Towards A Restorative School:
A Singapore Perspective.

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Introduction

Restorative Practices was first introduced and piloted in Singapore schools in 2005. As one of the four pilot schools, restorative practices was initially seen as an additional tool in the area of behaviour management. However, this perspective changed in 2006 after a learning journey to Australia to learn more about restorative practices and it was no longer looked upon as a disciplinary tool but an ethos of restorative practices, focusing mainly on building positive relationships.

The school developed a new framework for restorative practices to provide more clarity on its role in the school setting. At the same time, new structures and processes were put in place to facilitate the use of restorative practices principles pervasively, both in the instructional and non-instructional programmes.

This paper will provide an account of the school's journey in restorative practices since 2005. Ping Yi Secondary School is still in the developmental stages of our implementation and we are in the process of exploring new insights about restorative practices to support what we believe to be true – that restorative practices is indeed making a difference to the culture of our school.

Literature Review

The mission statement of the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP, 2005) defines Restorative Practices as "the science of restoring and developing social capital, social discipline, emotional well-being and civic participation through participatory learning and decision making". The emergence of restorative practices

within the educational setting has flourished since the first school based conference was held in a Queensland (Australia) school in 1994 (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001).

In recent years, studies were carried out to document the impact of restorative practices in schools and how restorative principles have helped in the reduction of offences committed by pupils. Mirsky (2003) illustrated how restorative practices have helped to create a more positive relationship between staff and pupils in Palisades Middle School, in southeastern Pennsylvania, U.S.A., resulting in a significant reduction in disciplinary referrals, detentions assigned by teachers, incidents of disruptive behaviour and out-of-school suspensions. The use of restorative practices by educators around the globe to proactively prevent problems like bullying and violence is also well documented in a qualitative and quantitative study carried out by Porter (2007).

Other than being seen as an ideal tool to create positive relationships and improve discipline statistics, restorative practices is also seen as a philosophy that presents itself as a tool for organizational change that serves to transform the school culture. Boulton and Mirsky (2006), in their study of The Bessels Leigh School in Oxfordshire, England, reported how restorative practices brought about a remarkable change in culture for the residential special school for boys (age 11-16) with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In a separate study, Mirsky (2004) highlighted how restorative practices transformed the culture of schools in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. through building relationships and community in the classroom with the use of circles.

Our Restorative Practices Journey

a)   Training in Restorative Practices

As a pilot school for restorative practices, staff in Ping Yi had the privilege to attend a customized training package conducted by a restorative practices expert from Australia. Through the basic training sessions, members of the staff were introduced to the concept and theoretical underpinnings of Restorative Practices. In addition, all participants were equipped with the basic skills set to conduct one-to-one conferencing and one-to-few conferencing using a set of affective questions.

On top of the basic training for all staff, a core team from each pilot school (including the Principal, Vice Principal, 3 Heads of Department and the Operations Manager) was selected to attend the advanced training session which equipped participants with the skills set to conduct community group conferences.

Throughout 2005, restorative practices was merely seen as an additional tool in the area of behaviour management. Members of the staff were actively using the affective questions to manage misbehaviour, but not all staff had the chance to taste success. During the year end staff seminar, concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of restorative practices surfaced, which prompted the core team to re-look at getting the staff to gain commitment and establish the buy-in. Otherwise, staff will look at restorative practices as just another new initiative that will soon be forgotten.

b)   *Learning Journey to Australia*

In early 2006, the Guidance Branch from the Ministry of Education organized a learning journey to Australia for the four pilot schools. Three members from the core team of each pilot school had the opportunity to go on this learning journey to gain more insights about the implementation of restorative practices in Australian schools. The learning journey proved to be a turning point as participants started to see restorative practices from a different perspective.

The following are some of the key learning points derived from the learning journey:

- Restorative practices is not just a tool to manage misbehaviour, but a philosophy;
- it can be infused into teaching and learning;
- it needs a whole school approach and
- it is about building positive relationships.

