

How restorative practice is making a
difference in schools

Debbie Atkinson, Galatea School, Sabbatical,
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Executive Summary

Purpose:

Restorative practice is not a new phenomenon and originates from many cultures including Maoritanga. In my experience restorative practice works particularly well with engaging Maori students in school, feeling understood, listened to and treated with fairness. Sharing experiences of powerful examples and evidence of this practice working well, is a large part of gathering evidence for its success.

In addition I am interested in the way that restorative practice is perceived by teachers and parents and how we can ensure that it is taken seriously and not disregarded as a “soft option”, rather than a powerful tool which encourages and teaches children to be accountable and take responsibility for mistakes.

I intend to investigate restorative practice by visiting a range of schools, which range in size, decile and regions. Through my investigation I intend to observe and discuss the use of restorative practice as a method of behaviour and relationship management.

Rationale and Background information

I have been passionate about restorative practice since first being given the opportunity to attend Margaret Thorsborne’s workshop in 2004. It gave me permission to use strategies I had long been criticised for, as a teacher who was ‘soft’ and used the ‘soft option’. Attendance at this two day workshop gave me some insight into what I had previously been doing, untrained, and gave me new skills which matched my own philosophy.

After completing the course I was fortunate to be a part of a Professional Development team implementing Restorative Practice across the school where I was working in the Far North. I, along with other staff could see immediate benefit for students whose social conditions may not necessarily support their achievement in education, both academically and socially. This was something that I had experienced as a teacher throughout my career, at this stage I was beginning to hear more stories from my colleagues about the successes they were achieving through their change in approach to relationships both in their classroom and across the school.

In my first principalship at a small, rural, two teacher school, we were able to implement this easily across our school, and included teacher aides and part time staff in the professional development. It was however heart breaking to see that this was not maintained beyond my tenure there and that the school experienced difficulty with relationships between staff, students and board members not long after I moved on to a larger school. At this time I wondered what more I could have done to embed this practice into the culture of the school so that it existed beyond my time there and was not reliant on one person continuing its use.

On implementing restorative practice at Galatea School I was fortunate to inherit a staff that were not only ready to take on restorative practice, all staff also felt as though this was an approach that fit naturally with their own collective philosophy. Use of the restorative chat became common place very quickly and was an accepted method of resolving conflict across the school.

In term 4 of 2013 Galatea School had an influx of approximately 40 students from a nearby school. We were challenged by more difficult behaviours than most staff was accustomed to, sudden larger class numbers and lower levels of student achievement. This was a challenging time for our school and while we strongly maintained the stance that restorative practice was worthwhile this was challenged by board members, parents and our community.

As a result of an increased school roll we were able to employ new staff for the first time in over four years, and while we knew that restorative practice was an important part of our school culture and used this as a basis for recruitment were aware that the professional development of new staff was important in maintaining the culture of our school.

The basis for this sabbatical research is to consider ways that parents and communities can be made more aware of the importance of restorative practice for their children's social and emotional learning, to ensure that new staff are effectively inducted and have sufficient understanding and information of the process and the background information, that teachers continue to understand restorative philosophies, that restorative practice is consistent across the school for all staff (teaching and non-teaching) and that non-teaching staff have opportunities to be involved in professional development available to teaching staff in order to ensure that restorative practice is embedded across the school and is a strong feature of the charter and curriculum documents within the school.

Methodology

The first phase of my research was to interview principals at a range of schools. I was very conscious of the time that this would take and am thankful to those principals who made the time to talk with me. Although the interview questions were the same it was important to me to be present rather than sending out a survey for completion. On finding out more about Appreciative Inquiry, this was the right way to complete my research, in that it was being done with schools, rather than to them and in this way was a restorative approach using the social discipline window. In particular it allowed me to hear more of the 'stories' which in restorative practice is immensely important.

My original thoughts were that I would spend much more time observing practice of teachers, mini-chats and playground behaviours. It soon became obvious that this was not an authentic way to collect evidence and that at times I was the only adult available for students to approach when they had a problem with minor wrong doing in the playground.

While this was effective in that I could clearly see that children were familiar with the process of the mini-chat, dealing with students you have no relationship with can be problematic and would not provide the evidence I had hoped for. It did however highlight for me the importance of building community and developing proactive strategies in order for students to have relationships with one another in order to restore relationships during times of conflict.

