you do a checkout closing round. In elementary, you're going to bring in more play. I would use objects to represent values a bit more. Maybe I'd ask kids to bring their stuffed animals or something from home and we pull values out that way, whereas in high school, older kids can think a lot more abstractly. And so we can do that the more abstract conversations without leaning into some of those strategies. But I tell you what, you can still play games with kids in grade 12 and they're going to respond in the exact same way. My personal philosophy is that what works in kindergarten is going to work just as well in grade 12 if not better. And so I often will take those strategies from kindergarten and apply them to the work that I do with adults, and it works very well.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much, Cory.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Cory. Our third guest on the podcast is Jennifer Morgan. Jen's a mentor support teacher working in restorative practice and social emotional learning in the Coquitlam School District. Thanks for joining us today.

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Jennifer Morgan: Thanks so much, Alex. Thanks for having me.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Great to have you here, Jen. So building off what Cory just shared, can you tell us about how your district approaches restorative practices and can you offer an example or two of what that looks like?

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Jennifer Morgan: Yes, I really appreciate what Cory is saying because you can see similarities in the districts and how we align. One thing that we landed on was the International Institute for Restorative Practice, which has a lot of really key components about how to be restorative and absolutely circle work is a key foundational aspect around being restorative. And also what it looks like is this continuum of how are we having conversations using effective language, how are we having impromptu conversations. We want to start with those low risk circles that we're having fun and we're having conversations that everybody can say something about. And then slowly building on that to having brave conversations. We want to have safe spaces, but especially today's age, we want to have brave spaces. And so having those conversations can really move not only the community forward, but also individuals just to feel that safety and noting that that's 80% of our work is that circle work, those small impromptu conversations that teachers are having using those I messages. That's mostly what it looks like. Really our mantra has been doing the circle work in the district to get folks used to that. And we're speaking that common language.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Jen. You mentioned 80% focuses on the regular proactive circle work, those impromptu conversations, and building that common language. But can you talk about the other 20% and the different tiers as well?

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Jennifer Morgan: Right, yes. Tier one is an approach that you would do for all students, and that's the proactive approach. Tier two is maybe more supports are in place for a few students. You might be having a problem with ... There's a small group and you might have to have a small circle aside with that group of students. And then tier three would be when there's a greater harm occurred, and then that's when we have a restorative conference. And so not as often. So 80% of the work is that tier-one approach. So it's those conversations, many folks are doing circle every day. So you want that proactive piece to be that 80%. That's the real important part. And I think folks, when they hear restorative, they just hear about the restoring piece. I think that's surprising to people that actually the restorative process is in that proactive building piece and that the 20% is when harm is done, ensuring that someone coming back into the community that we are not having them live in shame and that they're welcome back in. That's a really key factor to that piece. And so that's really that tier three approach, which means those are the few instances.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Jen.

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Bryn Askwith: Brenda, Jen, and Cory have just given some great examples of what some restorative practices and approaches can look like in school settings and specifically in their districts. Before we go any further, can you speak to how restorative practices are rooted in or related to indigenous knowledges?

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: I've been working in the field of restorative practices in schools for 25 years now across a range of different contexts, even countries. And it looks a little bit different. So we need to be culturally responsive when we're being restorative. And restorative practices in schools needs to weave together with other practices in schools, but specifically in the context of how restorative practices in school or restorative justice weaves together with indigenous ways of knowing and being and responding to harm, does come from the practices that are indigenous. People in Canada have been practicing since time out of mind. And so restorative justice and the practice of indigenous justice and indigenous ways of being have always been intermeshed. We would talk about it maybe as the practice of two-eyed seeing or two- eyed knowing that we can bring together these practices and weave them together, but particularly in the context of schools here in BC, we're in the process of indigenizing our curriculums and restorative practices in schools are helping us to do that in various different ways.

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Bryn Askwith: Cory, do you have anything to add to what Brenda say?