With these takeaways in mind, the members of the core team decided to change the perspective that the staff had of restorative practices.

c)   *Inspiring a shared vision*

After sessions of deliberation and careful consideration during staff and management meetings, consensus was built among staff and management that having a restorative culture is indeed beneficial to all stakeholders of the school. The core team, under the leadership of the Principal, decided that it was imperative to develop a shared vision for restorative practices to engage the whole school community. This prompted a realignment of the school's stretch goal to "Becoming a Restorative School in 2010".

d)   *"Buy-in" from staff*

One major concern that the management needed to address was that of staff buy-in to restorative practices. To propose the use of restorative practices against the existing punitive system is indeed a challenge. Many members of the staff have the impression that restorative practices seem to be a "soft" approach which may not be effective compared to the current punitive system that we have in place and they were worried that a wrong message may be put across to the pupils that we have gone "soft" if we replace the current system with restorative practices.

To correct this misconception of restorative practices, many sessions of clarification and reiteration of the restorative practices philosophy were carried out during staff meetings throughout the initial year of implementation. In addition, to show the commitment of the school in adopting the philosophy of restorative practices, a mid year seminar on restorative practices in 2006 was dedicated to revisit the philosophy of restorative practices.

After implementing the mid year seminar in 2006, the school management decided that a separate seminar on restorative practices be conducted on an annual basis to take stock of our restorative journey and for staff to share their success stories and strategies that worked for them. It is also a platform for management to share new insights and to chart the school's direction towards a restorative culture. We have since conducted two in-house restorative practices seminars in June 2006 and June 2007. Restorative Practices have also been identified as one of the school's key learning programmes in our total learning plan, aligning it to the school's stretch goal of becoming a restorative school by 2010.

e)   *Developing a Framework for Restorative Practices*

Having realigned the school's stretch goal, the core team had to develop a framework for restorative practices. In order to achieve the stretch goal, the framework has to be conceptualized in an uncomplicated way to help staff understand how a restorative culture can be created and sustained.

For a start, members of the staff were introduced to the Social Discipline Window (Figure 1), which describes four basic approaches to creating and maintaining social norms and behavioural boundaries (Wachtel, T, 2005). The four quadrants illustrate different combinations of high to low control and high to low support. According to Wachtel and McCold (2000), the restorative domain combines high control and high support and is characterized by doing things *with* people, rather than *to* them or *for* them. Members of the staff agreed that the school currently lies in the punitive domain and to realize the stretch goal of becoming a restorative school, it was unanimously agreed upon for us to make the switch to the restorative domain.
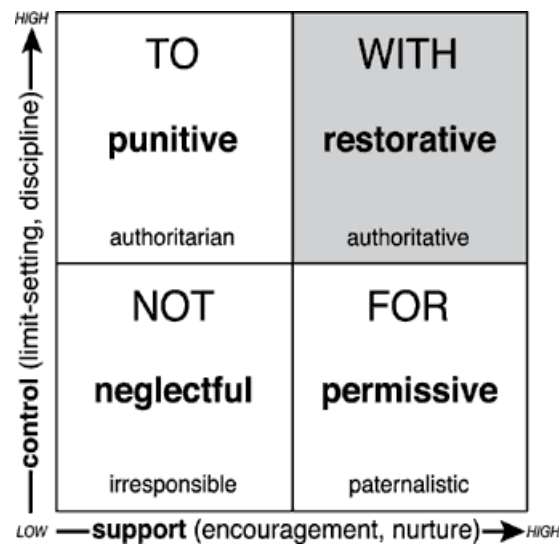

Figure 1: Social Discipline Window, Wachtel, T (2005).

After confirming the ideal domain that would fit perfectly with the school's stretch goal of becoming a restorative school, the school management was mindful of the need to put in place a framework that would provide the direction for a change in culture and reaching the preferred outcomes. It was then decided that we refine the existing framework for pupil management by infusing the element of restorative practices into the three areas that support pupil related processes (See Figure 2).

RE-DIRECT
(Pupil Development and Management)

Our Goal

Responsible Ping Yians

Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices

TEACH
(Instructional Programmes)

SUPPORT
(Non Instructional Programmes)

Figure 2: Ping Yi's Framework for Restorative Practices

The notion of "TEACH" reiterates the importance of instruction in the classroom and the paramount importance for teachers to change their pupils' behaviour through building positive relationships in the classroom. According to McEwan and Damer (2000), one of the most powerful ways to improve the behaviour of unmanageable pupils is to find curriculum and teaching methods to ensure their success. To promote a collaborative and restorative culture, teachers need to recognize that pupils have taken a long period of time to "develop" that undesirable behaviour in them and it requires the commitment of all teachers and a whole school approach to develop positive relationships whilst correcting the undesirable behaviour of pupils restoratively. After all, no matter how much teachers love teaching algebra, river processes, history of Europe or Newton's law, the many occasions that teachers lend their support and show that they care for the child will serve to strengthen that relationship even more.

