

Principal Sabbatical Inquiry: Investigating Restorative Practice and its Relevance to Bell Block School

Roz Miller: Principal Bell Block School – 2011

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to the Bell Block School Board of Trustees for approving this sabbatical and to Bruce Lobban, the leadership team and all staff for ensuring it was “business as usual” in my absence.

I acknowledge the support I received from professional colleagues and friends who were prepared to host my visits and share their schools’ practices and to discuss and debate Restorative Practices.

Thank you Delwyn Harrison, RTLB, for your work in our school and for time spent working with me on developing a Restorative Practice model for Bell Block School.

To Jenny Clarke, thank you, for the many hours of virtual professional learning we do on the phone and to Margaret Thorsborne for your inspirational three-day facilitation training and the wealth of resources you provided.

Thank you Ministry of Education and NZEI for introducing and maintaining sabbatical leave opportunities.

Activities Undertaken:

I have enjoyed the opportunity to have time to:

- read, discuss and reflect on restorative justice and practice
- review the restorative practice training undertaken with Margaret Thorsborne and use it to draft a plan for extending the use of restorative practices school-wide
- attend a seminar organised by the Taranaki Restorative Justice Trust
- talk with school leaders about practices in their school
- visit schools
- and to refresh and re-charge.

Executive summary

Embedding Restorative Practices across a school will positively impact on the culture of a school where relationships, connectedness and effective listening are not only valued but where all members of the school community “walk the talk”.

Successful schools are built on a platform of effective relationships, where all stakeholders are encouraged to contribute, to be heard and listened to, to accept

responsibility for their own actions, and to make things right when they make mistakes. This is possible by effective professional learning in facilitating Circle Time and in Restorative Practices.

If Circle Time and Restorative Practice form part of the school's Charter, new staff, parents, students and the wider community know that the school does not support the traditional punitive style of behavior management, instead promoting an inclusive model of positive relationships, a caring and respectful ethos which helps children develop their self-esteem and self-confidence.

Purpose:

To investigate how using a Restorative Practice model across all areas of the school might lessen the number of incidents of anti social behavior some students are involved in, especially in the Year 5/8 area.

Rationale:

Having attended a Professional Learning day on Restorative Practice, along with the RTLB and the three Year 7/8 teachers, facilitated by Margaret Ross, our team agreed that such practices could enhance our current school-wide system, which aims to allow all students to work and play in a safe emotional and physical environment.

The Taranaki Daily News reported on 15.07.11, that offenders who took part in Restorative Justice conferences re-offended at a rate 20% lower than those who offended in a similar way and did not take part in a conference. While the numbers potentially involved in our school would be considerably less, using restorative practices as opposed to a traditional punitive approach, has the potential to see a reduction in repeat offending, where people are expected to own their mistakes and to make reparation in some meaningful way, after hearing about the impact their actions have on others. Māori students aligned to a marae will be familiar with seeing people engage in discussion and dialogue, which is a key feature of restorative practice. Having this synthesis between school and the marae will allow for consistency between both places. As our school population is 28% Māori having a meaningful Restorative Practice Programme would seem a logical extension. Berryman and Bateman (2008, p29) state that restorative conferencing supports

“Māori cultural aspirations, preferences and practices... can lead to more effective participation and learning for Māori students.”

The Restorative Practices Team at Waikato University in their publication, Restorative Practices for Schools, (2003) recognize that schools work with diverse communities and that Restorative Practice is not a “one size fits all” where there will be complete unity of will but schools are urged to find ways of “peacefully co-existing, with respect and integrity.” Restorative Practices offer some such way.

Drewery & Kecskemeti (2010) make the point that the issues teachers deal with are increasingly more complex and that teachers are looking for different ways of interacting with students and staff responsible for discipline are looking for new ways of interacting with all sectors of the community. Restorative practices have the potential to meet the needs of all these groups.

