Preschool Best Practices Are Best Practices

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I. Background

The American preschool program is at the height of educational popularity, only second to the new student discipline issues. The two educational issues are married through the research based programs suggested to display best practices for teacher and student success. This paper will discuss the best practices leading to high quality preschool programs in conjunction with the need for new disciplinary practices throughout all levels of education. The disciplinary practices shown to be successful through research based programs are similar to those practices that make up a high quality preschool. Therefore, preschool practices are best practices for any level of school when it comes to the disciplinary procedures implemented by a school.

Educational "best practices" are interpreted in a variety of ways throughout the world but by American standards they include utilizing data to support instructional decision making. A man did a forty-year study to determine whether or not the best practices in preschool made a difference. This man, Heckman, completed his research reports determining how important best practices in early childhood education are to the future of a child. Utilizing best practices
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include the basis of providing many opportunities for young children\(^3\). In the course of providing opportunities, best practices are met.

Best practices in high quality preschools include a variety of approaches\(^4\). Specifically, the Reggio Emilia inspired practices encourage best practices for teachers to utilize at any level. Reggio Emilia encourages a series of pedagogical forms throughout their teaching including: the pedagogy of well-being, good taste, relations, continuity, participation, documentation and cultural pedagogy\(^5\). Teacher preparation is a combination of three undergraduate and two graduate years of schooling to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach to teaching\(^6\). Utilizing this base, the teachers have a strong sense of how to approach their students and the possible discipline issues that may arise. Though discipline may have higher stakes at a higher grade, the essential principles should remain the same throughout every level of education.

The most important piece of the Reggio Emilia approach for best practices in student discipline is the concept of practicing documentation. Documentation in the Reggio Emilia inspired schools opens the door to social and political implications and opens a forum for students and teachers to openly participate in their learning on a daily basis\(^7\). Documentation includes the notes taken by a teacher regarding every-day occurrences. The idea is to make the students, parents and teachers accountable for everything that occurs in the classroom.

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In this policy brief by UNESCO, the image of the child is construed through the lens of Reggio Emilia schools in Italy. The schools there accept a child and their capabilities on every level (from artistic, scientific, etc.) and encourages their success in every aspect of their person.

This text explains that each child needs a variety of opportunities to be successful including teaching through listening, kinesthetic learning, technology, etc.

\(^5\) *Supra* 4 “5”.
The school should work to include all elements of life in their teaching paradigm, including housekeeping tasks, different hobbies for children, learning by doing, and a sense of their culture.

\(^6\) *Supra* 4 “10”.

\(^7\) *Supra* 4 “225”.
This picture shows the importance of documentation and elicits the ideas of curbing student discipline. Without expanding too much on the subject, documentation leads to open records of the learning process and can plan for future success for children. Entering documentation into daily practice is a best practice for teachers and will illicit better student discipline procedures.

Best practices in preschool should be considered in the context of a high quality preschool. There are reports of thousands of preschool-aged children being suspended from school. The trickle down of extreme student discipline policies in America is astounding. This problem should be resolved based in best practices of preschool and the best programs for student discipline. High quality schools with best practices are now the expectation of the federal government and should be of all citizens of America.

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8Benen, Steve. "Suspending Preschoolers?"  MSNBC.com. NBC News Digital, 22 Mar. 2014. Web. Aug. 2014. This article describes the large number of preschool students who are suspended and correlates it to the school to prison pipeline issues that America is having.

II. Research-Based Student Discipline Programs

There are numerous research-based student discipline programs in America, but two approaches stand out at this moment. First, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports provides a framework for best practices in discipline (Horner et al., 2009). Second, Restorative Justice focuses on relationships in order to restore people after an incident (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Utilizing the first approach in solitude can be successful, but adding Restorative Justice combines the efforts taught back in the first years of life with the needs of a growing child. In order to better elaborate on their comparisons, looking at the framework for Restorative Justice is appropriate.

