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# Developing Restorative Practices in Schools: *Some Reflections*

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### Abstract

The use of disciplinary practices derived from restorative justice has recently been gaining popularity and inciting keen interest in the education community. Practices that have so far been introduced have tended to centre on conferencing, although there is a broadening range of other practices in schools that are being brought under the heading “restorative”. This paper offers some reflections on these developments, building on the experiences of a team at the University of Waikato, which completed two projects on restorative conferencing in schools for the Ministry of Education under the rubric of the Suspension Reduction Initiative, and continues to develop understanding of the practices. The projects included developing and trialling processes for suspension hearings using restorative conferencing and principles from restorative justice. Objectives of both projects were related to the desire to reduce numbers of suspensions and exclusions, particularly of Maori children. We argue that the introduction of restorative practices invites schools into some tectonic shifts in thinking about offending behaviour, about community, and ultimately about the purposes of education.

### Introduction

The idea of restorative justice has been receiving growing and widespread attention over the last decade. Principally this attention has focused on the domains of criminal justice (including youth justice), but a large and growing number of schools are implementing practices based on these ideas. We think it is fair to suggest that the practices are not well understood and that there is a need for more debate and more development of the ideas for the education context. This discussion paper addresses the possibilities that these ideas make available for the practice of counselling in relation to offences against school codes of behaviour. The paper draws on developing understanding of these practices, and particularly on two professional development projects sponsored by the Ministry of Education. It is not a research report *per se*. Rather, we are seeking to contribute to a conversation about the ongoing development of “restorative

practices” in schools and to draw from experiences in these projects in order to do so. Along the way, we shall discuss the roles that school counsellors might play in implementing these practices. But first we outline some background to the development of restorative practices in schools.

### **The rise of restorative conferencing**

Aotearoa New Zealand has a long tradition of restorative justice and related practices. Maori have engaged in hui-style meetings to resolve conflict for as long as many can recall (Hakiaha, 1997). More recently, through the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, family group conferences have become part of the legal process available to the youth justice system in New Zealand (McElrea, 1996; Morris & Maxwell, 1998). In effect, hui-like processes were mandated into law in relation to both child welfare and youth justice. More recently again, there has been a huge growth of interest in the use of restorative justice, not only for youth but also in the adult courts (Morris & Maxwell, 2001). Rising interest in restorative justice has been fuelled at least in part by the exponential increase in numbers being imprisoned. This has coincided with a growing climate of concern for the victims of crime.

In New Zealand a four-year pilot is currently in progress, trialling the use of conferencing using restorative justice principles for referrals from the adult courts. In Australia and the United States of America, academics and local authorities have developed and trialled their own processes, sometimes called “victim-offender mediation” (Umbreit, 1988), “community group conferences” (Hyndman et al., 1996), “community reparative boards” (Karp & Walther, 2001), “family group decision-making” (Mirsky, 2003) or “family unity meetings” (Mirsky, 2003). It is claimed that there are currently 150 communities in the United States that are implementing family group conferences (Mirsky, 2003). Canada has a history of trials and implementation almost as long as ours, and also parallels New Zealand in drawing from indigenous “sentencing circles” (Stuart, 1997). In England and Wales, four pilot projects in 1994 have grown to 97 family group conferencing initiatives running (Mirsky, 2003). All four Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark) also have substantial family group conference programmes (Mirsky, 2003). The idea is also spreading widely. Some twenty-five countries with similar projects underway or in planning were represented at the fourth international conference “on conferencing, circles and other restorative practices” in the Netherlands in 2003 (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2003). The range of countries present included those as far spread as Hong Kong, South Africa, Japan, Argentina, Thailand, Papua New Guinea and the Czech Republic. Moreover, the movement has received international recognition at the level

of the United Nations through the drawing up of some international basic principles for restorative justice (UN Economic & Social Council, 2000). It is clear that restorative justice is an idea whose time has come.

