Restorative Practices in Prison: a holistic approach to address bullying amongst prisoners

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Bullying is a worldwide phenomenon not only amongst students in schools but also in prisons (Sekol, 2016). Bullying has a negative effect on everyone involved. Victims of bullies can experience depression, anxiety and an overall lower self-esteem (Riese & Rush, 2016). They remain in their cells, isolating themselves. Some of them threat to commit suicide by cutting themselves (Ireland & Ireland, 2000). Direct and indirect aggression are both types of bullying that prevail in prison. If prison bullies remain unchallenged about their behavior, they will not stop abusing people upon release and they probably will not lead a law-abiding life. The impact of bullying on the prison as a whole is significant, it causes disruption, undermines the prison rules and it threatens the safety of the prisoners and the prison staff. Not only the characteristics of the individuals play an important part, environmental factors like limitless access to material goods, a high population density and the hierarchical structure in prison are associated with bullying (South & Wood, 2006). "Given the frequency and complexity of bullying, a multi-level approach is recommended for prevention and intervention" (Letendre, Ostrander & Mickens, 2016, p. 238). The prevention pyramid displayed in figure 1 is an instrument that offers a frame of reference for an integrated approach to deal with bullying. The pyramid has several levels, which can be divided into two main parts: the base focuses on the broad wellbeing of people (being the environment and living circumstances). The upper levels are the more urgent and problem-oriented measures. Every level in the pyramid is essential in order to secure an effective policy to prevent bullying (Deklerck, 2010).
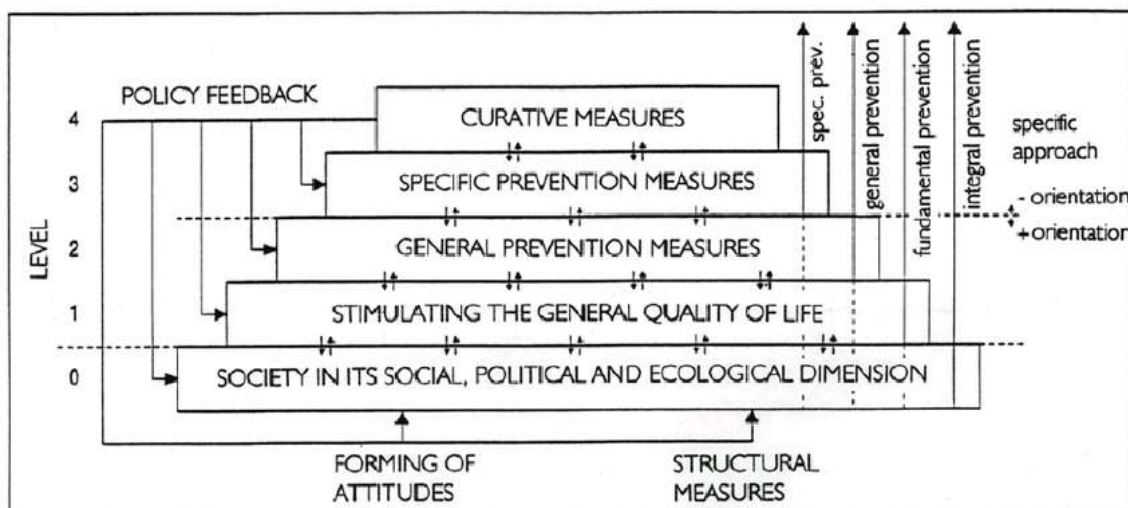
Figure 1. The prevention pyramid (Deboutte, Deklerck, O'Moore, & Minton, 2007).

"Restorative practices are a set of ideas and approaches used to build healthy communities, increase social capital, repair harm and restore relationships" (Molnar-Main, et al, 2014, p. 6). It is a philosophy, a way of life and can be practiced in many different ways. Restorative practices offer a new perspective and a different approach, focusing on the closest stakeholders and the wider community. "This will require a shift away from traditional bullying management practices to a model based on responsibility, accountability, engagement and support" (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2009, p. 7). Restorative practices can be used to deal with bullying on the different levels of the pyramid, promoting a holistic approach to address bullying amongst prisoners.

Starting at the top of the pyramid, restorative practices can be applied after a bullying incident has occurred. "Restorative justice appears to be a valuable tool in dealing with both criminal acts and the types of behavior which can lead to conflict and distress between residents" (Littlechild, 2011, p. 57). When harm is done, it needs to be fixed, wrongdoers need to be held accountable and the needs of everyone involved should be addressed. The first response to any case of bullying is having a conversation with the person who reported the incident using affective questions. Depending on the needs of the involved and the

seriousness of the bullying several restorative practices can be implemented. A restorative

dialogue or impromptu conversation for incidents of a less serious nature and a more formal

response to address the more severe situations. Those formal conferences, varying from a

small group conference to a whole community conference, demands thoughtful preparation

and can be attended by the following participants: wrongdoers, victims, bystanders, prison

staff, governor and if relevant, members of the local community. The decision to use one of

the formal conferences depends on several factors, including the needs and the willingness of

the participants (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2009). Some caution is advised when conducting

face-to-face meetings. Although it is "an occasion for all to hear the harm and plan steps to

accountability and reintegration. However, persons harmed by bullying or harassment may

not wish to face the person who harmed them . . . fearing further victimization" (Molnar-

Main, et al, 2014, p. 7). The conferences should only be conducted by trained facilitators.