The Restorative Justice approach looks to the classroom environment first to implement the best practices to curb behavior issues. This includes giving teachers the opportunities to include restorative justice principles and values into the classroom. Restorative Justice creates "ecosystems of care" according to Northwestern School of Law Professor, Christine Agaiby. The idea behind this program is to diverge from the punitive measures that ask systematic questions when a problem arises. Instead, a Restorative Justice program asks questions that work on the relationship of the people involved and put a truly human element into the process.

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Dr. Bailie addresses a simple list of positive and negative behaviors that should be addressed in schools and the best way to address them through restorative justice practices, including the use of proactive relationship building as a way to curb discipline efforts.


Reisel speaks to restorative justice in many examples throughout his talk but specifically addresses the idea that “the brain is capable of extraordinary change, and the best way to achieve that … is to change and modulate our environment” (11:51).
The triangle shows the unique relationship between members of a restorative justice process with human relationship at issue. The problems associated with and advantages included in Restorative Justice programs for schools makes the process less systematic and punitive and more human and holistic. This process asks the offender to not just leave school for a period of time, but rather use their unique skills to right the wrong. For example, when a child bullies another over a text message, the victim and the offender will have a chance to discuss the issue. Ultimately the offender will be asked to look at his or her own skill-set to help restore his or herself again. A student with excellent speaking skills may go to a younger classroom to explain the consequences for a human who is bullied and a human who bullies. The student who is an artist can create awareness via posters or online postings about bullying and the issues surrounding it. This does not punish the student but activates their skills to learn and effectively stop a cycle of recidivation.

This program has been used in the criminal justice system extensively by America, but New Zealand has taken the approach to their schools. The school system of New Zealand
requires Restorative Justice practices to be a part of each student discipline issue\textsuperscript{12}. Due to their issues with the nation's school-prison-pipeline, their school system of discipline needed to be addressed. This can parallel the issues in America but change can happen before a complete deterioration of the system. Following the example of other countries can help model a system of excellence in America and push for the best practices for our children\textsuperscript{13}.

\textit{III. Partners in Life: The Marriage of Preschool Best Practices and Student Discipline}

Documentation encourages open forums for teachers, students and parents in addition to opening the lines of communication--permanently--for students and teachers with an added accountability for the student to participate fully in their own learning experience.

There is so much encompassed in the process of teaching already and taking this one step to document all aspects of learning and classroom environment will help to mainstream that process. If teachers opt to document what is happening in their classroom they become a part of the learning environment instead of the head of the learning environment. The teacher can better observe the relationships in the class, curb behavior issues, and allow for a more unique data collection for students struggling. This data will be used to show the growth of a student intellectually, behaviorally, socially, etc. The mass amounts of learning that go on in a classroom beyond a classic curriculum should be given recognition and documentation will show this.

Further, utilizing a Restorative Justice approach to documentation provides the student with the opportunity to succeed and better maintain a position of respect in the classroom. When

\textsuperscript{12} Watt, Emily. "A History of Youth Justice in New Zealand." 30. \textit{Overview of youth Justice Principles and Processes}. Department for Counts, 2003. Web. Aug. 2014. Watt discusses the long history of problems in New Zealand for their youth flowing straight into the correctional system. She explains that the restorative justice principles that were integrated into the criminal system were then put in the school system to make a proactive stance against the school-to-prison pipeline.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Supra} 9.
the teacher opens the conversation through every other avenue of learning through documentation, the behavior elements can be examined as well. Behavior that is acceptable will be commended. Behavior that needs work will be addressed with everyone and possibly stop other students from engaging in the behavior later. When everything is on the table, everyone has a responsibility to care for the information. This will ultimately provide for a better classroom, an excellent behavior program and best practices in teaching.

Classroom management will come first and the way schools handle discipline now is unfair. At one school a student reports she has no idea what the staff will do when she is in trouble. This school has a staff representative to help cope with the needs that occur when discipline may be an issue. This representative could be a social worker, student assistance coordinator, staff psychologist, etc. The important piece of the external staff member (a person outside the classroom environment) is to be sure the students are fully aware of their existence and purpose. After discussing with a high school student regarding her handbook, she was unaware of what a student assistance coordinator was and their purpose. Though it is listed many times in her handbook, there was no indication of what the person would do or their helpful qualities instead of punitive purposes.\(^{14}\)

It is important to keep the lines of communication open but push it past a handbook with outlined measures. The documentation going on in the classroom should become a part of the school culture. Opening lines of communication in multiple modes will help everyone understand what is expected, how growth is achieved and where both academic and social needs are met. Documentation through the Reggio Emilia style encourages teachers, students and parents to be fully engaged in what happens in the classroom lessening discipline issues from the start.