Interest in restorative conferencing in schools has to some extent paralleled the trajectory of interest in restorative justice in New Zealand (for an account of this, see Hayden, 2001): a huge increase during the 1990s in numbers of suspensions and concern about the fate of young offenders, combined with high rates of truancy and concern about school discipline in general, are all part of the mix. The application of restorative justice principles to schools has also happened in other countries. Reports are available of restorative conferencing projects in schools in Australia (Hyndman et al., 1996; Thorsborne, 1999), Canada (Zammit & Lockhart, 2001), Northern Ireland (Mirsky, 2003) and the United States (Nash, 2004). To begin with, conferencing was introduced into New Zealand schools in the hope that it would lead to a reduction of suspensions, which have been increasing exponentially since the early 1990s (Ministry of Education, 2003). However, in spite of the fact that many schools are now employing such principles in their day-to-day disciplinary functioning, the full implications of introducing restorative justice-like processes into schools remain indeterminate. What we suspect, on the basis of initial evidence, is that they are likely to be far-reaching, challenging the relationships between the disciplinary and student support systems within the school. Since school counsellors have a mandated interest in the ways that a school guides its young people into constructive pathways in their relationships with others in a community, it follows that they might profitably engage with these principles and facilitate their implementation in schools.

### **Defining restorative justice**

The restorative model of justice views crime as an interpersonal conflict between the victim and the offender that needs to be addressed (Zehr, 1990). Restorative justice is sometimes contrasted with retributive justice, in which a crime is assessed and the offender punished in proportion to the nature of the crime. However, it may still be the case that punishment or a related consequence is one of the outcomes of a restorative process: the point is that punishment is not the main objective. The young person is not so much supposed to learn a lesson by deduction from the punishment itself as by experiencing fully the wider implications of the offence and the damage done to relationships. At the same time, the young person experiences community support to address the damage done.

Where retributive justice defines crime as a violation against the state, restorative justice defines crime as a conflict between individuals in which their relationship is

placed at centre stage. The justice that is created is produced by focusing on and redressing the harmful effects of the actions of the offender on the victim. Accountability is no longer determined by an application of the law. The offender is required to meet the victim of his or her crime, to hear the full extent of the impact of the offending, and accept responsibility for his or her actions. Victims are provided with an active role in assisting the offender to understand the effects of the crime on them. The parties themselves (rather than a “third” or non-affected party such as a judge or school principal) determine what should happen to make amends. This represents a radical change to the way in which “justice” is delivered in criminal cases. It is also a process that can transform disciplinary processes in schools.

Proponents of restorative justice argue that the response to crime must begin where the problem begins, within relationships. From this perspective, crimes or misdemeanours are not first an offence against the state or the school; they are offences against people. It would be possible to suggest that the initial rupture is in the integrity of the person who exhibits such behaviours. Here, one role that a counsellor might play is in the kind of conversation that invites a person to consider options for the restoration of personal integrity. This might happen alongside or subsequent to a process that addresses the restoration of community relations. Even if there has been no previous contact among those present, a crime constitutes a community of affected people, and hence, creates relationships, but they may not be the kind of relationships that are preferred by either perpetrators or victims. The central goal of restorative justice is therefore the healing of the relationships damaged by the offence.

### **Restorative justice in schools**

The notion of restoration in this context derives from the more general interest in restorative justice and the use of conferencing in restorative justice. These links with justice, and the use of what has come to be called restorative conferencing in relation to suspensions, suggest that what we are doing here is centrally concerned with the school disciplinary system. However, rather than locating restoration solely in law, discipline and justice, we are keen to see such practices as inviting the development of links between a school’s disciplinary practices and the pastoral care and student support functions in the school. It has indeed been the convention in most conceptions of “guidance” in New Zealand schools for pastoral care and student support functions to be kept very separate from disciplinary functions. This was understandable during the process of developing the role identity of counsellors in schools, when the profession had to work to establish a position from which to practise that was free from the constraints of the “remedial-adjustive” orientation (Hermansson, 1990,

p. 163) that was sometimes expected of school counsellors. Counselling needed to be distinguished from disciplinary guidance. Restorative practices, however, do not require school counsellors to provide direct disciplinary influence on young people. Rather, they enable counsellors to facilitate conversations and relationships in which changes in behaviour may be negotiated in a forum that is more democratic than authoritarian, more inclusive than divisive, and more demanding of response than blaming. Therefore restorative practices can be said to provide school counsellors with a way to make a contribution to the school community in relation to disciplinary issues that does not compromise their student support functions.

