



## Implementing Restorative Practices in your school: *Some thoughts for Leaders*

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Bringing any new innovation to life in a school and making it stick (sustainable) is a massive task. Cultural change in organisations is a field in its own right and is the subject of countless books and papers.

If you are a leader considering implementing restorative justice practices, have no illusions - you are in for a very bumpy, but ultimately rewarding journey. Make no mistake; the change you will be asking some of your colleagues, parents and students in your school to make in their thinking about what should happen when one person's behaviour harms another person is enormous. If you are like me, you will also find some of your own core beliefs about behaviour management challenged. Blood and Thorsborne sum things up well by saying:

*Moving from a punitive rule based discipline system to a system underpinned by relational values requires a change in the hearts and minds of practitioners, students, their parents and the wider community. Without understanding the enormity of this task a few good people in each school will be working very hard to make a difference, with limited impact.*  
(2006:1)

For many, the principles and philosophies underpinning a restorative headset may involve a fundamental paradigm shift. For someone to shift their paradigm, they need to become painfully aware that their existing

paradigm just isn't working any more. In other words, their world needs to be rocked.

For me, this came as a young teacher, moving into leadership, I was, all of a sudden in a position where I had the power to suspend students. *What power!* At this time I was working with tricky students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a young, male, cocky, middle-class and largely naïve teacher, I thought *the problem* was that schools weren't suspending kids often enough. In other words, leaders in schools were just *too soft!* So I suspended kids – plenty of them, with incredible efficiency.

Nothing changed.

The kids got trickier, and because most of these suspensions were for fighting, bullying, and assaults (conflict), the suspensions just further trashed already strained relationships between kids. The emotional fabric of the school community was also a casualty, as relationships between staff and parents of our tricky kids came apart at the seams. My world was rocking as the metaphorical walls tumbled down around my ears. What I thought *should* work to keep schools safe, orderly and productive was simply not working, in fact, the more punitive we became, the more conflict and upset we had to deal with. The fights got more frequent, more vicious, and teachers saw more unrest in classrooms.

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Relationships in our school were falling apart under a punitive regime that was more concerned with who did what and how long kids should be suspended. In our *tunnel vision* approach to trying to *tighten* a behaviour management policy to a point that consequences were always prescribed and consequences consistently meted out (consistency - what a joke by the way), the keystone of community had been forgotten. Of course, this keystone was relationships.

In these hugely unsettling experiences where we discover that what we previously believed was *the right thing* is now in fact, *the wrong thing*. Many of us prefer to continue to do the wrong thing well, rather than doing the right thing poorly!

The good news is that you are not alone! Many have walked the restorative road before you and have been kind enough to share their stories and research about the challenges of implementing Restorative Practices in books and articles. It is not my intention here to give detailed guidance on the *ins and outs* of successfully implementing Restorative Practices; I will however give some key tips from my experiences and point you in the direction of some very good books and articles on the subject.

**Remember – there is no one pure model of Restorative Practices in schools.**

If you are looking for a specific model or prescriptive set of approaches to emulate in your school, my advice is *stop looking*.

Even though there will be approaches you have seen or heard about in other schools that may suit your context, looking for a model of RP's to *carbon copy* may be a fruitless exercise in the long run.

Terry O'Connell says that Restorative Practices find their own level in schools. The

eventual form that Restorative Practices take in any school will be a result of that school's unique situation and context. Restorative approaches need to be responsive to the particular needs of the school community they serve. No one size fits all and needs will be different in different contexts. Howard Zehr tells us that Restorative Justice is *a compass, not a map*.

Restorative Justice points us in a direction but does not specify exactly how things should be done. What schools do need to stay true to are the restorative values of:

- Those in authority doing things 'with' people, opposed to doing things 'to' them, 'for' them or failing to do anything at all
- Creating, valuing and protecting relationships above all else,
- Empowering those affected by harmful behaviour to be key stakeholders in the process of moving forward,
- Addressing misbehaviour in ways that are supportive of relationships, not damaging to them,
- Putting people and relationships before rules,
- Ensuring that responses to wrongdoing aim to do no further harm to those involved (those harmed and those responsible for the harm).