Despite our best efforts there is some evidence of bullying behaviour occurring at school and while our current Behaviour Management system includes children taking responsibility for their own actions, for some students this is difficult and denial and blaming others is frequently evident. A small number of students are repeatedly named as responsible for bullying behavior, which is mostly verbal. Some responses to a parent consultation phase in August 2009 expressed a wish that the playground be a safe and enjoyable place for all students.

Morrison (sited in Thorsborne & Vineyard, 2009) states that

“there is clear evidence that bullying behavior is associated with depression, post-traumatic stress, and future aggressive behavior. Interestingly, these ill-effects can also be experienced by students who bully others.”

It is my belief that no matter how few the incidents of bullying are, schools have a responsibility to address the issues for the victims and the wrong-doers. Both groups need to have their thoughts listened to and input into how to put things right.

The five Values, which are an important part of the culture of our Year 1-8 school

- responsibility
- honesty
- respect
- fairness and
- helping others

are an integral part of teaching programmes across our school which can be enhanced by the addition of restorative conversations in all areas of the school.

School Visits

The sub-cluster RTLB and I visited schools, both primary and secondary, which have established, or are establishing, a culture of Restorative Practice during which we asked the following questions:

- To what extent is Circle Time a feature of the school?
- What restorative justice models are schools using?
- To what extent are restorative justice practices embedded in the school's practice?

- How evident is the use of restorative practices and language in classrooms and in the playgrounds?
- Are all staff involved? If not, why not?
- How was the restorative process introduced to students?
- How was the restorative process introduced to parents?
- At what stage are parents involved in the restorative conversations?
- Who facilitates the conferences?
- Do you have examples of resolutions that have been effective?
- What went well when introducing restorative justice practices in your school?
- What were the challenges you faced when introducing restorative practices e.g. resistant staff?
- What do you see as the benefit of restorative practices - relationships, learning management, playground interactions?

In two schools we worked with pairs of RTLB who began introducing restorative practices in schools three years ago. They had undertaken facilitation training and one pair had undertaken research and training in Circle Time which they used extensively with teachers. They recognized that the bottom of Morrison's (2004) Hierarchy of Restorative Responses, where relationships are re-affirmed through social and emotional skills programmes, held the key to reducing the number of intensive interventions required. The bottom of the triangle forms the solid foundation on which the important aspects of the culture of a school are built - School Values, Circle Time, Professional Learning, relationships, connectedness, effective listening.

In one intermediate school the principal and deputy principal conduct the conferences at the top of the triangle, the Intensive conferences which usually involve between 1-5% of the population, often referred to as the "full monty restorative hui" focused on re-building relationships. In that school the role of the RTLB is working with teachers to strengthen relationships and develop connectedness within classes through the facilitation of Circle Time. They emphasized the importance of respectful relationships and connectedness as being pivotal to success at school and in life. The middle layer of the triangle includes class, small group and individual conferences.

Jude Moxon's "hierarchy of behaviours" was used in consultation with staff to classify behaviours into minor, moderate, high or major and to develop processes to manage the behaviour of each group using the restorative triangle. It is the responsibility of the class teacher to work with students from their class whose behavior falls into the minor group. Thus teachers are actively involved in working with their students to change these minor

transgressions.

Margaret Thorsborne presented a Restorative Practice information evening meeting for parents in some schools, "Steps for Peaceful Parenting". Restorative Practice conversation cards were sent to the homes of the students and anecdotal information has been received about the conversations being used at home, as well.

In another school staff had undertaken the three-day facilitation training, paid for through Learning Support Funding, (LSF) and a fourth refresher day was held for teachers previously trained in the facilitation process.

The RTLB who work in this sub cluster facilitate most of the professional learning in their schools around the Chat Cards, valuable Restorative Thinking Practice tools, which they had adapted and use scenario cards for teachers to practice the skills of conducting restorative conversations.