The notion of restorative justice also challenges, to some extent, the adversarial mode of most legal processes (Zehr, 1990, 2002). In such processes, the accused offender is objectified and totalised as a wrongdoer and expected to defend himself (usually it is a male) against such an accusation. In schools, the discipline system proceeds on the basis of similar assumptions. A restorative process, by contrast, begins from a position of respect for those affected, including the so-called victim, the young person identified as the offender, and their communities of care. The objective of the restorative justice process is to offer an opportunity for the young person to make amends on a variety of levels – to those affected, to the community, to self – and in the process to restore the possibility of healthy relationships. This is essential in schools, where in many cases relationships among those involved will be ongoing. It is even thought possible to transform relationships through the conferencing process. Potent elements include dialogue, the skilled facilitation of the emergence of different perspectives and the consequent creation of new meanings (Toews & Zehr, 2003).

Restoration is mostly about restoring connection through increased understanding – it is not necessarily about keeping kids in school or out of prison. While there are some suggestions in the literature that the process developed by the University of Waikato, together with other similar processes now operating around the country, may in fact achieve these outcomes, we do not support this project solely because we want to stop young people from being suspended or excluded from schools. A school is a complex community that offers interesting possibilities for community – and nation-building. Of course, because it brings together (compulsorily) people from so many different cultural backgrounds and because it is a community focused on young people, with their families somewhat in the background, the school is a community that has very special characteristics as well. A school is perhaps more like a village based on an inter-tribal grouping, rather than a family. Yet each school has responsibilities for the nurture and development of its students that reflect parental responsibility

in part. Every school also has its own particular characteristics based on its population and geographical location. This is one reason why we do not think it is possible or desirable to prescribe an inflexible model for introducing and doing restorative conferencing in any particular school. On the other hand, we do support the development of a systematic regional approach for a combined service to support schools to implement restorative practices.

### **A brief account of our projects**

During 1999–2000 a team from the University of Waikato worked on a pilot project, funded by the Ministry of Education, to develop a process for using restorative justice principles for conferencing in schools around the Waikato (Gerritsen, 2001; Winslade et al., 2000). The aim was to provide schools with options other than suspension or exclusion. The trial project became part of the subsequent Suspension Reduction Initiative (SRI), a nationwide initiative from the New Zealand government, through the Ministry of Education, which aims to reduce the numbers of students (and especially Maori students) being suspended from mainstream secondary schools.

The intention of our first project was to try to keep students in schools, rather than suspending them. We named this project (and that process) *Te Hui Whakatika* (see Macfarlane, 2000). The numbers of students being suspended from secondary (and primary) schools had been rising exponentially throughout the country. Maori students, especially Maori boys, were over-represented in numbers suspended. In the Waikato region in 1998, young people suspended were close to 60% Maori and 80% male (Ministry of Education figures). Our project was in some ways an outgrowth of the work of Judges M. Brown, McElrea and Carruthers, who had written and spoken publicly about their concern about the numbers of young people coming before the courts (Brown, 1993; McElrea, 1996). Judge McElrea (1996) had also advocated the family group conference process as especially relevant for responding to major disciplinary challenges in school contexts. The Waikato project picked up on their ideas about the probable value of using restorative justice principles for young people in trouble in schools. The project drew upon a Queensland initiative that had been applying these principles in school contexts (Hyndman et al., 1996; Thorsborne, 1999). We melded those ideas with some ideas from Maori hui-making, and also with ideas about narrative therapy (Jenkins, 1990; White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 1999) and respectful ways of speaking taught in the University of Waikato Counselling Programme, in which some of the project team were teachers. In this first project, we worked with five schools with very different characteristics, who implemented the ideas in very different ways. The project was evaluated by a team from the

University of Auckland, who found that there was substantial satisfaction among participants with the process (Adair & Dixon, 2000). Recommendations in their report included the appointment of designated persons to facilitate conferences, and the need to describe clearly and make resources available to follow up on the proposed outcomes or restoration plan.

