

“Non-Restorative” Language

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Educators know that words matter. As we move from zero tolerance discipline toward restorative alternatives, we must also move away from some of our everyday language. School staff lingo can inadvertently, but powerfully, contribute to school climates that mirror the criminal justice system, prison, and even war.*

Too often, school personnel unwittingly make casual references to war, beginning with how we refer to our colleagues' stress. We say teachers are “in the trenches” or “in the foxhole” or “on the front line” and “under the gun”, and near the end of the year, we enter “survival mode.” Professionals note that school staff have “PTSD” from routinely experiencing student fights, and even “secondary PTSD” from repeated exposure to the realities of our children's lives. Meanwhile, unwanted student behavior is “triggered,” must be “de-escalated,” and students who are harmed beyond a particular conflict become “collateral damage” “Hall sweeps” sound like warzone “mine sweeps” and are routinely used to return “A.W.O.L.” students to class.

School organizations typically follow a strict “chain of command,” and lack of decision-making authority is referred to as “above my pay grade”. Administrators follow the system's “strategic plan” as they decide who is “in their army” and choose a “plan of attack” with the “best bang for the buck.” Teachers “choose their battles” in classroom management, staff sign up for “duties,” class lists are “rosters.” Younger children are taught to walk in straight lines like drilling soldiers, facing forward and following a line on the floor or touching the wall with one finger to stay orderly. In crises, central office specialists are “deployed” to schools to provide “backup”.

And thinking about school vernacular brings up common criminal justice references as well. With an eye to protecting students, we adopted “zero tolerance” policies – modern terminology for a “tough on crime” legislative philosophy. Our system places discipline administrators in roles that can feel more like “detectives” than educators, requiring “intakes,” “investigations,” “incident reports” and “evidence”. Educators manage “cases,” hold “hearings,” and label students “victim” or “offender,” as required by the “due process” and “appeal” system. We punish for “insubordination,” call challenging children “repeat offenders,” and use the criminal term “assault” for physical violence.

As in the criminal justice system, school consequences include removal from community, “suspension” or “detention.” When kids come back, we require “reinstatements,” as if the student was returning to military duty. Even poor grades can result in academic “probation”. Having educators make “judgments” that incorporate and assign criminal justice terms is particularly damaging because children are so susceptible to internalization of labels used by the adults in their lives.

The all-encompassing penetration of the criminal justice system in schools is clear when police cars are parked in visible and privileged spots. Undoubtedly intended to send a message of safety to students and parents, for some students, the spotlight and privilege of law enforcement vehicles might seem to say: “We expect you to behave in a criminal way,” or “We think of you as criminals,” or even “We need protection from you”. In an environment where administrators say “Clear!” over walkie-talkies as they empty halls, like screen cops making life-threatening entries, who can blame students for feeling that way?

And many schools look and feel like prisons, with cinderblock walls painted institutional colors, cafeteria lines and trays, lack of natural light, sliding metal grating to separate areas, and designated isolation spaces for those who violate rules. Schools may require uniforms to increase a sense of equity, but prisons require them to minimize human voice and individuality. When schools face a threat, they use “lock downs,” administered by

staff who, like prison officials, regularly have access to the building’s more pleasant areas – like staff bathrooms and faculty lounges -- which are inaccessible to prisoners and students.

Perhaps most offensive is when we say a student is “off the chain.” “Off the chain” is a shorthand signal between educators to be alert and ready to support a student on a particular day, and is not said with malice, but this is one expression we should completely erase. Dogs are kept on chains, and our children are not dogs. Worse, humans are chained in slavery or as prison labor, with escapees being “off the chain.” We must not use language that echoes inhumane treatment in schools – ever.

We cannot readily change school hierarchies, buildings, or even uniform rules. There is a lot, however, that we, as educators, can change. We can be aware of the power of our everyday language and, wherever possible, replace war/criminal justice/prison expressions with expressions of resolution/reflection/learning. We can work together with intentionality to re-capture our primary role as educators, reject the role of enforcers, and send every possible signal that we are fully in the students’ corner. It is entirely appropriate, and arguably an educator’s highest calling, to teach students the skills to be able to learn from mistakes. Whenever possible, we should leave battling, investigating, and punishing to military, law enforcement, and criminal justice.

I guess that means I should stop telling people that Restorative Practices are not a “magic bullet,” huh?

*The inspiration for this essay was [Taking the War Out of Our Words](#), by Sharon Strand Ellison, 1998.

<i>What we sometimes say...</i>	<i>What we might say instead...</i>
Discipline: “intakes” “statements” “investigations” “incident reports” “evidence” “victim/offender” “due process/appeals” “assaults” “insubordination” by “repeat offenders” “suspension” and “detention” “reinstatements” after suspension	Discipline: “figure out what happened so we can work to repair it” “record keeping” “involved students” “Circles with a focus on repair and fairness” “punching, pushing, shoving or hitting” “disrespect” by “familiar faces” “removal from community” “return-to-school Circle”
Staff are: “in the trenches” “in the foxhole” “on the front line” “under the gun” “have PTSD” or “secondary PTSD” Teachers must “choose their battles” in classroom	Staff are: “doing a lot with limited time, often under pressure” “exposed to regular stress” “should use planned approach” to classroom management
About Students: “triggered” must be “de-escalated” “collateral damage” (when harmed by others’ conflict) “off the chain”	About Students: behavior “caused by something that happened to them” “experiencing the effects of trauma” “need support to calm themselves” “affected by the conflict” “needing extra support today”

“What we Might Say Instead” chart suggested, and contributed to, by Nancy Riestenberg, Author, [Circle in the Square](#)