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Cory Hartling: Yeah. Well, I agree with Brenda. For sure. You look at circle in different contexts, so circle can be ceremony, so that's when we are activating on our Squamish values. We also have Lil'wat people in our district as well too. And so in different places you certainly have to be culturally aware of how circle has been used, but we'll also use circle in a lot of different contexts as well. So we'll blend it into social-emotional learning. We'll use it in curriculum at the end of the day, I really think of circle as something that we all have a stake in. All of our ancestors in some capacity practiced circle. We all sat around a campfire at some point. We all had a place where we would sit in a community and talk about the challenges that we were having. And indigenous people have really carried that forward for us in a structured, thoughtful way. I'm not an indigenous person, but I feel comfortable in pulling circle back from my ancestors as well too, and thinking about, okay, how did my ancestors solve problems? Well, we sat around, we talked about it. And so in schools, I really like to bring that in for people. And in a digital world where it's so easy to forget that you're talking to another person on the other line, grounding kids in that reality that when you sit across from another human being and you have a thoughtful conversation, it's a lot different when you see the emotions on their face when you wrong someone or when you've been wrong. And that space around that campfire is really the place to do it.

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Bryn Askwith: Jennifer.

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Jennifer Morgan: I agree. We have the Albert Marshall Mi'kmaq Two-Eyed Seeing is something we believe in a lot, but also listening to other indigenous folks, indigenous elders, and bringing that in to our circles, the First Peoples principles of learning is something that there's a poster in every classroom. And it's such a great way. If I was to talk to teachers about how we incorporate that into their days of really making that known in the circle today, we're going to be reflective or reflexive or we're really sharing story today, or we're really exploring our identity and really naming that and nurturing that piece. So that's a really simple strategy for educators to use those first peoples principles of learning and bring that into their circle practice. And to be honest, some people are worried about making mistakes, and I've talked to many indigenous folks who say, "You need to try. " You need to try. And it's okay if you make mistakes along the way." And they do want us to do that work. It's important work, and it's really part of decolonizing education is having these spaces that look a little different.

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Dr. Alex Gist: You're listening to Where You Are. I'm your co-host, Alex Gist. To learn more about the work BC Children's does to support well-being in school communities, including resources that can be helpful to school professionals, visit keltymentalhealth.ca/school-professionals.

Are you a teacher, administrator or school staff member? Take some time to share out the Kelty Mental Health Resource Center as a hub for free mental health and substance use information resources for BC families in your school community. Tell parents and caregivers about our website, podcast, webinars, and more by sending them to keltymentalhealth.ca. Let's shift the conversation to talking about benefits and impacts. Cory, Brenda shared a little bit about what the research and literature says about restorative practices, but I'm curious what impacts these practices had for students in your district and for their well-being.

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Cory Hartling: Yeah, so I'll start with the anecdote. I for years worked at the Sea to Sky Alternate School, and we did circle three times a day. That was a key part of our program is teaching kids how to exist with each other in a way that was thoughtful and kind and caring. And through that work, eventually we got to a place with our kids where they would start requesting circles. So one of my favorite stories is I'm sitting in my office. And a student kicks my door in and says, "Cory, I need a leap in circle." And for me, although obviously not appropriate to kick my door in and to swear. For me, I was like, okay, we're there rather than this child who in the past would've taken matters into their own hand. Their response was, I need to go to a trusted adult. I know a process that works and I'm going to ask for it. And so on the ground level, that to me tells the power of that restorative practice. This person's now doing well. They've learned some skills in order to help navigate their emotions. They know how to navigate conflict. At the district level, I don't necessarily equate restorative practice directly to this, but we saw a significant drop in our suspension rates over a number of years. And with that drop in

suspension rates, not necessarily leading to correlation, we saw our grad rates skyrocket to the point where we had the highest indigenous grad rate in the province. And restorative practice certainly has a role to play in that. When you stop suspending kids and when you start helping them navigate the challenges that they're having, they will graduate. It's a very simple formula. On my end, just in my own data that I collected through work that I did at the middle school and also the alternate school, we look at rates of recidivism. We tracked out all the circles that we did over a period of three years, and it was something like a hundred restorative circles that we did two years, a hundred restorative circles, and our rate of recidivism was 13%. And so you have to flip that and think about the criminal system. The criminal system is inverse of that. And so in our schools, we're seeing this process that is leading to reduced rate of recidivism. Kids are not repeating the same behaviors. They're learning from their mistakes. They're in school, they're navigating conflict. Does conflict still happen? Of course, it does, but we have a mechanism through which to address it, and that to me is a really powerful piece of data that we've seen within our schools.

