

# Restorative Practices in Australian Schools: Changing Relationships, Changing Culture

GARY SHAW

*The application of restorative justice principles and practices in schools is beginning to consolidate as an area of educational interest and reform. Although there is enthusiastic support for a philosophy that focuses on problem solving and repair of damaged relationships following an incident or crime, this support is tempered by hesitation about how restorative justice works, what impact it may have on current approaches, and how it is measured. This article presents the findings of a study conducted in eighteen Australian schools in 2004 and considers how such an approach may contribute to school culture change and to broader goals associated with producing a more civil society.*

How to manage and address conflicts in schools continues to challenge educators all over the world. The literature in this field is huge, as the range of responses grows to meet demand, yet the search for solutions continues as new programs, theories, and research enter the market. What do school administrators do to manage threatening and disruptive behavior? How do you prevent bullying? What are the best ways to develop safe, supportive, and civil learning environments?

During recent years restorative justice has become an area of interest for addressing incidents in many Australian schools across all state and territory educational jurisdictions (Blood and Thorsborne, 2005). This article presents the findings from a study on the use of restorative justice practices in schools involved in a Pilot Community Conferencing and Restorative Practices program in Victorian schools during the years 2002–2004.

## Why Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice has its conceptual origins within the criminal justice arena and is based on a belief that crime is fundamentally a violation of people and interpersonal relationships. Such violations do harm to victim(s), offender(s), and others in the community and, therefore, create obligations and liabilities that need to be repaired (Zehr and Mika, 1997).

Braithwaite and Strang (2001) suggest that it is values that distinguish restorative justice from other justice systems. In simple terms, they claim that restorative justice is about healing rather than hurting through punishment. The process is typically a conference that brings together the affected parties to look at how to put things right. Other proponents argue that restorative justice has emerged as an alternative approach to justice as a result of the failures in the criminal justice system (Bazemore and Walgrave, 1999). In this sense, restorative justice is also promoted as informal, communitarian, and victim-centered (Strang, 2002).

In schools, restorative justice is more commonly referred to as *restorative measures* or *restorative practices* and may be represented by a broad suite of prevention and intervention strategies aimed to address discipline, well-being, and educational objectives. The notions of relationship repair and offender accountability have particular appeal in schools, where issues of order, justice, and punishment are closely linked to social relationships and educational inclusion.

## The Situation in Victorian Schools

Victoria has more than two thousand three hundred government and nongovernment schools. There is general recognition that positive relationships, coupled with challenging and engaging curriculum, are at the center of safe and supportive school environments. Although relevant legislation regarding student attendance, leaving age, code of conduct, mandatory reporting, and so on, governs educational standards in relation to behavior, schools in Victoria are relatively autonomous in their choice of welfare and behavior management responses. This autonomy has led to a wide range of approaches and, therefore, a wide disparity in student management practices, including the use of suspension and expulsion.

In April 2002, the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T), in collaboration with the Catholic Education Office Melbourne

(CEOM), initiated an investigation into restorative practice and community conferencing in Victorian schools. Up to three days of professional training in the theory and use of restorative practices were provided to all participants as part of a pilot program.

The Australian Youth Research Centre (AYRC) conducted an evaluation of the establishment and preliminary use of restorative practice during 2002. An evaluation report and literature review were presented in December of that year. Schools involved in this first phase of the pilot provided promising reports on the use of restorative approaches. An impression was formed that such approaches could be effective in managing incidents and problematic behavior in schools. A preliminary evaluation, however, raised questions about the sustainability of restorative practice as a strategy and was unable to provide a proper impact study due to limited time available to schools to report on their progress. During 2003 the pilot program entered a second and more informal phase. Funding for further support stalled until late in 2003, affecting the schools' capacity to remain connected to the program. Local activity continued in some schools with the aid of DE&T regional staff and staff from the CEOM.

### The 2004 Study

In 2004 interview and survey data were collected from eighteen primary and secondary schools, six of which had been involved in the pilot program from 2002 (Stokes and Shaw, 2005). The key questions for this study focused on the conditions in which restorative practices were implemented in schools. The logic of restorative practices as a social intervention was also investigated. In other words, we examined what underlying assumptions and rationale were used to support the use of such a social intervention, and in what way these related to intended outcomes.

Many participants in this study indicated that their schools were already using strategies that complemented restorative approaches before embarking on the more formalized introduction of restorative practices. Pastoral care, citizenship education, peer mediation, and circle time were cited as examples. At the same time a range of other social interventions, such as positive discipline, assertiveness training, and control theory, were also evident.

Along with the growing body of evidence pointing to the importance of relational learning and to configuring schools as learning communities,

the case for restorative practices was seen as timely and appropriate. The rationale for introducing restorative practices was different for each school, but essentially each was searching for ways to improve behavior management outcomes and the quality of relationships.