In some schools I was able to interview students who had been part of recent restorative meetings. These interviews were helpful in finding out how familiar students were with restorative processes and also how they felt about it, how it affected them and whether the outcomes were beneficial. In all cases students felt that teachers at their school who used restorative practice listened to them and genuinely cared about them. This enhanced their experiences within the school environment and encouraged them to do well by taking risks in a safe environment.

My original intention was to interview resistant teachers and to discuss understanding of restorative practice with board members and parent communities. It quickly became evident that interviewing resistant teachers was yet another way of 'doing restorative to them' rather than working with them. To be working in a truly restorative way this did not feel right.

Interviews with principals highlighted that there were gaps in what parents and boards of trustees understood of restorative practices. This was an area for further development in all schools, with some principals already aware of this and beginning the implementation of ideas.

In addition to investigating restorative practice in schools, I was interested in the differences and similarities of practice in the legal system.

Findings, Observations and Discussion:

My found that all schools visited have some form of restorative practice in place. The majority of schools are currently using restorative practice as a reactive tool for managing and resolving conflict. Some schools are encouraging a more proactive approach. Schools that are quite new to using restorative practice are more likely to be using proactive approaches.

All schools had some form of resistance from staff at one time or another. This was dealt with via a range of methods, both punitive and restorative.

The biggest issue schools have with maintaining restorative practice is staff change. This aligns with my own experience in my first principalship, where restorative practices were not at all evident beyond my employment and caused major relationship breakdowns which ultimately affected the school roll and caused possible closure of the school. Ensuring that

restorative practice is part of the recruitment process helps to ensure that new staff being employed are likely to be on the same page, but is not always a guarantee. Induction and effective ongoing professional development ensures that staff continues to be exposed to restorative thinking and are therefore more likely to put it into practice.

Maintaining interest and professional development over time was discussed at length. Schools are busy places with a number of initiatives underway at one time. Ensuring that keeping good restorative practice on top is a priority can be difficult during busy times. Schools which have good induction processes are more successful in maintaining the restorative environment throughout the school. Schools with a clear outline for professional development which strongly matches the charter and school curriculum document are much more likely to maintain restorative practices throughout the school and continue to grow and improve practice.

Principals are aware that not all staff are using restorative practice consistently but agree that consistency is important. Most could site at least one staff member who was resistant in some way, or defaulted to practice which principals felt was less than desirable.

In larger schools senior management are more likely to use restorative practice for managing conflict and dealing with behavioural issues. In some cases there are specific playground staff whose role it is to take the time to deal with conflict using restorative practices. This is in response to resistance from staff who consider that restorative practices take up too much time.

In most schools it is unlikely that support staff and teacher aides are a part of the professional development, due to budget constraints, unless they were employed specifically to complete this role.

All principals agreed that consistent use of restorative practice, particularly proactive steps which improved relationships between teachers and students and which built community between students are a factor in raising student achievement. Effective ways for measuring this success were discussed and it was agreed that there are so many possible factors which contribute to educational achievement that attributing achievement outcomes solely to restorative practice is impossible. Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis research into effect sizes shows that the relationships students have with their teachers provides a 0.72 rank, showing that relationships are important and have a large effect on achievement, which in turn supports that restorative practice does influence student achievement positively.

When asked what understanding parents have of restorative practice the response was varied, and in some cases was cause for thought about how this might be better promoted for parents to have an understanding of the concepts of restorative practice and also to be using some of the ideas in their parenting at home in support of the school. My own thoughts around this and planning for the future now include parent workshops which will

enhance the relationships of existing and new parents to the school. Several schools I visited have excellent transition workshops for parents and children of new entrants which I will use as a model for developing the Galatea School transition program. Furthermore the workshop attended, Parenting in Windows, which looked at the social discipline window and parenting styles is an excellent way of introducing restorative concepts to parents.

In addition to improving the understanding of the parent community some schools have been able to involve their local community and shopping centres etc. in their school initiatives ensuring that the same messages were being given throughout the community.

Whanganui is currently undergoing becoming a “restorative city” and there are overseas examples such as Hull, where this has also occurred.