The notion of "SUPPORT" outlines the other pupil processes that take place outside the classroom e.g. Co-Curricular Activities, which are equally important as the school strives to adopt a restorative culture that is pervasive throughout the school setting.

The last notion of "RE-DIRECT" acts as a safety net to repair and rebuild relationships that have been strained. Compared to the earlier notions which are more proactive and preventive in nature, this notion is rather reactive and it may only involve about 1-5% of the population. The hierarchy of proactive to reactive processes is probably best illustrated by Morrison's (2004) model, (adapted slightly for this paper) shown in Figure 3.

RE-DIRECT

1-5% of population
(Reactive responses)

RE-
BUILDING
RELATIONSHIPS

REPAIRING
RELATIONSHIPS

RE-AFFIRMING
RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH DEVELOPING
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Whole School
(Proactive
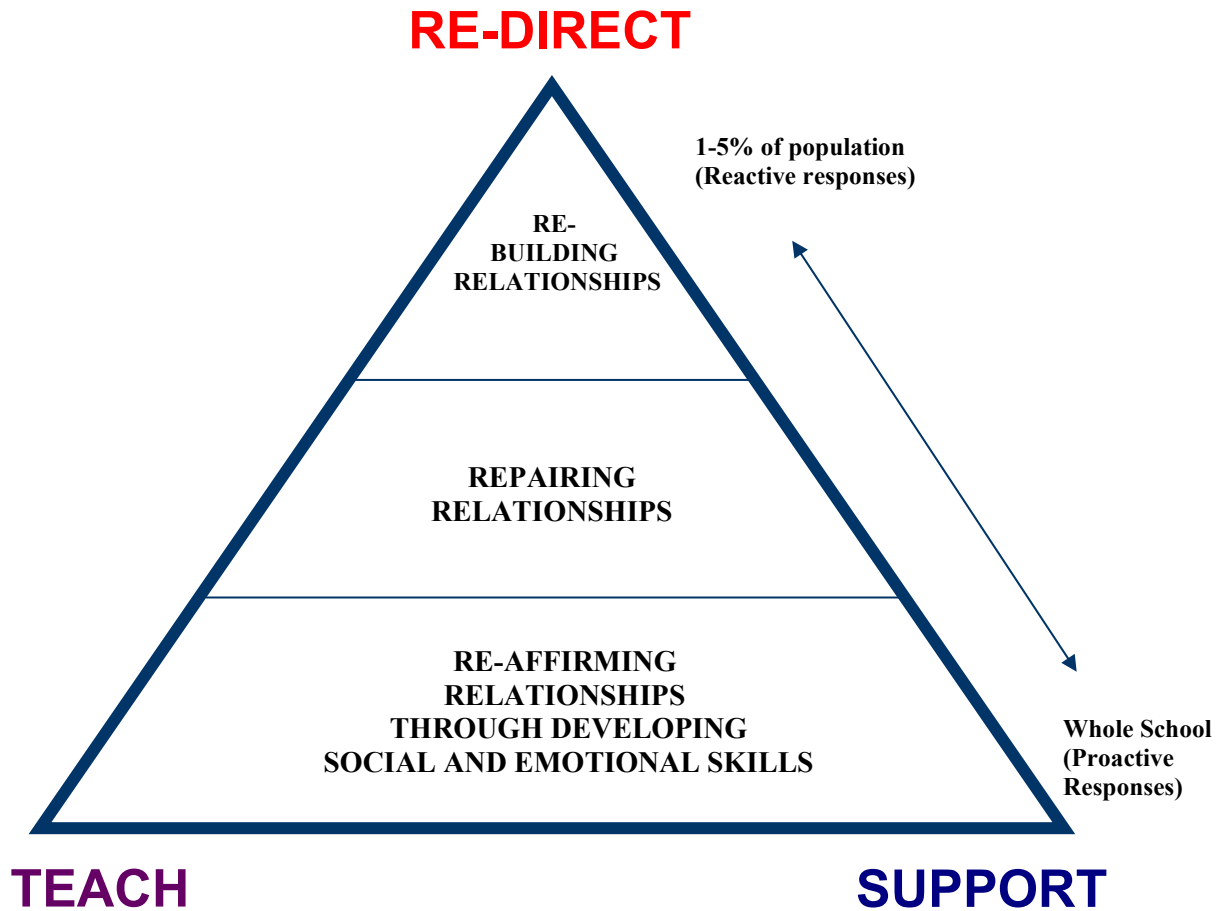Responses)

