

SPECIAL REPORT

Using Restorative Practice in Schools: “Positive Behaviour For Learning” (PB4L)

Ministry of Education

In 2009, sector representatives came together to hold a summit because of concerns about escalating problems with student behaviour. The Taumata Whanonga behaviour summit agreed on a new, more positive approach to managing behaviour in schools, an approach now known as Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L).

Restorative practice is part of that approach, and comes out of a strong research and evidence base.

Now eight years on, 174 schools are involved in the Ministry’s restorative practice initiative having received or due to receive training from the Ministry’s partner, Waikato University’s Institute of Professional Learning.

New Zealand schools have been using restorative practice approaches in varying forms since family group conferences were introduced in 1989 as part of the Children, Young Persons and Families Act. Restorative practice in its initial stages was a response to the huge increase in the numbers of students who were being suspended or excluded from schools and, in particular, to the large ethnic disparity in suspension rates across a range of deciles.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education launched the Student Engagement Initiative to encourage schools to find ways to reduce suspensions. The PB4L action plan was then developed in 2009 at the Taumata Whanonga behaviour

summit in response to concerns about student behaviour. The plan included various programmes and practice based initiatives for whānau, staff, and schools to encourage pro-social behaviour in all students in New Zealand schools.

PB4L is built on the foundation that positive behaviour can be learnt and that environments can be changed to improve behaviour and support effective teaching and learning. It also reflects the belief that schools play a major role in creating safe, healthy societies.

Restorative practice – the basics

The PB4L Restorative Practice model encourages and supports schools to analyse their existing values and practice and evaluate how effective their current strategies are for building and managing relationships and resolving differences and conflict. It then offers school staff a set of best practice tools and techniques to support a consistent and sustainable approach to managing positive, respectful relationships within the school and for restoring relationships when things go wrong.

Four principles underpin the model:

- Positive interpersonal relationships are a major influence on behaviour.
- A culture of care supports the mana of all individuals in the school community.
- Cultural responsiveness is key to creating learning communities of mutual respect and inclusion.
- A restorative approach leads to individuals taking responsibility for their behaviour.

The model has three interrelated components: Restorative Essentials; Restorative Circles;

Restorative Conferences. Restorative Essentials is about the everyday, informal actions that emphasise relationships, respect, empathy, social responsibility and self-regulation.

Restorative Essentials supports teachers and adults within the school community to approach problems in a restorative way and equip staff

with the skills needed to de-escalate situations successfully, enabling all staff to ‘keep the small things small’. Restorative Conversations use a scripted set of questions to explore a problem in a respectful way. Using a script reduces the risk of the conversation wandering off track.

“Restorative practice allows students to tell their stories – we’re allowing them the dignity of hearing what they have to say and respecting the unique individuality of everyone”. - Murray Lucas, Principal of Tawa College

Restorative Circles support all staff and students to develop and manage relationships and create opportunities for effective teaching and learning time. They are a semi-formal practice requiring a degree of preparation. They provide teachers with a range of processes to build relationships with and between all people in a school community, maintain those relationships, and enhance positive communication. Restorative Circles also provide learning opportunities and strategies to repair relationships and support ongoing positive connections. They operate on a continuum from low-level community building and promotion of mutual understanding all the way to healing or conflict resolution circles that can be used to repair serious situations among people.

Restorative Conferences: There are three types of Restorative Conferences in PB4L Restorative Practice: Mini Conferences, Classroom Conferences and Formal Restorative Conferences. Although they differ in formality, numbers participating and the severity of the related incident, all three types require preparation, participation and follow up, and all three use Restorative Scripts and fair process.

Restorative Conferencing is a process that provides schools with ways to repair harm and restore relationships. It uses the stories of those involved in an incident and the people close to it – such as students, staff and whānau – to:

- explore what has happened and who has been affected
- hold those who have caused harm accountable for their actions
- provide support to those who have been harmed, and others involved.

Conferencing is most often used by a school's senior leadership, syndicate leaders, heads of department, and pastoral staff.

Restorative practice is all about relationships

At heart, restorative practice is a relational approach to school life grounded in beliefs about equality, dignity, mana and the potential of all people.