In our second project, we worked with key people from 29 schools designated under the SRI in Northland and Auckland. The Waikato team undertook a 15-week project that ultimately would span three semesters, from August 2001 until April 2002. There were three phases to the second project. In Phase One, we went around the schools and talked with designated key persons about what they believed were the reasons for the escalating numbers of suspensions, and secondly, what they thought could be done about the problem (if they saw it as such). In Phase Two, we developed a website for the schools in the project, aimed at developing a network of schools wanting to use restorative practices, and at sharing resources. Phase Three was a series of two-day training workshops attended by key people from each school, including a number of school counsellors, in which we discussed the implications for community relationships of some language practices in schools and demonstrated the conferencing process developed in our first project.

In Phase One we found a wide range of initiatives already in place to try and prevent the escalation of suspensions. Many practitioners were disillusioned with the current school-community relationships, particularly with Maori communities. In terms of developing restorative practices for schools, the most important outcome of this project was our realisation that the process of the formal conference could be used in a variety of purposeful conversations about disciplinary challenges, without the formality of the conference. We taught participants a simple outline of a conversation process that works for “deans’ conversations”, classroom conferencing and formal conferencing. The website was not well supported by participant schools and was subsequently abandoned. The conversation process, however, remains in use by many practitioners. School counsellors already have many of the key skills necessary to make this process work.

### **Features of a restorative conference**

There are different versions of the process of restorative conferencing. The process we used in these two projects shared some things in common with other approaches and also differed in some ways. It is impossible to claim any aspect as “ours”, and practitioners embrace good ideas wherever they find them so there are some real hybrids around. Nevertheless, our process both shares features with other models and also has

its own distinctive features (see Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004<sup>1</sup>). It includes the community of concern in the conversation around a problem, and charges it with addressing the harm done by the offence. Those invited might include the young person, any victims, family members, teachers, peers, school counsellors and community members with an interest in the young person (e.g. kaumatua (elders), youth workers, sports coaches). The number of people involved would normally be fewer for the smaller “deans’ conversations” than for full restorative conferences (in accordance with the seriousness of the offence), but the principle of including more voices remains. This principle challenges the usual assumption that a school disciplinary offence is a matter between the individual student and the school authorities, and suggests that it is a matter that affects a network of relationships and should be addressed within those relationships. The venue for a hui is chosen to facilitate the involvement of the community in the process. This might mean holding the hui in the school marae or a local marae, or, say, in a kohanga reo centre or local community centre. The hui is conducted in observance of protocols that are culturally relevant to the young person and his whanau (extended family), such as using powhiri processes and karakia for Maori young people, and observing the principle of tuakana teina (the “older brother-younger brother relationship”, referring to the idea that older relatives have a responsibility to help and to some extent teach younger ones).

Within the hui there is a deliberate effort to avoid the usual approach of isolating the individual with the problem, and a corresponding effort to invite all involved to participate in the taking up of responsibility for designing a path forward. Where there is an identifiable victim (with something like “continual disobedience” this is sometimes difficult to define) the voice of the victim is given prominence in the process through their being asked to participate in: (a) the naming of the problem; (b) the accounting of the effects of the problem; and (c) the determination of what would be needed to set things to rights. Victims are also invited (where appropriate) to bring along support persons or family members.

Michael White’s (1989) aphorism “The problem is the problem, the person is not the problem” is invoked early in the hui and a consistent effort is maintained to avoid totalising descriptions of the young person, or for that matter of the victim or anyone else. Totalising descriptions are descriptions of persons that purport to characterise something of the essence of a person and that serve to organise everyone’s understanding of that person’s identity, especially when such identity descriptions are

1 This booklet, *Restorative Practices for Schools: A Resource*, is available at a cost of \$20 (incl p&p) from the first author.



accorded institutional legitimacy. Legal descriptions like “criminal”, mental health descriptions like “ADHD”, and school identities like “truant” or “behaviour problem” are examples of totalising identity descriptions.

After the process of powhiri and welcome, during which all of the participants are asked to express their hopes for the hui, everyone contributes their perspective on the nature of the problem under discussion. Each person’s name for the problem is accepted and written in the middle of a circle diagram for all to see. All of these descriptions are accepted collectively as “the problem”. Each of these names for the problem is expressed in written form in “externalising language” (for explanations of this practice, see White, 1989; White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Externalising language avoids naming a person as a problem, or a naming that suggests the origins of a problem as springing from the nature of a person. Participants are then invited (the victim first and then others, including the young person himself, or herself) to state the effects of the problem on them personally. On the written diagram, these effects are represented around the outside of the circle that contains the names of the problem.

