

Restorative practices in New Zealand schools 2011

This summarises findings of a study of ten schools which had adopted restorative practices. It included two primary schools, one intermediate and seven secondary. Two of the secondary schools were integrated and the rest were state schools. A case study method was used, involving visits to the schools and discussions with a wide range of people, including teachers, students, leaders and the community.

Most of the schools in this study previously had high levels of suspensions and ran assertive models of discipline. Some had students involved in specific high-profile incidents that triggered the need for change. Some of the schools had gained a poor reputation because of their problems and were difficult, sometimes dangerous places. Many were looking for ways to change.

For some, the shift to restorative practices involved a 'revelatory moment', usually after attending a training seminar, and a strong decision to put the practices into effect. However, it is a big step from that kind of moment to implementing a whole school restorative approach.

Two elements were found to be most important in effective implementation: good leadership and excellent systems to support teachers, students and senior staff. A variety of leadership models were evident in the schools. In most cases, the principal handed over implementation to, or shared it with, senior staff. Models ranged from one deputy with full responsibility, to small teams of senior and guidance staff, to the whole senior staff being engaged in ongoing restorative work. In some cases the principal became more divorced from the implementation, and better outcomes were noted when principals remained engaged. One role of the school leader is to articulate the philosophy of change, and this proved quite important to best practice.

In interviews, a variety of views were given about whether restorative systems could become self-sustaining, but most leaders thought that constant work was needed to maintain the operational efficacy of the policy. The main reason for this was the additional investment needed by all parties in effectively resolving disputes. There is also ongoing additional work in educating the school community and other stakeholders (such as the police and social agencies) about restorative approaches. The resource cost of these elements were met by schools in a range of ways, and was partially offset by the effects of the approach in reducing behaviour-related problems.

The leadership role therefore embraced two separate domains: practical skills and support, and values and beliefs. Both elements needed to be addressed in implementing restorative practices.

The schools had diverse views about what restorative justice meant in the school context. These ranged from those who saw the practices as a set of skills for improving and managing behaviour, to those with a wide vision of a fair and just society. Most were attracted by the shift from punitive to restorative approaches.

Implementation involved a number of factors from planning to new system development, professional development, strategic and policy changes and community education. A variety of different models were evident, with some core differences between schools in relation to the model chosen, whether it was voluntary or compulsory for staff and whether the school aspired to be completely restorative, or saw the approach as an adjunct to more assertive methods.

A range of models are described in the report. They each contain an element of intervention within the classroom, followed by a hierarchy of other practices to support teachers and deal effectively with the problem. Some schools run a hybrid model where either punishment or restoration may be used, and some put limits on which issues can be dealt with restoratively, with certain serious incidents excluded.

Frequent elements include a classroom 'minichat', support from senior staff, a restorative room or restorative exercise, followed by escalation to a full conference if required. Some models also have part or whole class conferences to resolve specific issues.

Teachers interviewed for this study strongly supported restorative practices, especially in the schools that had implemented a whole-school approach. They noted that the new practices lead to better and calmer classrooms, and more focus on learning. If there are incidents, teachers follow specific practices and feel supported by senior staff. Hierarchies are reduced and teachers no longer have to shout or get angry with their students. By giving up the power of the top-down approach, they reap the rewards of better relationships. Top quality professional development inspires teachers and provides them with the skills they need to be restorative.

Some resistance was reported by some teachers to restorative practices. This is most evident in the hybrid schools (using restorative and punitive methods), where teachers are not necessarily required to change their practices. Fewer benefits accrue to the teachers in these schools. The whole-school restorative context provides the most effective structure, because teachers know that all other teachers are using the same processes.

School leaders use a range of methods to engage teachers in restorative practices. There is a need for ongoing professional development to cement and extend the practices so as to improve student learning. At heart, the new approaches change what it is to be a teacher. The rewards of the new system are great, but they are difficult to implement and sustain. Teachers may find their own levels of empathy and relationship-building are enhanced.

Support from the boards of trustees is crucial, because of their role in school planning and policy and in the discipline committee. Board members report being strongly supportive of the change, which one called 'intuitive'. This support is not surprising, because most board members are parents and their children benefit from the better relationships within the school. Some BOT members recounted stories of the effects on their own children.

About half of the schools had put restorative practices as a strategic goal in the charter, and others had placed it in teacher's handbooks and other places. Some of the schools undertook internal reviews, while others looked to ERO and Ministry reporting of outcomes for their indicators of success.

The restorative schools worked with the school community in a range of ways. Some deliberately tried to educate parents and the wider community, while others thought only those who came into contact with the restorative system need to know about it. The level of influence of the schools on local agencies, other schools and the wider community was relatively minor, considering the wide changes occurring within the schools themselves.

We interviewed a number of students who had been through restorative processes. Many of them would no longer have been in their schools under prior regimes. The students like restorative approaches but do not find them easy. The older students recognise the extent to which the systems have helped them. Some student stories are reproduced in the report.