In Jena High School, restorative justice can be the key to eliminating some of the most egregious violence among students. In one example, six students were bullying another student. The offenders violently harmed the victim. The weekend before the offenders bullied the victim, they were victimized by a different bully. The essay asserts that victimization leads to further violence and offending. The schools need to utilize a restorative justice program to take into account a broader context for the offense and determine how to resolve the issue and change the school culture.

When students are engaged in their learning and are required to be accountable for their learning through the documentation of their learning the tenants of restorative justice can successfully come into play. A Restorative Justice program requires that students take responsibility for their actions (from the triangle diagram on page 5). Research shows that students are less likely to continue, with this accountability included in the process. Documentation on a daily basis plays directly into the need for accountability. A student will be able to see directly what the encounter was, how it was perceived by others and how to make changes for the future. The use of emphasizing student success and progress through documentation procedures for Reggio Emilio based schools and the Restorative Justice practices will make for a more healthy and safe learning environment.

**IV. Why now?**

Bottom line: education laws are changing. It is important to join the wave of documentation of student discipline for the best interest of the child and the betterment of the

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In this essay, Suvall shows how Jena High School utilizes restorative justice practices in schools to overturn their punitive system that caused more trouble.
American school system. Illinois has a bill waiting only for a signature from the governor before it is passed and executed in the state (SB 2793). This bill changes student discipline requirements so each school must report to the Illinois School Board of Education (ISBE) with all data collection of student discipline information. Starting the process now with an open, documented, restorative process will make following requirements set out by the government much easier later.

The federal government under the United States Board of Education (USBE) will come in to look at the data collected to determine if there is a legal issue regarding student discipline. During a School Discipline Workshop hosted by Loyola University Chicago School of Law, Karen Mines and Tamara Perry spoke on behalf of the USBE. They spoke about the legal approaches the USBE includes in their analysis of student discipline data. The two approaches are: different treatment and/or disparate impact. Mines and Perry explained that in order to determine whether or not a school has in fact treated students differently or created a disparate impact on a certain category of students, the USBE looks to answer specific questions. For different treatment, the three questions relate to students who are similarly situated, legitimate and nondiscriminatory reason for the discipline and any pretext for that discipline. The disparate impact is based on questions regarding the impact based on race, the practice necessity to meet an important educational goal and whether or not a comparably effective practice that would lessen the burden on a particular category of students.

During this workshop groups worked together to make this theory a reality for their community and school. During this group work educators, law students and other key actors sat together to create an idea of where to begin on a project of creating a restorative justice program.
The reality is a large shift is coming and stakeholders must begin to think in terms of new discipline programs now. One group decided to create the following diagram:

This diagram illustrates the idea that schools are struggling with the time it would take to create this type of system (the basis for the hour glass as the main outline). The group also demonstrates the number of short and long term problems a school may experience (including the staff and students responding to the new program, the need for restorative justice, etc.). The
idea is all stakeholders must be involved for the school culture to change and even with benefits it may be difficult at the beginning. This does not mean a school should not attempt to put this in place, but shows the reality of some stakeholders sitting together to work this out.

This illustration does go to show that the documentation of learning, even for adults, can provide accountability for that learning, the importance of the project, and go so far as to help others learn along in the process of viewing the documentation. This can extend to student discipline issues. Students who can see the problems facing their school through the process of documented learning, the school can begin to change that culture and make a difference with everyone involved. Creating a practice of open documentation and student discipline centered around Restorative Justice will satisfy the transparency required in the new age of education in America. Following the line of thought from Reggio Emilia preschools’ best practices will provide for a better student discipline program.