When the effects of the problem have been thoroughly explored in the context of community relationships, the facilitator says something like, “Since no one story ever captures everything about a person, what does everyone here know about [the young person] that we would be blind to if we only paid attention to the problem story?” A list of contradictory information about the young person is then assembled on a second diagram after contributions from around the room.

The young person is asked to make a choice between the two stories represented on these diagrams. Which one would he or she prefer to be the one that went forward from this meeting? Some skilled work then occurs where the facilitator enables the young person and his or her family to build a sense of going forward, after achieving closure of the rupture caused by the offence through some agreed act or process. This may be for the offender alone, but more usually in our experience many people who are part of the conference may also want to contribute to the restorative work that follows the conference. The meeting then moves into forming a plan for what needs to happen to: (a) address the harm done by the offence; (b) ameliorate the effects of the problem, and (c) enable the preferred story to go forward. Designating someone who will follow up is essential, and this may often be an ideal role for the counsellor.

In many of the schools where this process has been implemented it has frequently been the school counsellor who has been in the role of facilitator. The process is not, strictly speaking, counselling, but it can be thought of as therapeutic in its effects. It gives the counsellor a role to play in addressing disciplinary matters that does not create

the role conflict that dispensing punishments would do. In other cases, the counsellor has been in the role of support for the victim (and sometimes for the offender). Where such role conflicts occur it becomes important that the school has worked through who will take responsibility for training in and facilitating conferencing.

### **Some observations on implementation**

We offer here some observations from these projects for those who may be thinking about taking up a restorative practices programme in their school. A primary consideration is that each school has its own character, its own community, its own particular mix of staff with their own particular strengths and weaknesses. This means that any “recipe” for introduction, or for the process itself, must be flexible enough for a particular school to adapt for its own particular circumstances. When facilitators understand the underlying philosophy of the process, they are better able to cope with such variability without compromising the process.

Inviting parents and others from the community into the school tends to have important and far-reaching effects. Several parents and caregivers who participated said they had never had such a meaningful conversation with the school, and while this may be read as an indictment on a school, it is also testimony to the fact that introducing these practices can help develop both home-school relationships and school community. It was notable that although teachers were sometimes reluctant to participate, those who did were very supportive of the process, and some had an eye-opening (and in some cases a career-changing) experience. This often related to their coming to understand the home circumstances and personal struggles and aspirations of the offender in ways they had not foreseen.

It is true that the time taken to organise, execute, and follow up from a formal conference is significant (at least ten hours). However, we have moved away from the idea that conferencing is central to these practices, and now would support the introduction of what we call “small conversations”, not only in disciplinary interactions such as the dean’s office, but within classrooms, between teachers and students. These conversations have a simple but particular shape which can be taught very quickly, and which, when used by teachers and other staff on the run, have proven enormously effective. Conferencing may come too late if it is implemented only when a suspension is imminent, particularly for continual disobedience.

Finally, embracing the principles of restorative conferencing bridges and creates a link between the student support and the disciplinary systems in a school (for example between the counsellor, the deans, parents and the Board of Trustees). However, in spite of what we thought were significant efforts to explain what we were

trying to do, there sometimes remained substantial pockets of misunderstanding within the school administrative hierarchy. For example, some schools held Board of Trustees hearings after the conference, which appeared to take little cognisance of what had happened in the conference. Experiences such as this suggest that when a school decides to do conferencing there is an inevitable implication for the way the school is organised – indeed, for the entire culture of the school.

### **The current scene**

A precise assessment of the success or otherwise of the Suspension Reduction Initiative (SRI) is not possible, because in 1999 new definitions were coined, and “stand-down” is now the name given to temporary suspensions which result in the student returning to school. In fact, it was our understanding that many schools (particularly those in rural areas) were already working to reintegrate their “errant” students, and the original notion of the suspension, which included short, medium and longer term exclusions, hid this important point. According to a recent Ministry report, secondary schools participating in the Suspension Reduction Initiative have succeeded in reducing the suspension rate for Maori students from 76 per 1000 in the year 2000 to 48 per 1000 in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2003). Although both stand-downs and suspensions have reduced or remained steady in schools participating in the Suspension Reduction Initiative, male, Maori and 14-year-old students continue to be over-represented in stand-down and suspension statistics compared to the population in general. Over all schools, Maori males were stood down at a rate of 65 per 1000 and suspended at a rate of 21 per 1000 in 2002. The peak age for stand-downs was 14 years (80 per 1000) (Ministry of Education, 2003).