They work with teams and whole staff. Having one group of relievers for a day enabled each team to be released to work with them, for one block of school time in one day. They plan to work in each school for two years, with a lead teacher in restorative practices, expected to carry on the professional learning and support, when the two-year agreement expires.

In one school reward cards for desirable behaviours were given to students modeling desirable behaviours. One card is drawn out at weekly assemblies, the prize being a cell phone, with an overall draw at the end of the term being an ipad. Bus drivers and local shopkeepers have also been given cards to give out, resulting in improved behavior in these two areas and congruence between school and the community. A secret detective in each class was also given a card to give to another student modeling the desired behaviours.

The two RTLB working extensively with Circle Time, work together across a number of schools, initially leading the circles, with the teachers taking increasing ownership. As the capability of the teacher increases they take over the leadership role with support from the RTLB, until they are required in a support role only.

When these two RTLB receive a class referral from a teacher the RTLB complete a pre referral survey with the students and the teacher to gauge the depth of the relationships within the class. They commented that in some cases there was considerable difference between what the students felt and the thinking of the teachers. The surveys are based on the work of Helen McGrath and Toni Noble in their *Bounce Back* series. The results of the surveys are graphed and presented to the teacher before the Circle Time learning begins. After a series of Circle Times the same test is completed and again the results graphed.

When a sensitive issue arises in a class, and the student is likely to be uncomfortable, the RTLB introduces it in the 3rd person, without naming anyone. This ensures the wrongdoer hears of the impact their behavior has on others and what behaviours the class expect of each other.

One very effective strategy they used to manage students who were not compliant with Circle Time expectations, was to give four children a sticker for the day which they give to a child displaying the expectations of Circle Time at the end of the session. When they give the sticker they have to verbalise exactly what the sticker was being awarded for. A child who has particularly challenging behaviours is usually chosen to give a sticker out to encourage them to observe desired behaviours.

These two highly motivated, knowledgeable RTLB discussed the research that shows that the use of more consistent circle time increases work output in classes and the development of more effective problem solving skills.

The number of resources shared with us by other schools and RTLB has been especially valuable as it added to the resource bank we can access.

Findings

The foundation on which any successful school is built is the quality of the relationships which exist between all members of the school community. The Restorative Practice team at Waikato University outline ways in which schools can ensure an inclusive culture exists in the school from the welcome to new students and staff, to visitors and parents and suggest ways to provide support for all members of the school community. (p8).

Extensive reading has confirmed for me the important place Circle Time has in establishing and maintaining restorative practices. All teachers at Bell Block School have taken up training opportunities for facilitating Circle Time in classrooms, through professional learning with Therese Hoyle and with Delwyn Harrison. Some teachers use it on a regular basis to make democratic decisions in their class, to give students a voice, which is heard and acted upon, and as an opportunity to resolve areas of conflict. Circle Time is a no-blame process, which teaches effective communication systems to address all of the above, in a trusting and confidential environment.

Circle Time follows a structure, which is easy for students to understand and remember, and empowers them to take responsibility for setting up the room and contributing to discussions.

Jenny Mosley, has developed a model of Circle Time which is used extensively in Britain and other countries. She states that Circle Time

“has proved successful in promoting better relationships and positive behaviour, two of the most effective improvements to both learning and the smooth and harmonious running of a school.”

Jenny cites some of the benefits of Circle Time as promoting positive relationships, creating a caring and respectful ethos, helping children develop their self-esteem and self-confidence and providing efficient and effective systems and support for all staff.

This is what we want for all our students and staff, thus my thrust for having Circle Time used in all classes on a regular basis and for a variety of reasons as one part of a culture of Restorative Practice.

Restorative conferencing was first introduced into schools in the 1990's to reduce the number of suspensions, which was increasing. This has been partially successful. However that is not an issue our school faces and our future focus will be on integrating restorative practices with our current Values and Key Competency teaching programmes. Respect for all, one of our key Values, underpins all restorative practices as does effective communication with others.