TEACH

SUPPORT

Figure 3: Hierarchy of Restorative Responses, Adapted from Morrison (2004)

f)   New Systems and Structures

To support the framework for restorative practices, the school decided to embark on two new systems in 2006, namely the Year Head System and the House System.

The traditional departmental system is effective in maintaining continuity in the academic pursuit as pupils progress from the lower level to the higher. However, it does not provide an effective mechanism to monitor the holistic development of the pupils in the physical, aesthetic, socio emotional and moral domains. Therefore, the Year Head System acts as a complementary system that will ensure a balanced horizontal

development for pupils in all these domains during their 4 to 5 years in school. This is needed for positive relationships to be nurtured. With senior teachers being appointed as custodians to take charge of each level, the platform for monitoring of pupils as well as building relationships through a whole school approach is made more evident.

The House System provides greater opportunities for interaction among students of different levels, team-building across classes and streams and gives pupils more opportunities to develop a greater sense of loyalty and belonging to their respective houses. This will deepen the bonding between pupils who may be from different levels and streams. The House System also lends itself well as a platform for teachers from the same house to bond with pupils who they do not teach thus creating another layer of positive relationship within the school setting.

g)   *Implementation and Findings*

For the school to experience a culture change, the implementation of restorative practices has to be carried out in a pervasive manner across the school setting. From 2006, the implementation plans have been mainly focused in the three areas outlined in the framework for restorative practices.

In the area of "TEACH", restorative principles are used for setting expectations at the beginning of the year for all classes and in the lower secondary Interdisciplinary Project Work (IPW). This is done through the use of Circle Time, which creates a caring group feeling where people involved are valued and able to learn more about others and themselves (Smith, 2003). Circle Time does not only facilitate the setting of expectations in class. The underlying principle behind the use of circle time is to allow for a safe,

trusting and non-blaming environment for the students to share their thoughts and explore other ideas, in the process, raising their self confidence.

In the next area of "SUPPORT", restorative practices are infused in the Co-curricular activities of the school. For example, teachers in charge of co-curricular activities will use circle time to set expectations and discuss issues pertaining to the conduct of their respective activities before or after each training session. In addition, circle time is also used explicitly to pilot the teaching of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in co-curricular activities in 2007.

The last area of "RE-DIRECT" addresses about 1-5% of the pupil population, which requires a lot of attention from the school to "repair" and "rebuild" the strained relationship. Since 2006, three formal class conferences have been conducted to address issues like disruptiveness and undesirable learning attitude. Although the three conferences were conducted in a similar fashion, all three yielded different results and achieved varying degrees of success.

On a larger scale, for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of restorative practices and to achieve a higher level of buy in from the staff, three members of the pupil management department decided to use restorative practices in a controlled environment to address the problem of latecoming to school - to see if restorative practices really works. During the first term of school, normal procedures without the use of restorative practices were put in place to tackle the problem of latecoming. In term 2, all latecomers were dealt with using the restorative principles (affective questioning). The use of restorative practices in term 2 resulted in a considerable decline of latecomers to school (See Tables 1 and 2).