In spite of the apparent success of our first Ministry-funded trial, and the huge interest there has been from schools, there has not been a systematic introduction of restorative conferencing into schools. There is a wide variety of restorative justice conferencing and other similar processes currently on offer, some packaged more attractively than others. Groups of education professionals, such as school counselors, have registered a strong interest in the “restorative” aspects of the process, and it seems that their enthusiasm is not easily stemmed. Staff in senior management positions in schools tend to have varying attitudes to it. On the one hand there are so many ideas around that purport to cure the ills of education that it can be difficult to choose among them – or to believe all their claims. Some quickly decide that this is something they already do, before they have fully understood the differences between restorative practices and their current practice. On the other hand, because many of the ideas put up for trial require long term implementation and evaluation, the

research community is (understandably) often a long way behind in evaluating projects. Sometimes, too, the proponents of “solutions” are perceived to have a stake and therefore may be seen as biased – and so there develops a scepticism about the enthusiasm with which new ideas are presented. Calls for evidence-based practice are easy to make, and may even be desirable, but education is a very complex social science, and simplistic models of experimental scientific method will quite clearly not serve us well. Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence from research projects of varying degrees of rigour that some form of restorative conferencing does make a positive difference and that therefore the whole domain of restorative practices is worth pursuing. Such evidence comes from trial projects in different countries, including our own, where restorative conferencing used in youth justice and school contexts has been shown to significantly reduce repeat offending and school suspension (Mirsky, 2003).

### **Broader implications for schools**

For more serious offences, criminal justice systems act to protect the majority of citizens by locking offenders up. In schools, the equivalent is to lock young persons out. By contrast, restorative justice shifts the focus of our thinking about offending. In order for it to work, more than just a grafting of a new technology onto existing systems is required. Some shifts in thinking need to take place. The primary shift required for restorative practices is a shift from thinking in terms of individual character deficits and the individual attribution of responsibility to an emphasis on relationships in the school community. If offences are seen as damaging to relationships rather than as personal challenges to the authorities of the school, then the path forward changes from satisfying the demands for retribution by authorities to restoring the damage done to relationships. In the process the position of the people primarily affected by an offence is altered. Their concerns and needs are given more prominence and their mana valued more highly. Young persons are required less to bow to authority than to take up responsibility to repair the hurts they have caused to those they have harmed. Meaningless punishments are favoured less than meaningful acts of restoration. Young persons are offered ways to address the harm they have created, rather than branded as deficient more or less permanently. At the same time the common binary distinction between “soft” therapeutic approaches to offending and “tough” retributive punishing approaches is rendered irrelevant. Restorative justice is neither of these. Rather it focuses on a definition of accountability that is situated in the relational context of the offence (rather than to rules or authorities) and seeks to address harm done in ways that will make an ongoing difference.

The role of school counsellors ought to be implicated in any project to address the relational climate of a school. We therefore see restorative practices as fitting well within the function of counselling and guidance. Counsellors cannot on their own implement the kind of changes that would constitute an embracing of restorative practices by a whole school. But they can play a role in introducing and developing such a climate. And they are already more trained than most teachers in many of the facilitative skills necessary to conduct useful restorative conversations.

As our first project progressed, it became very clear to us that the practices of restorative conferencing called upon the entire school community to examine its relational practices. Astute kaumatua recognised this potential early on and supported the implementation of the process in their schools and communities. For example, one of our early conferences ended among other things with the realisation that the school was not offering “a safe environment”. At the same time, the relationships of the school to its Maori community were opened up by the process of the conference. Teachers and deans ended up understanding more about the young man who was the initial catalyst for the conference, so that they also understood why he was constantly late, and why he often seemed to end up fighting. In other words, the original reason for the conference seemed to fade into a much broader canvas, and the principal and other senior managers, some of whom attended the conference, were astounded at what they learned about their school. With much goodwill, they then set out to change what they had seen and did not like. (Of course, this was not so simple!) Repeated experiences like these led the team to suggest, as we have seen, that the processes offered here are not simply about conferencing – they are about *restorative practices throughout the school* – a more inclusive concept altogether. They open up a vision of a school community placing a much greater focus on the quality of its relationships rather than on locating all problem situations in the character of individuals. Counsellors are frequently alert to such totalising practices when they are performed by teachers or administrators. But they also need to be alert to the versions of totalising that exist in counselling and psychological discourse.