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Oh, I'm just so loving this conversation. Just gives me so much hope. Part of restorative justice empirically through randomized control trials, we know that the practice of restorative justice does decrease recidivism rates. And we know again, from the same randomized control trials that the practice of restorative justice for those who have experienced harm reduces the symptomology around post-traumatic stress disorder. And so we want to decrease that symptomology. A circle allows all of that to happen in one container. We don't do something separate for the people that are responsible for harm to those that are harmed. We just work it on together. So what we're really doing is we're creating cultures of upstanders for active responsibility in our schools. We want to break the cycles of passive bystanders in society to evoke and nurture and support active citizenship where we don't expect someone else to do it, that we're all responsible for keeping school communities safe.

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Bryn Askwith: Hearing you say that, Brenda, makes me think back to what Jen was saying earlier, just around having some of those brave conversations, and what Cory mentioned earlier, just conflict is out there in the world. And so how can we from young ages working with our students and our children to get them to be doing that work and being comfortable with it as they move forward, as citizens in society. Jen, for others looking to implement restorative practices in school, can you talk about maybe any challenges you've had to overcome or any lessons learned along the way? Because I suspect there might be educators listening or administrators listening, thinking, okay, we definitely want to be doing this, starting this or doing more of this. So what are some things that have worked and what are some challenges that you've had to overcome?

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Jennifer Morgan: Yeah, that's a great question. The major challenge is time. So one thing that we found is when we build it in the schedule, if you can set that time aside, then you're not feeling like you're fitting it in. And so often I come from a middle school background, we'd have

something called advisory in the morning, which would be our circle check-in. If as a school you can build in that time and if admin can build in that time for teachers to say, it's okay, this is the time we're going to protect, to meet as a community, that is key. And then the other tip I would give is to start small. Start small, start with a Monday check-in, see how that's going. Start with low risk, so you're really building a muscle just like we would in any kind of practice. So if you're starting small and seeing success, then you can build from there. So that's not too overwhelming.

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Bryn Askwith: Cory, I want to ask you, how can we move restorative practices from policy to practice?

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Cory Hartling: Yeah, so I've taken it back to your why. So why do our systems exist? Why does our school system exist? Why does our healthcare system exist? Is help take care of people, nurture the whole child, the whole individual. And in our district, we've developed policies around restorative practice that really take in that whole person, that whole child. Our practice flows from our policy. And if you look at things like the School Act, go into the Safe, Caring and Orderly Schools document, there's a great line in there that talks about how consequences at a school level should be co-constructed with the student. And in the past, that was really looked at as, okay, well, we'll do our yearly code of conduct review. We'll pull a couple of kids from leadership, we'll get some feedback, and then boom, there's our codes of conduct. But in our district, we've really thought about that through the circle in that if you are asking kids to be a part of the development of accountability, then it should be done in the moment through circle. And so being able to pull policy documents and say, well, actually, our practice is aligned with our policy and vice versa has made it really easy for us to navigate these conversations with families, with our nation partners, with students. Though this work is so interesting because quite often it relies on passionate people. So having passionate people as well can help drive policy and practice. And then getting into the schools. So in the last couple of years, our district has hired a coordinator for restorative justice. That's part of our instructional leadership team. And it has invested in that work. And so as a district, we are saying, this is important to us. We are investing in this. So for us, it's seeing this guy, starting with our why, working through the practice that way, and then getting into the schools and demonstrating how this works. I did want to share one more thing. The big question I always ask people when it comes to restorative practice is, if not this, then what? If not this, then what? And if you ask a parent or a student or a teacher that question, they'll often come back to restorative practice. What are you actually looking for? I want to have a conversation about the harm. I want to sort through it. I want to move forward in a good way. Sounds like you want to circle. So if you're hesitant about restorative practice, if not this, then what? What is the alternative?

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Cory. That's a great question and great way to frame it. Jen, how do restorative practices integrate with or complement or enhance some of the other initiatives that

take place in schools that support mental health and well-being, such as social-emotional learning or others?

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Jennifer Morgan: Yeah, we talked a little bit about the First Peoples principles. And so CASEL, which stands for Collaborative for Academic Social-Emotional Learning, they have a really great site to visit. And part of that social-emotional learning can be practiced not only in Circle, but when you're being restorative as well. So if you're looking at that self-awareness, self-management, the relationship skills, it becomes not an added item to your day as a teacher. So you can really incorporate that together in that circle practice because you are practicing those things. We're noticing a lot of students are having a hard time with their self-awareness, their self-management. That is happening. If we can do that as a collective where we're practicing those social-emotional learning skills and restorative practices together, it can really work well together and make it easier on everybody and just make it flow really nicely.