### How Restorative Practices Were Implemented

The introduction of restorative practices was handled in different ways depending on the nature of existing well-being and behavior management practices, the involvement and support of school leadership, and the understanding program designers had about the intervention. Restorative justice theory, used to underpin restorative practices, appears simple on the surface but can be complex, particularly in terms of what constitutes healing and community involvement. The literature also points to the potential of restorative justice to critique existing approaches to student discipline, challenging the plausibility and effectiveness of punishments (Roche, 2003).

For a number of schools, restorative practices were best represented by conferencing strategies, such as informal miniconferencing among a small number of people, or classroom circle conferences, or a formal community conference that could involve a large number of people. Such conferences were typically guided by a script using an inquiry-based approach that focused on hearing the stories of victim(s) or offender(s), identification of harm, and the development of a collective agreement. A couple of schools used community conferences as a way to reduce school exclusions and to retain or reintegrate students who had been involved in more serious incidents that might otherwise have resulted in expulsion.

Other schools incorporated restorative practices within a broader framework of relationship management and social skill development. This approach typically featured a continuum of prevention and intervention strategies in which restorative practices were central to engaging students, and as important, were used by teachers in solving their own conflicts. For example, participants at Regional Secondary College embraced restorative justice as a key school change strategy to move away from punishment-based approaches. Participants pointed to increasing pressures for them to address an array of challenging student behaviors at a time when school administrators are encouraged to retain students for longer and to play a stronger role in student well-being. Achieving balance between their educational and welfare responsibilities and the maintenance of discipline and order represented a significant challenge.

## The Impact of Restorative Practices

Restorative values and principles, such as healing over hurting and participation and reintegration, had widespread endorsement from participants in the study. The findings suggest that restorative practices can be an effective process for repairing relationships, acknowledging consequences of behavior, and solving disputes.

Participants also noted that restorative practices provided an opportunity to teach for transformation. In other words, they provided a formal way to teach about the ethics and ideals of justice, citizenship, and positive relationships. The experience suggests that restorative practices can provide students with important opportunities to understand the impact of their behavior on others and promote accountability within a community or collective context. According to participants, the best environment for such transformation is one in which notions of democracy, student voice, and participation are consistent or aspirational features of school practice.

At Alternative Primary School, a school for emotionally and socially disturbed young people, the initiative focused on the use of restorative language and circles. Emphasis was placed on teacher modeling of restorative behaviors, and teachers were encouraged to look at every student wrongdoing as a teaching opportunity. One teacher commented, "Restorative practices have been an incredible success story. The challenging behaviors and presenting characteristics of the student cohort has not changed. The records for the time-out room (used for violent kids) have shown a dramatic change. This term there has been none, and in the corresponding time last year there would have been three incidents a day." There was also evidence that restorative practices opened up opportunities for teachers to support students' emotional needs more confidently and to engage in problem-solving conversations. According to respondents, the use of problem-solving questions helped improve behavior management. It was suggested that questions that promoted discussion about consequences and personal reflections had the potential to trigger empathy and remorse.

For some teachers and administrators, the use of restorative practices represented a fundamental shift in thinking about school justice and discipline. The application of restorative practices may threaten some teachers with a perceived loss of power and control, particularly within frameworks that involve compliance with school rules regulated by punishment regimes and the conferred power of teachers (Karp and Breslin, 2001). However, the experience of participants suggested that punishments based

on a high-control, low-support paradigm are less effective in changing negative behavior. The premise put forth by Wachtel (1999) that people are happier when those in authority do things *with* them rather than *to* them or *for* them resonated with participants.

Restorative practices were appealing to participants because of the potential to build coherence between a school's educative purpose and its discipline and punishment regimes. However, high ideals, such as "building communities of care" around participants, using such practices as community conferencing, require strong administrative support, collective will, and time. For example, it was reported by the Assistant Principal from Rural A Secondary College that when under pressure some teachers were unable or unwilling to use restorative practices, resulting in the use of contrary measures or passing problem students on to senior staff: "Past practices often meant that staff would pass problems on to Year Level Coordinators or the Assistant Principal. This has changed to a degree, but for some staff it is still too difficult. The age of staff (older) is one factor, as they are grumpier and less tolerant. The time of the day and time of the year can also influence whether staff have time and the energy to work things through. Sometimes it is just more convenient to give the problem to someone else."

A further issue raised was the personal style of the teachers. The nature of relationships between staff and students was noted throughout the interviews. Restorative practices involve participants in collective problem solving, and it can be problematic when teachers are unable to engage students in such a process. The Assistant Principal from Peninsula Secondary College summed it up this way: "There can be problems if the staff member is part of the issue. They may be good teachers but they don't relate well to kids. They must be supported and involved in deciding solutions." The role between teacher and student is now characterized in relational terms, leading to school practice to focus more explicitly on student engagement and participation in an inquiry-based learning environment in the hope of improving learning outcomes (DE&T, 2006).