**Use Data Strategically**

*If you change the stories, you will change the culture.*

Restorative justice is about creating safe spaces and opportunities to listen and respond to stories of harm (Morrison 2007:156). It seems serendipitous that a critical part of bringing people on board to a restorative way of doing things involves a

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commitment to gathering and telling the stories that are made as people in schools give restorative approaches a go in their day to day interactions with students. These stories can be captured through strategic use of data (quantitative and qualitative). So start collecting stories **right now**. Collect stories about the student who one day showed a new understanding about other people when asked restorative questions. Save the stories about the class conference where a class who were falling apart spoke passionately and insightfully about what they thought about an incident or a situation or when the kids who normally quietly endured the silly behaviours of a few finally spoke up and spoke together against what was happening to the learning environment in their room.

It might be a story about the parent who suddenly saw a different side to a student who had been conflicting with their child and softened in their views given the insight a restorative conference has given them about that child.

*If you change the stories, you will change the culture.*

Helping staff to identify and begin to challenge their existing paradigms around discipline involves the ability of a school to ask itself some very tough questions about the effectiveness of traditional disciplinary processes. For many schools, it is already apparent that traditional consequences to student misconduct, like suspension and exclusion, do little to change the behaviour of students or to make schools safer and more orderly places. It is best that we respectfully confront one another with these *inescapable truths* and what this means for our school?

Another useful approach is simply asking students and parents about their perceptions of the school's current approaches to

discipline, particularly in regards to addressing conflict among students. This typically takes the form of surveys. And just like in restorative conferencing, the quality of the answers will reflect the quality of the questions you ask your community. If you want change, you must be brave. If you want honest feedback, bring students and parents on board in designing these surveys. It is wise to make sure these surveys can be administered again after one year, and again after that to track any shifts in perceptions that may be attributable to the implementation of Restorative Practices.

If possible, before implementing restorative approaches, gather baseline data on suspensions, class to office referrals, the types of incidents (e.g. fights between students) -anything that you are hoping to influence through implementing of Restorative Practices.

Many schools develop an *action research* framework by asking themselves a very simple question, for example: "will implementing Restorative Conferencing to address student conflict reduce the number of physical fights in our school over the course of a school year?" My advice here is to take Stephen Covey's guidance and *begin with the end in mind*. Be clear about what you want to measure and compare against after a period of time so you can tell the stories, in time, about what Restorative Practices changed in your school.

**Leaders lead the implementation from the front.**

Thorsborne and Blood (2006:1) make the very important point that in implementing Restorative Practices, school leaders sometimes fail to use the relational approaches with their own staff. In their zeal to see Restorative Justice embedded, school leaders may use coercion

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and bully-styled tactics to push staff to change their practice to become more relational and restorative! A restorative mode of leadership requires leaders working *with* staff in the same spirit that they want staff to work in with students.

Restorative schools simply don't happen in the absence of restorative leadership.

The school's leadership, with the Principal at the front, must embrace and model restorative approaches in their work with students and in their management of staff.

Principals must be trained conference facilitators and need to be out there running conferences. If you are a Principal reading this, I'm glad you are reading this! The signs are positive already. Your staff are watching your every movement to gauge your level of investment in Restorative Practices, so take my word for it, you won't achieve a restorative school through delegation. Build the Restorative Practices core team around yourself and the passionate advocate who brought Restorative Practices to your attention. If you are not prepared to do this, may I suggest you leave Restorative Practices to the truly committed? Perhaps find another vehicle to create a more positive and relational school culture.