### **Respecting difference**

The University of Waikato Restorative Practices Development Team is but one of many that are working for similar objectives. There are many different processes currently being used that purport to be doing restorative justice. Different approaches to restorative justice emphasise different objectives, for example victim restoration, “integrative shaming” of offenders, or community empowerment (White, 2003). The process we developed recognises the increasing complexity of the diverse composition

of most school communities. It also recognises that in many ways schools are already communities of care. Our broader objectives were to offer a process for building and maintaining a peaceful, diverse and caring community, where it is possible for people who are very different from one another to live together harmoniously; and to offer an opportunity for an offender to make amends in ways that do not objectify or oppress any of the parties. These objectives are founded on the belief that respectful dialogue is ultimately the only peace-building option we have, and so we (all) need to learn increasingly effective ways of working towards peaceful co-existence. This includes the idea that both victims and offenders should have at least an opportunity to discuss the offence, and to consider ways to make things right.

We believe schools have a unique and powerful place in civic affairs and that use of these processes has important lessons for students about citizenship. Thus it would be possible to teach the process in, for example, the health curriculum, and in this way to enable both students and teachers to activate the process, for example in playground mediation between students, or within “problem” classrooms. Thus restorative conferencing encompasses the idea that there could be many different voices in a carefully facilitated conversation about the offending. While increasing the number of voices in a process increases complexity and reduces the attractiveness of simple solution prescriptions, it can also be seen to lead to outcomes that engender greater commitment from more people. The conference is not simply an opportunity for the official voice of the community or school authorities to speak and to adjudicate. It offers pathways to restoring the relationships that have been breached by the offence. Persons affected by an offence can benefit from the opportunity to confront the perpetrators of their victimisation, and in so doing both restore themselves to greater strength. Offenders benefit by learning more about the effects of their actions than they ever could by being punished by a disinterested authority, and are given the opportunity of redress to the offender. We believe that this kind of redress does much more to build a peaceful community than do punitive actions that succeed only in producing people who feel they have little shared investment in their community or school.

Central to our commitment to developing Restorative Practices in Schools is the belief that the knowledge as to why the situation with escalating stand-downs and suspensions exists, and the knowledge of what to do about it, is most likely to be found within the schools and their communities. As a university team we have been privileged to join with schools and their communities in conversations (and ultimately, work) that promotes practices of “restoration” in schools. Restoration is a word that needs to be defined more carefully, but the centre of the idea of restoration

is respectful relationship. In schools, it is about relationships between people associated with schools, whoever they may be, including whanau, parents, teachers, students, senior management, Board of Trustees members, kaumatua, the local marae komiti, and all people in the community of care around the school.

Embracing restorative principles, in the end, changes the ways in which we think about conflict and difference. Ours is a developmental approach which is founded in the notion that an interest in restoration implies something about how we all prefer to get along together. “Common sense” understandings of community tend to be based on the idea that if we belong together we must be like each other. We are unashamed in drawing attention to the fact that, if we want to be able to live and work together as a diverse community, accepting that becoming increasingly like one another is not an option, then there is little other choice than to learn how to develop and maintain dialogues that enable differences to be talked through in ongoing and re-cyclical ways. For our schools to embrace such ways of relating could herald a massive revolution, not just in disciplinary practices, but in the ways we all interact generally as communities. Restorative practices are about respectful relationship in the face of diversity and the inevitable difficulties that go with it. Their introduction could have important and far-reaching implications for the practice of education, signalling a shift from the certainty of being right to the uncertainties of the respectful management of diverse viewpoints. It is, of course, possible to treat restorative justice solely as a disciplinary measure when things have already gone wrong, but this would be to miss its real promise.

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