## Challenges and Opportunities

There is sufficient support and enthusiasm for restorative practices to suggest that this approach will continue to grow and develop. The key challenge for participants was therefore to look for ways to embed restorative practices cohesively within a school policy and practice framework, where they may have been viewed as a marginal activity or in opposition to



existing practice. For a number of schools this integration meant significant culture change.

The critical underlying strategy for sustainability is a whole-school approach. A number of promising whole-school approaches have developed over the last few years, among them those of Wachtel (1999), Morrison (2005), and Blood and Thorsborne (2005). Enabling factors within such an approach are characterized by supportive and productive leadership, a climate of professional learning, and congruence with policy and practice. Similarly, the participation and role of students and parents in any whole-school change are important but are currently less well developed. Sustainability in study schools was enhanced when restorative practices complemented other student-centered strategies, such as pastoral care, social skills programs, or middle years' initiatives.

A major threat to sustainability is the pressure of time to build a whole-school approach. It was demonstrated that between one and four years were required for schools to reach expected benefits. Sustainability was strengthened when schools saw themselves as part of a collective or cluster. Network meetings and regional facilitators with some understanding and knowledge of restorative practices played an important role, particularly in early implementation.

Investment in professional learning was of high value to the schools studied. Time was required to develop an understanding of what is restorative and what is not, how these practices fit in the school curriculum, and what they look like in the classroom and on the playground. The plausibility of restorative theory, values, and principles needs to be tested against current practice in most schools.

## Conclusion

The data collection for this study was completed in 2004. In the three years since, there has been substantial progress at the regional level, with hundreds of schools now including restorative practices in their plans. In my current role, with responsibility for the national values education initiatives in Victorian schools, I have heard many success stories, but I have also heard about the continuing dilemma of changing school practice and in particular of engaging teachers, students, their families, and the wider school in productive dialogues about restorative justice practices. These dilemmas highlight the need to investigate further the contribution of restorative practices to safe, happy, and socially just schools.

There is sufficient evidence in this study and in the literature to argue that restorative practices can be used in schools to address such things as bullying, conflicts, breakdown of relationships, alienation, and reintegration of marginalized students. Why then has resistance been encountered in some schools? Why do restorative practices appeal to some and not others? Under what circumstances do restorative practices work best and for whom?

These critical questions suggest there is more we need to know about restorative practices, particularly in terms of the process itself and what impact it has on other school practices. What is the most effective way to engage students in the process? What is the best way to include families or the community?

We do know that a continuing focus on quality relationships and the social skills development of students seems to provide a solid foundation for the most effective use of restorative practices. We also know that for a restorative philosophy to be implemented and sustained in schools, the aspiration must be on changing from behavior management to relationship management (Cameron and Thorsborne, 2001).

## References

- Bazemore, G., and Walgrave, L. *Restorative Juvenile Justice: Repairing the Harm of Youth Crime*. New York: Criminal Justice Press, 1999.
- Blood, P., and Thorsborne, M. "The Challenge of Culture Change: Embedding Restorative Practices in Schools." Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and Other Restorative Practices, Sydney, Aug. 2005.
- Braithwaite, J., and Strang, H. "Introduction." In H. Strang and J. Braithwaite (eds.), *Restorative Justice and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Cameron, L., and Thorsborne, M. "Restorative Justice and School Discipline: Mutually Exclusive?" In H. Strang and J. Braithwaite (eds.), *Restorative Justice and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Department of Education and Training. *Safe Schools Are Effective Schools*. State of Victoria, 2006.
- Karp, D., and Breslin, B. "Restorative Justice in School Communities." *Youth and Society*, 2001, 33(2), 249–272.
- Morrison, B. "Building Safe and Healthy Communities: Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation." Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and Other Restorative Practices, Sydney, Aug. 2005.
- Roche, D. *Accountability in Restorative Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.



- Stokes, H., and Shaw, G. *Restorative Practices Pilot in Victorian Schools: Evaluation Report*. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2005.
- Strang, H. *Repair or Revenge: Victims and Restorative Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002.
- Wachtel, T. "Restorative Justice in Everyday Life: Beyond the Formal Ritual." Paper presented at the Reshaping Australian Institutions Conference: Restorative Justice and Civil Society, Australian National University, Canberra, 1999.
- Zehr, H., and Mika, H. "Fundamental Concepts of Restorative Justice." *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social and Restorative Justice*, 1997, 1(1), 47–56.

**Gary Shaw** is a senior project officer with the Department of Education in Victoria, Australia, where he manages values education and civics and citizenship education projects.

Copyright of Conflict Resolution Quarterly is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. / Business and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.