PB4L and Incredible Years Teaching, which have been and are being implemented in many schools use many proactive strategies for building community and strongly resemble restorative practice in this way. Schools which are new to restorative practice are learning more proactive strategies, whereas previously the reactive process was a more likely tool to be taught in workshops. Circles which promote community and the values of the school are a priority in some schools and are now a daily or at least weekly expectation. Skills for taking circles are being promoted by local RTLB and are vital in developing community between children, to develop student-student relationships.

In order to restore relationships children must have student – student relationships, not just student – teacher relationships. At Galatea School we pride ourselves on the good relationships that we have with students and how well we know not only our own class, but others across the school. This now needs to extend beyond student – teacher relationships and for community to be fully developed by promoting and actively teaching skills which build student- student relationships.

A familiar story among colleagues at schools visited and in conversations at the RPI conference is that while teachers are able to use restorative practices with students there are few instances where teachers are restorative with one another and that teacher – teacher relationships need to be developed further for this to take place and be effective. Experiences of staff conflict being resolved using restorative practices is that there is less likely to be mutual agreement of the situation. At times one person can be made to be the sole wrong doer, with others not acknowledging their own responsibilities and contributions to a situation. In staff conflict, as with all conflict, there is more than one perspective. Adult conflict is much more complex, getting the story much more difficult, and achieving positive outcomes where all parties are able to move forward positively, much more one sided.

In new work, which Margaret Thorsborne is completing with Sue Attrill and Bev Turner, they are developing strategies for developing readiness to restorative practice tool. This is in response to schools not being able to fully implement restorative practice because of

differing viewpoints of senior management, turnover of leaders resulting in restorative practice not being fully implemented or reaching its full potential, and high levels of resistance which have affected the implementation across a school. This tool will be helpful not only in identifying readiness but also for reviewing and auditing where a school is at and in planning for further development or restorative practices throughout a school.

All schools I visited had some form of values program in place. Cornerstone Values, Covey's 8 Habits, Fish Philosophy and Positive Behaviour for Learning were all evident across the schools in which they were implemented. What is of extreme importance in the success of these values programs is consistent use by all staff across the school. Schools which use repetition are more successful. In effect when teachers and students use a script they are able to reach success more quickly. This resembles the scripts used in restorative practice for the chat and conferences. In order to use new strategies effectively, particularly for students whose social conditions do not necessarily support their achievement in education, having these tools increases their confidence and allows them to participate fully, show respect and follow the value system of their school. Evidence gathered showed that it did not matter which values program was in place, but that those schools which actively supported their students to succeed in the program they were using were the most successful in gaining consistency.

Gaining more understanding of restorative justice as opposed to restorative practice has helped me in developing a bigger picture of how the skills learnt through restorative practice help students in life and has also developed my own thinking about where I sit with restorative processes when it comes to more serious offending, in effect testing whether it is only appropriate under some circumstances.

Restorative justice in the legal system, works by reducing reoffending by 20% whereas other more punitive approaches without rehabilitation, and often even with rehabilitation, do not. Offenders who are able to gain insight into the effects of their offending on others are much more likely not to reoffend. Again, in the justice system this can be seen as the 'soft option' by others. Care does indeed need to be taken that the process does not cause further harm to victims. When evidence clearly points to higher reductions of reoffending than other forms of punishment there is very obvious merit in its use.

As a society we have difficulty coming to terms with how restorative justice can work for serious crimes which have widespread victims and serious harm to others. In these cases the future safety of others is vital and our present system ensures that this happens through incarceration. The role of restorative processes in these cases is still relevant and is based around the needs of the victim. When used in a way which does not benefit the offender, through reduction of sentence, and when completed under genuine circumstances evidence shows that it is highly useful in helping victims find the answers they need to recondition following the offense. By hearing the story that is important to them in understanding the

circumstances and allowing them to reach a place where they are able to continue their lives in a meaningful way. This is personal to each and every victim and their own story, and should provide what they need to allow them to move on. Whether this is an apology, an explanation or assurance, or the need to see the offender in a way that they are no longer paralysed by them and the crime, the purpose is to be able to reach a point where they are able to cope and move on with their lives in meaningful ways. Research shows that for victims this is the most important part of the process. It must be noted that being able to move on in meaningful ways does not, nor should it, imply forgiveness of the crime committed.