The PB4L Restorative Practice model focuses on building and maintaining positive, respectful relationships across the school community and offers school staff best practice tools and techniques

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to restore relationships when things go wrong. By building and maintaining positive, respectful relationships within a school, staff to staff, staff to student and student to student, issues are more easily managed.

Andy Fraser, Otaki College Principal, knows that this relational approach is the key to the success of restorative practice. Otaki College is one of 24 secondary schools that piloted the Ministry's approach to restorative practice in 2013/14 across the North Island and came on board already grounded in an understanding of the approach.

Andy describes a watershed moment during his time as deputy principal at Porirua College when dealing with exclusions. The principal reminded him that his job was 'to keep kids in schools, not to keep them out'. This led him to think about what being a restorative school really meant.

“To be a restorative school means having a culture based on really strong relationships – between students and students, teachers and students, the school and whānau and community. The critical basis is building a culture where you work with people and don't do things to them. It's about a mana-enhancing approach where you are building people up, not chopping them down.”

This emphasis on positive and respectful relationships that is at the heart of restorative practice is echoed by Murray Lucas, Tawa College Principal, another of the pilot schools. Not only is the school a calmer learning environment with restorative practice in place that benefits everyone, but also more students are staying at school.

“Students learn that it's OK to fail the first time – you can make a bad decision, learn from it, move on and still have a place at the school. And there's an awareness that teachers and even principals sometimes get it wrong – we all have some vulnerability we need to show.”

Restoring relationships, repairing harm

Internationally, restorative practice has its origins in restorative justice, a formalised, relational response to offending and victimisation in the criminal justice system. Restorative justice is a movement away from a traditional retributive focus (on wrongdoing and punishment) towards a restorative approach that seeks to repair the harm caused by crime through coordinated conferencing. Processes such as family group conferences came about as an alternative response to the exponential increase in the number of people being imprisoned for recidivist offending.

For people used to a traditional retributive focus, there can be a misunderstanding that restorative practice approaches offer an easy way out. However, in restorative practice, the most serious behavioural incidents are dealt with through holding a formal restorative conference. In this setting, the young person comes face to face with the person who has been harmed, and sometimes this will be in the presence of the police as well.

Naenae College began using restorative practice in 2008 as one of a number of approaches to deal with what had become an unsafe environment. The principal, John Russell, wanted to change the whole school culture rather than just deal with the consequences of problem behaviour.

His response to the view that restorative practice offers an easy way out is that “Most kids find conferences a much harder path because it requires taking ownership of your behaviour and impact on others and requiring changing at a deeper level.” More importantly, it reduces the potential for issues to reoccur – “You can have a punitive disciplinary system but if you leave things unresolved, the problem will come back”.

What it means for youth justice

For Andy Fraser, creating and nurturing restorative practice’s ‘culture of care’ means school attendance and retention rates are up. In simple terms, kids aren’t out running around on Otaki’s streets – they are in school.

It’s a view echoed by John Russell who recognises that restorative practice enables a deep and lasting change for young people, particularly boys. “The reality is that a lot of kids have lived their lives in a

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fight/flight mode and in a fear/punishment model. We teach them to move beyond that into empathy to working under a social control model – you minimise rules, you just talk what behaviour should look like all the time and encourage it”.

Where to next for PB4L

The Ministry has partnered with Martin Jenkins and Associates to evaluate PB4L Restorative Practice. The evaluation covers schools that joined the initiative in 2015 and finishes in 2018 but we already know from the pilot schools that restorative practice makes a difference.

Those schools reported positive outcomes such as:

- a calmer school environment, with improved classroom behaviour and more time for teaching
- improved engagement and learning for students in the classroom
- growth in relational and problem-solving skills across the whole school community, for both adults and students
- improvements in attitudes and relationships across the whole school community
- a consistent best-practice approach that aligns with the school’s shared values.

Where to find out more

Schools that want to know more about how to introduce Restorative Practice can download Books 1-3 of the PB4L Restorative Practice Kete from the Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) website: www.tki.org.nz. The kete provides schools with tools and resources to support them to implement the PB4L Restorative Practice model. Book 4 of the kete deals with Restorative Conferences and at present is only available to schools that have received formal training in the PB4L Restorative Practice model. Schools can contact the Ministry of Education through the TKI website for further information about training opportunities. ■