To implement restorative practices in schools there needs to be a shift in thinking away from the faults of the individual responsible towards an emphasis on relationships – what damage has been done to the relationship and what needs to be done to repair it. Restorative practices focus more on people rather than punishment and rules. The traditional punitive approach would see emphasis on who did wrong, what rules have been broken and what punishment the person should receive. Whereas restorative practices look at who has been hurt, what the needs of those involved are and how we can make it right.

The ease with which staff respond to this will be as diverse as the students we work with. Their attitude and allowing sufficient time for implementation will be key factors when introducing the changed practices. Blood & Thorsborne (2005) suggest that

“changing the hearts and minds of staff can be the greatest challenge for culture change.”

In order that change is implemented in schools it is important that wide consultation with staff is planned for and implemented and that all staff have the opportunity to see why a change is being mooted, what the strengths of our current system are and where it is not working. In this way staff have ownership of the new initiative. Further, staff need to be able to engage in rigorous debate and dialogue, and be given time and support to make the changes required.

The current behavior management system in many schools, which has an emphasis on attributing blame and punishing those who break the rules, does not bring about changed behavior for many students nor does it repair the relationships, which have been damaged. The intention is that by punishing the wrong doer they will understand that the behavior is unacceptable and by making the punishment sufficiently unpleasant they won't repeat the behavior. This method is clearly not working in society if the number of recidivist offenders appearing before the judicial system is tallied up. Nor is it working in schools when the same students are repeatedly involved in contravening school expectations.

Howard Zehr (sited in Restorative Practices for Schools, Waikato University, p11) believes the focus should be on the following questions:

Who has been hurt?
What are their needs?
Whose obligations are those needs?

Implications

To ensure that all staff are fully supported in our school, especially when they are newly appointed, our current mentor programme for new staff, needs to be expanded to include ancillary staff and staff joining the school during the year, in keeping with the recommendation from the Restorative Practice team at Waikato University on inclusive school cultures.

The Bell Block School vision, which is contained in all school documentation and the website, will be reviewed to reflect restorative practices embedded with the Values and Key Competencies.

A lead teacher position, with an attached unit, will be advertised for the 2012 school year to lead the team developing restorative practices in our school. The team will be joined by the Police Education Officer, who has an interest in restorative practices, invited to join the team.

The restorative practice model developed by Langley & Hansberry (2008) for junior classes will be used as a guiding document for this area of the school.

Where to next?

- A professional learning and development plan has been prepared including milestone dates which will ensure that the implementation of restorative practices is planned and implemented in a well-timed way allowing all staff time for reading, reflection, practice and discussion.
- Attendance at a 3 day Advanced Facilitator training, including school visits in Melbourne or Sydney.
- Becoming a member of the Taranaki Restorative Justice Trust

Conclusion

For successful relationships with others, including resolving conflict, this writer advocates the use of Circle Time and Restorative Practices. Restorative practice skills are life skills and Langley & Hansberry (2008) confirm that it is never too early to model and use the foundations of Restorative Practices. They state that

“Children learn to be responsible for their choices sooner when adults, whenever possible, try to do things ‘WITH’ them, rather than doing things ‘TO’ them, or ‘FOR’ them.”

They advocate, therefore, that when young children have offended another that adults work with the children to resolve the issue rather than taking control and deciding what will happen as a result of the wrong doing. Children need to be taught the skills of managing their behavior and putting to right when they have offended others – it won't happen by osmosis. Langley & Hansberry (2008) state that we need to

“be as purposeful in teaching young people how to be disciplined as we are in teaching them to read and write...”.

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Recommended Resources:

Visual Script – Junior Class Visuals – Jane Langley
Coming Around to Circle Time – Robin Hromek & Teresa Bliss
Changing Behaviour in Schools – Sue Roffey
Circle Time for Emotional Literacy – Sue Roffey
Bounce Back – Helen McGrath & Toni Noble