All of the schools are reported as calmer places to be. They are settled, smooth, friendly, engaging and focussed on learning. Some are "lovely". The core reason for this is the good relationships that exist between staff and students. Many descriptions of the schools are

included in the report. Often the staff attributed the changes to a range of factors, such as peer mediators, fewer rules, engaging classrooms, no 'blaming' and far fewer incidents, especially serious ones.

For those schools which have implemented a whole school model successfully, there is a huge reduction in stand-downs and suspensions. The figures are clear and remarkable. Those using a hybrid system still tend to rely quite heavily on suspensions, and the outcomes are less clear. Reaching and remaining at zero suspensions is quite possible in well-run restorative schools, but not all the schools in this study aspire to that. Incidents in schools decline markedly in restorative systems, and most problems are dealt with increasingly at the lowest level (usually in the classroom). Overall, these schools have reduced their suspension rates by two-thirds.

Suspension Rates Pre- and Post RP Work	Baseline Suspension Rate (Three year ave prior to RP)	RP Suspension Rate Av since implementation	% Reduction in Suspensions	Number of years doing RP work
SI primary	8.3	2.2	74%	5.5
NI primary	3.7	4	-9%	3.5
All NZ Primary Schools	1 (2004-5)	1 (2009-10)	-0.02%	n/a
SI secondary	23	9.4	59%	3.5
NI integrated	10	0	100%	0.5
City secondary	33.7	16.8	50%	8.5
Rural secondary	33	0.4	99%	5.5
Regional secondary	22.3	7.4	67%	3.5
SI integrated	14.3	3.1	78%	4.5
Provincial secondary	28.3	14.7	48%	1.5
All NZ Secondary Schools	14 (2004-5)	14 (2009-10)	0%	n/a
SI Intermediate	4.7	2.9	39%	3.5
All NZ Intermediate Schools	6.5 (2004-5)	7 (2009-10)	-8%	n/a
Average Reduction in Suspensions Across the Ten Schools			60.50%	

Figure 1. Reduction in suspension rates, 10 restorative schools. compared to overall changes in school sector.

Bullying, in the words of one principal, is 'tailor-made' for resolution within restorative systems. In restorative practices, bullies are required to account for themselves and for the harm they have caused by their actions. They are often given good support to change. As well, children learn good mediation and dispute resolution approaches in the best restorative schools, and no longer tolerate bullies. A happier, calmer and friendlier school environment repels bullies.

Restorative practices tend to increase the engagement of students at school, and especially at-risk students. They may create a good context for learning, with quiet and friendly classrooms and good relationships between students and teachers. In some of the schools in this study, the effects on achievement have been significant.

This is shown below in Figure 2.

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Baseline Rate*	RP rate**	% Change in Completion in L2+	Years in RP	Av Change in L2+ per year
SI secondary	34%	22%	43%	54%	58%	72%	33%	62%	87.3%	3	29.1%
NI integrated	88%	64%	78%	74%	80%	80%	78%	n/a	n/a	0	
City secondary	47%	55%	66%	72%	78%	81%	47%	71%	49.7%	5	9.9%
Rural secondary	51%	42%	56%	73%	73%	66%	51%	62%	20.8%	5	4.2%
Regional secondary	55%	49%	60%	52%	63%	63%	53%	63%	17.6%	2	8.8%
SI integrated	61%	62%	65%	65%	78%	82%	61%	72%	17.9%	4	4.5%
Provincial secondary	47%	47%	47%	63%	58%	60%	56%	60%	8.1%	1	8.1%
All NZ Secondary	57%	59%	64%	70%	72%	74%	57%	68%	18.3%	5	3.7%
									Average Improvement in L2+ Leavers per year in the RP sample		10.8%

*Average in three years prior to implementation

**Average in years since RP implementation

Notes: post 2005 NCEA data is not comparable to pre 2005 data. City Secondary and Rural Secondary baseline period should ideally include years prior to 2005, but the data does not allow this. The 2005 year has been taken as the baseline. The National baseline period is also taken as 2005. This data uses MOE data rules rather than NZQA rules.

Table 2. Achievement rates (Leavers with NCEA 2+) pre- and post restorative policies

Perhaps the best way to characterise the relationship between restorative practices and academic achievement is that the improved school environment enhances learning opportunities for all, but that more at-risk students need additional assistance to benefit academically from the improved context.

The conclusion to the report discusses the factors that lead to successful implementation of restorative practices, including a clear philosophy, good leadership supporting values and beliefs as well as systems and resources, professional development, a system that works for all, support for teachers and the implementation leaders, and ongoing commitment to improvement of practice.

The lack of restorative approaches in teacher education is discussed. Only one College of Education offers a course in restorative practices to trainee teachers, which hinders implementation in schools. Finally, the question of the resources needed for effective implementation is briefly considered.

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