



Education

Julia Steiny: A British city bands together to help its schools

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My well-traveled friends winced when I said I'd be going to Hull, England. They described it as Britain's Detroit.

The once-thriving shipbuilding and fishing industries left Hull's downtown rich with civic buildings and monuments from happier centuries past. Now they share their faded elegance with gaudy malls and new structures built on the cheap.

A cabbie in York, about 45 minutes from Hull, also winced. He said he'd never been there himself, but he knew Hull had the country's highest concentration of what we would call public housing. "It's poor and forgotten. What on earth were you doing there?"

Well, I'd gone to a conference to hear Hull's civic officials tell the success story of how they'd banded together, starting in 2007, to train 23,000 child-serving professionals and volunteers in "restorative practices."

The city of 280,000 people has 57,000 young people, most of whom had been heading down the same sort of bleak paths American inner-city youth find themselves on. Graduation rates were abysmal; the schools were all on England's watch list; crime was intolerable.

Things were so bad, they really had nothing to lose by trying something new.

The story began when head teacher (principal) Estelle Macdonald was assigned by English state officials to "turn around," as we would say, Collingwood Primary, a desperately low-performing elementary school.

She describes what she found there as utter chaos. Teachers were frustrated and furious, with each other, with the administration, with parents, but most of all with the nasty, out-of-control kids.

The adults behaved horribly, as though the miserable situation gave them license to act out. Daily, they modeled hurtful, punitive behavior for kids whose parents' behavior was, if anything, worse.

In 2006, Macdonald was desperately searching the Internet for any sort of help.

One day, without much hope, she called Ted Wachtel at the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), based in Bethlehem, Pa.

She says, “I mean, why not? I had no better ideas. That day I had to go out to a luncheon meeting, and when I got back my secretary said that some mad American had been calling every five minutes.

“When I talked to Ted, I could see that what he said had massive implications not just for my little primary school, but beyond.”

She came to America for training and then raised the money to bring IIRP trainers over to England to teach all her staff the simple techniques. Key among those techniques is taking time for one another, ritually, on a routine basis.

At Collingwood, adults and children, in various combinations, gather in small groups called circles, where they each answer the same question — for example, how they perceive a certain problem and how it might be solved.

Twice a day, Collingwood children and their teachers share, one-by-one, the successes and challenges of their school day. Children appreciate being consulted with questions and getting a chance to speak their minds. Adults do not cede authority, but teach them how to speak effectively, from the heart, and to listen empathetically.

God knows many adults have a lot to learn about speaking and listening effectively. It’s much easier to bark top-down rules at kids and to assign punishments.

Macdonald says, “The kids are not little angels, but they are starting to understand that what they do affects other people. That changes children’s lives. It also changes the lives of those who look after them.”

As luck would have it, Macdonald’s brother, Paul Nixon, works in social services. He’s an expert in Family Group Conferencing, which gathers an extended family to decide together how to care for a child who needs to be removed from a neglectful, abusive or substance-involved home. In effect, Nixon runs circles.

Macdonald called her brother and declared, “What you’re doing is a restorative practice. You need to speak to Ted Wachtel.”

Brother and sister started to make the connection between school and social services. And a local high school also started to study and use Collingwood’s techniques.

The tipping point came when Hull’s head of Children’s Welfare, Nigel Richardson, got involved. He says, “We’d already gotten good at Family Group Conferencing, and we had several youth diversion programs [to keep low-level offenders out of jail]. We had a framework, priorities, action steps, but we lacked the glue. Then I saw the report on Collingwood. So I went. Estelle and I talked and talked.”

Richardson gathered city officials together to let Nixon and the school leaders explain what can happen when adults become scrupulous about behaving in helpful and healing ways toward children.

Together the officials asked, “What if restoration wrapped itself around the lives of the children? What if restorative practices connected all of us across the city? How do you create a common language, build

relationships among the agencies, and still keep intact the different professional practices? I didn't know, but I was in a position to allow brilliant people to have the conditions to ask and answer those questions.”

Only three years later, Hull's crime has dropped significantly. School attendance is strong, and test scores are soaring.

British public-service agencies, including police departments, sent conference participants from all over the country to learn how to do things Hull's way.

The Hull officials were justly proud.

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