Restorative values must be lived by those leading the implementation. I have seen many leaders attempt to *delegate* the implementation of Restorative Practices to others in the school and you guessed it, the new practices haven't taken hold in any meaningful way. It is a tragedy when such a potentially powerful way of doing things is passed over because leadership fail to go beyond paying lip service to it.

*In every school there is a hidden curriculum, which is about the way people treat each other, how teachers treat kids, how kids treat kids ... (Lickona 1994)*

### **Support, support, support, oh and support!**

Marshall, Shaw and Freeman tell us that Restorative Practices require teachers to redefine their role in behaviour management to "relationship management" and that teachers need time and support to grapple with questions about the impact of punishment and potential alternatives based on a restorative philosophy. They remind us that teachers require understanding and time to practice and refine new skills and to reflect upon their own style. This occurs best in an environment that is a challenging yet supportive – in other words, high control / high support (see the social control window). *"The onus is also on school systems to ensure that teachers have access to substantial professional development that allows for progressive skill development with the aim that teachers will be able to confidently apply and model effective relationship management skills"* (2002:7).

Experience showed me the importance of supporting colleagues, even when I didn't agree with what they wanted to *do to* a student. There were many occasions when an angry colleague *wanted blood* from a student and I believed a restorative conference would deliver the best outcomes. On these occasions I followed my colleague's preferred option but negotiated for a restorative conference (perhaps after a suspension). If I had not supported my colleagues in these circumstances, my relationship with them would have taken a blow and with it may have gone any chance of them coming around to a more restorative approach in the longer run. I sometimes lost battles to win the war. Some of the colleagues I supported

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in this way ended up being the school's biggest advocates for Restorative Practices.

What this taught me was that people ultimately engage in *something new* through their relationships with those they trust who are already doing the *new* thing. If these relationships are damaged, the opportunity to ethically influence others is significantly reduced.

### **Commit to ongoing professional learning and for heaven's sake do some reading!**

To finish up, painfully aware that there is so much more I would like to share about implementing Restorative Practices in schools, I ask you to tap into the wealth of knowledge out there about Restorative work in schools. I have lost count of the books, articles, videos, PowerPoint presentations on the web, old school VHS videos, DVD's, downloaded YouTube clips and documentaries I've devoured over the years. I've been a Restorative Junkie! Not everyone will be as obsessive as I've been, and nor should they be. What I am saying is that you need to do a fair bit of reading.

Remember, just doing restorative work well in your school is not enough. You must be a salesperson for Restorative Practices. To do this, you need to be the well-read expert in your school. You will sift and sort through what's out there and choose the best articles and clips for your staff.

If you have a passion for the possibilities of safer schools and more connected communities, let this passion stir you to embark upon your own learning journey into this joyous and hopeful field.

When you come across a really good resource, share it with others, whatever you do, don't keep it to yourself. Sharing it will

increase your capacity to learn more as well as benefiting the recipient. If I may point you in a specific direction in your reading, let this be toward John Braithwaite's model of Responsive Regulation (Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation 2002). It answered many burning questions I had and helped me reconcile many issues around how Restorative Practices fit into a broader picture of responses to wrongdoing.

Read all you can get your hands on in regards to sustainable implementation of RP's in schools. Anything written by Marg Thorsborne, David Vinegrad and Peta Blood is a great place to begin.

Then of course, there's my little books: "Working Restoratively in Schools" and "The Grab and Go Circle Time Kit for Teaching Restorative Behaviour".

### **Stay True to your values**

A commitment to Restorative Practices involves a deep commitment to the nitty-gritty work of building a more peaceful world. In a political climate where politicians encourage people to fear one another to gain votes, those who stand for reparation based justice face a challenge. **Are you up to it?**

*Cowardice asks the question: is it safe?  
Expediency asks the question: is it popular?  
But conscience asks the question: Is it right?  
And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular – but one must take it because it's right.*

*Martin Luther King (1968) cited in "Restoring Safe School Communities" (Morrison, 2007)*

*All the best.*

*Bill*

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