In regards to how this relates to schools, I considered stories of my own, in which parents of children who have been either the victim or the wrong doer in minor incidents have wanted to see more happen. This is likely due to their own experiences and philosophies on relationships. Parents in New Zealand schools often demand that the wrong doer should be named and shamed, stood down or punished in ways that are irrelevant to the wrong doing.

As a professional using restorative processes with children who have been involved in incidents, the victim is often very satisfied with the outcome and happy to receive an apology and an assurance that the behaviour will stop immediately and not happen again. Their satisfaction is strongly related to the faith in the process and that this will occur. Their story is the one that matters. Helping parents to understand that the incident has been dealt with and finished is often the biggest challenge in completing the process. As with the justice system, people 'outside of the story' often don't understand how a victim can move on from horrific crimes if they haven't been a part of the restorative process and heard the story.

Implications

The implications of my research for Galatea School have been, to ensure that parent information and understanding is an important part of the schools process. Early workshops which allow parents to learn alongside staff might ensure greater support of restorative practice and understanding of the ways they work to develop social and emotional intelligence. Ensuring that parent information and understanding of the processes and philosophies is a next step for Galatea School. We are in the beginning phases of running parent information sessions for new parents.

In examining the way we do things at Galatea School, and in considering how we work with parents and students, we have become more aware of the need for stronger parent and student voice in relation to student well-being. We have introduced well-being interviews and exit interviews for students and parents to ensure that what we think we are doing well is considered so by our community.

Developing skills for managing staff conflict is beneficial in ensuring that staff situations are better managed and have positive outcomes for all. Since my sabbatical leave I have developed a Stress Management and Wellbeing procedure, which sits alongside concerns and complaints procedures, to ensure that staff is aware of the early steps to avoid conflict and to develop understanding of restorative processes prior to issues arising. I now have a much stronger focus on developing teacher – teacher relationships and place much more importance on small issues being dealt with promptly and taken directly to the source. This emphasis is evident in the newly developed procedures.

Discussion, resources and regular feedback sessions are now embedded in Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings at Galatea School to ensure that proactive strategies are a focus for teachers. Explicit links between growth mind-set research and restorative practice will enhance educational outcomes for students. Introducing proactive approaches which work effectively alongside the reactive strategies of restorative chats, classroom conferences and community conferences are an integral part of what needs to be happening in schools for there to be less conflict and for students to develop their social and emotional intelligence. Introducing research and evidence as a part of regular and ongoing professional development is essential for maintaining restorative approaches across a school.

Staff ownership of a schools process is important for consistent implementation and use. Ensuring that there is flexibility within the process and that the process is working with, and maintains the restorative philosophy is essential. A strong understanding of the social discipline window and the compass of shame must be a part of professional development and induction of staff in order for restorative practices to be embedded. As a result staff at Galatea School has used recent professional development reading and discussion to develop a Galatea School Restorative Practice document, which will be used as part of staff induction and will be a strong feature of the Galatea School Charter and curriculum documents.

Development of a Galatea School Restorative Practice document which features in the Charter will ensure greater consistency of practice throughout the school. Consistency across the school charter and curriculum will also help to ensure this, as mentioned above.

Conclusions

In conclusion my own understanding of affect script psychology and the ways that guilt and shame affect our relationships, along with the social discipline window and compass of shame, will be used to develop teacher understanding of restorative practice and the ways it builds the human emotional system.

My belief that consistency of practice across a school, and preferably across a community, helps to ensure that restorative practice is well embedded and has the greatest impact, remains strong. Students who have relationships that can be restored between themselves

and with teachers and other adults are more likely to perform well and achieve in education and are less likely to be involved in criminal offending against others later in life.

Building community is vital in developing relationships. Without those relationships we are unable to restore in times of conflict and conflict is more likely where relationships do not exist. Teachers' understanding of the need for students to build relationships with one another in a variety of ways through deliberate daily tasks is essential.

Furthermore, developing and maintaining restorative practice requires deliberate professional development and planning to ensure that it is embedded in the culture of the school and is not reliant on a single staff member or a small group of staff members which may change over time.

In addition it is important that parents understand how restorative processes help their children develop socially and emotionally. Developing parent understanding will help to embed this in the culture and community of the school.

Restorative practices continue to be a positive way of managing behaviour and conflict in a variety of settings. These can only be enhanced with further proactive methods, a consistent and embedded approach, understanding of the purpose and valuing the process and positive outcomes.

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