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Bryn Askwith: Any resources that you would recommend for school professionals who are looking to learn more about begin working on or keep working on restorative practices?

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Jennifer Morgan: There's a resource I suggest. It's Circle Forward by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis. And a lot of our folks have been given that and that really helps them. It's a big resource, but it actually is very manageable. That takes from low-risk circles to higher-risk circles. And it's a great place to start. It has a really lovely forward with all of the why and a really lovely back section with openings and closings and games that you can play in circles. So I highly recommend that resource.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks, Jen. That sounds like a fantastic resource. Cory.

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Cory Hartling: I'll echo what Jen said. The Circle Forward is probably the single best resource I've come across when it comes to Circles within schools. Peace of the Circle, Dr. Evelyn Zellerer, she's done a lot of work in our schools, in our systems, and that's another excellent resource to connect with. Another great resource we'd be the IIRP, the International Institute for Restorative Practice. You can go to the website, but for me, at the end of the day, the resource is all great. They're all wonderful. They'll tell you a lot of things. My advice for people is just to do it. I think people sometimes get scared around restorative practice, however, it's a conversation.

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Bryn Askwith: Thanks so much. Brenda.

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: I just would love to echo what they said along with Circle Forward. They have a number of different books, Circle In Square by my colleague Nancy Riestenberg. The Little Books of Restorative Justice series written by the so-called grandfather of restorative justice, Dr. Howard Zehr, covers everything. But there's also a little book on restorative discipline in school. So the little book series is really great. And based on my book, which is a bit of a dinosaur now, Restoring Safe School Communities together with Nancy Riestenberg and Margaret Thorsborne from Australia, we're working on a new little book called From Bullying to Belonging. That will be part of the little book series. So there's lots of resources out there, but just start simple and I think start by doing.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Often we end the podcast with that opportunity to share any final thoughts or words of wisdom. So, Jen, we'll start with you. Are there any final thoughts or words to wisdom that you'd like to share?

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Jennifer Morgan: I think that we can't be scared to try. We have to do. And I will add just when we have supportive administrators and supportive environments, you can really see the restorative practice take off. So I think that's another final tip I would give is just trying to dig in together. And I just wanted to end with my favorite quote. It's from Richard Wagamese, "All that we are is story." It is what we arrive with and it is all we leave behind. And so that always reminds me when we're talking about restorative practices and circle work is just that ability to share stories.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Jen. Cory, any final thoughts or wisdom?

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Cory Hartling: I like one-liners, and I don't know where I heard this before, but the idea that connection and belonging is not another thing on your plate, it is the plate. And I think about restorative practice through that lens or circle in general. It's the thing that holds everything up. And when we talk about time. Time comes up in the education system constantly. "I don't have time to do this." "I have all this curriculum to get through," all these challenges, but we don't have the time to not do this. So for people that are struggling with it and finding a place for circle within your classroom, within the school, I would counter and say, if connection and belonging is the plate that holds everything up, then we actually have to make the time for this, it's so important.

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Dr. Alex Gist: Thanks, Cory. And Brenda.

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Wow, thanks so much. Restorative practices in schools, like in other contexts, are about building healthy relationships. And so it's not only healthy relationships in an

interpersonal sense between two different people, it's healthy relationships with my classroom community, with the community at large, with the administration, with the parents, but ultimately, it's about a healthy relationship with ourselves. So circle and other restorative practices help us to build a healthy relationship with ourselves. And when we develop that relationship, that's the core relationship through which everything else unfolds and we can uphold healthy societies and relationships.

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Cory Hartling: Thanks, Brenda.

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Bryn Askwith: And thank each of you for making the time to be here with us, sharing these insights, these gems, these examples and your expertise in a very practical way for our listeners. So thank you very much to Cory, to Jen, and to Brenda for being part of the episode with us today on Where You Are.

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Cory Hartling: Thank you all.

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Dr. Brenda Morrison: Thank you.

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Jennifer Morgan: Thank you.

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Cory Hartling: Thank you very much.

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Dr. Alex Gist: To our school professionals listening today. Thanks for making the time for this episode of where you are.

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Bryn Askwith: And a big thanks to my co-host, Alex. We'll definitely have to co-host again together soon. I've really enjoyed having you be part of this episode. For our listeners, if you enjoyed the conversation today, please leave us a rating where you might be listening now. Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's, Kelty Mental Health Resource Center. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham with audio engineering by Ryan Clark. Audio production by JAR Audio.

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