They carefully plan and prepare the meeting. Their main task is to provide a safe place for the

participants to speak. Face-to-face meetings aren't appropriate if the bully or victim doesn't

want to be involved in the meeting or if the bully doesn't acknowledge the harm he caused

(Molnar-Main, et al, 2014). Restorative conferences offer a forum where offender and victim

can meet and tell each other how they have been affected. This process fosters empathy and

brings back humanity into the relationship, which makes it harder for the bully to maintain his

harmful behavior. Research conducted by South and Wood provides the first empirical

evidence to suggest that the tendency to morally disengage is consistently related to bullying

in prison (2006). "Moral disengagement appears to play a significant role in bullying . . .

People tend not to engage in harmful conduct until they have justified the morality of their

actions to themselves, making their behavior personally and socially acceptable" (South &

Wood, 2006, p. 492). "Bullies and victims do not represent two distinct groups; individuals

can be both bullies and victims" (Ireland and Ireland, 2000, p. 214). Recent studies shows

that the bully/victim group represents the largest group in prison (South & Wood, 2006).

Having being victims themselves means the bullies can relate more easily to the effects of

bullying which makes it harder to avoid their accountability. "Participation in restorative

justice does not require victims and offenders to come in contact with each other. And the

participation of one does not deny the participation of another" (Toews, 2006, p. 22).

Conversations with the victim exploring different options using the restorative questions can

empower them. It gives them some control back by asking what should happen next. For the

wrongdoer conversations with him alone or conferences with bystanders, support people and

prison staff can aid him to see the effects of his behavior and to acknowledge the harm he has

caused.

General prevention measures is situated in the center of the prevention pyramid.

Many adults don't acknowledge the bullying behavior and they often don't react appropriately

(Riese & Rush, 2016). In the prison of Ruiselede in Belgium prisoners report that the staff

often turn a blind eye. There are generally two possible reactions from the prison staff when

faced with bullying. A tendency to minimize the incident by stating that the victims are

exaggerating and that they should just make more of an effort to get along. And the punitive

approach, in one case a prisoner was sent immediately to another prison and another prisoner

was coerced to write an apology letter or else he would have to stay in solitary confinement.

Both approaches show that the prison staff isn't aware of the impact of bullying behavior and

they don't know how to intervene restoratively. All the stakeholders should understand the

seriousness of bullying and be aware of the implications "if the behavior is ignored and not

corrected" and " how dangerous it is to do the wrong things" (Curtin, 2016, p. 11). Ireland

and Ireland state that indirect bullying occurs more in prison. Since those forms are harder to

detect by the prison staff, it reduces the risk of punishment. Prisoners and prison staff should

be trained to recognize the behavior of bully and victim related to direct and indirect bullying

(2000). They also need to learn how to intervene restoratively. Involving prison staff in

circles with prisoners around the topic of bullying or in a conference gives every participant a

broader view. "If a program is to become effective in changing bullying behavior all three

groups, offenders, targets and bystanders must be included in the resolution" (Curtin, 2016, p.

7). Bystanders often encourage the bully and support his behavior by laughing, making

positive remarks and by not openly defending the victim (Salmivali & Poskiparta, 2012). In

prison bystanders can be prisoners and staff members. Gaining more understanding in the

mechanism of bullying, the effects and what can be done to intervene restoratively will

increase the behavioral options for these bystanders. ". . . findings provide support for a

restorative approach to offending that includes active participation by a key party, the

bystander, to deliver justice" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 210).

        Restorative practices can be implemented to enhance the quality of life in prison.

"Social hierarchy seems to be inherent in the prison system and prisoners appear to be

encouraging such a social system as bullies are given high status by both prisoners and staff"

(South & Wood, 2006, p. 491). The prisons in Belgium are divided into several sections

where groups of prisoners live together. Every section has his own prison staff. Circles

should be part of everyday live in prison. Not only to address incidents but also to begin or

end the day. Prison staff can be trained to facilitate those circles. ". . . circles provide a

cooperative forum. People are encouraged and given the opportunity to express their own

views, yet circles seek to find common ground between people" (Costello, Wachtel &

Wachtel, 2010, p. 112). They can be used to address the needs of prisoners and staff, such as

living and work condition. "Belonging is recognized as being essential for psychological and

physiological health" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 205). By speaking respectfully with each other and

letting the prison staff participate in the circles, mutual concerns can be addressed. Sharing

interests, emotions and support builds connection. It brings people closer together, fostering

connection which can act as a counterbalance to the dominant social hierarchy.

Implementing different restorative practices like circles and conferences, training staff

and prisoners to act restoratively and enhancing the quality of life for prisoners and the prison

staff provides us a different and multi-level approach for dealing with bullying in prison.

"Prison is a community in and of itself . . . Using restorative practices in prison brings a

healing element to prison and to those who live and work within" (Toews, 2006, p. 58-59).

Introducing restorative practices into prison has the potential to influence the whole prison

culture. "The centre-pieces of the solution must include commitment to human rights, mutual

respect, tolerance of difference and shared responsibility" (Ahmed, 2008, p. 211). A policy

based on these values and promoting an integral restorative approach, creates stronger

relationships and connections between prisoners and between prisoners and prison staff. It

builds a healthy and strong community, where bullying doesn't get a chance to thrive.

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