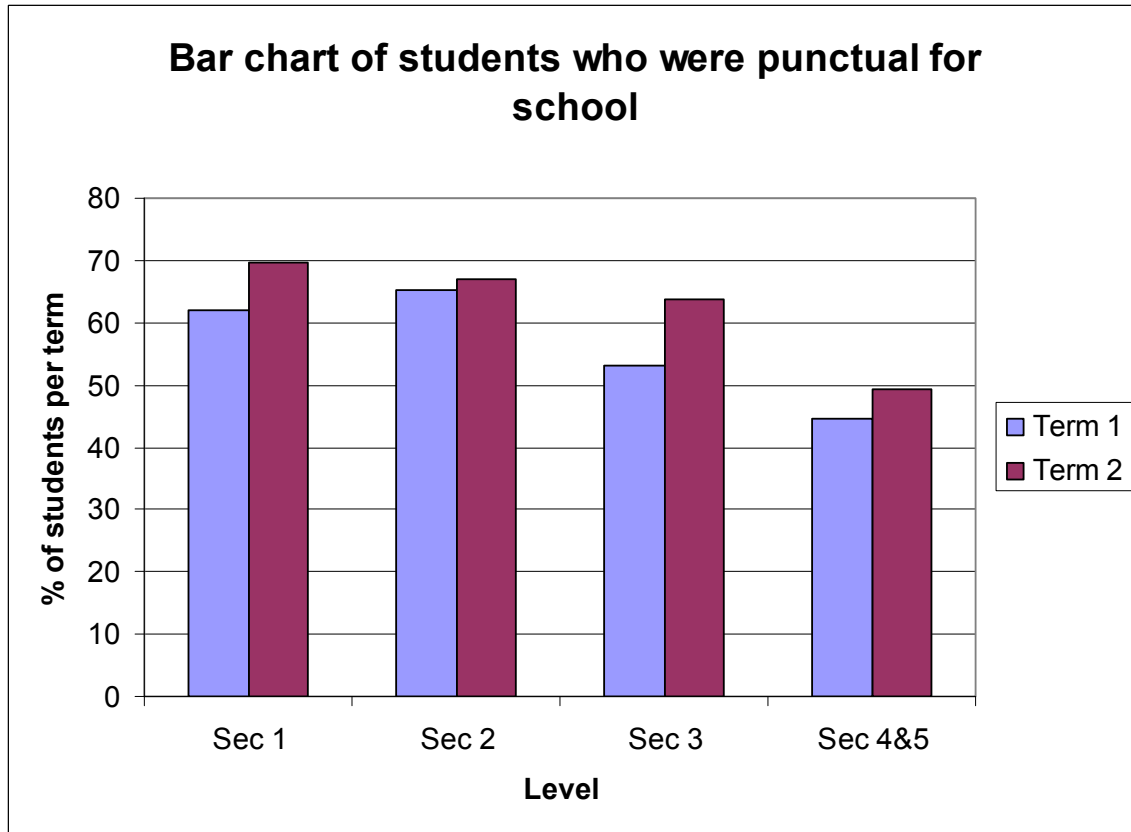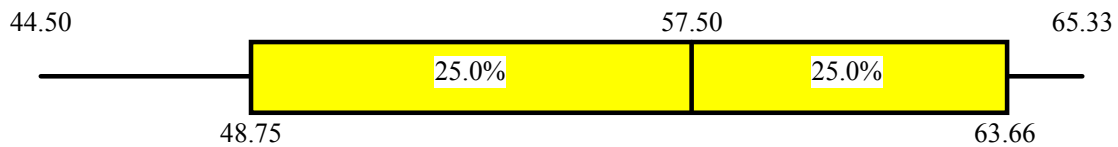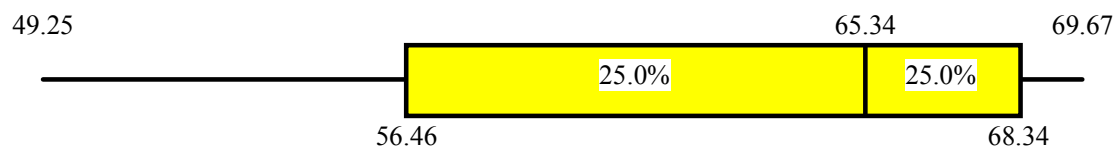# Bar chart of students who were punctual for school

Table 1: % of pupils who were punctual for school

Above: Box plot showing the median % of students who were punctual for school on average per level in term 1.

Above: Box plot showing the median % of students who were punctual for school on average per level in term 2.

Based on the comparison, the median percentage of students who were punctual for school on average per level is 65.34% in term 2. This is about 8% higher than the median percentage of students who were punctual for school on average per level in term 1.
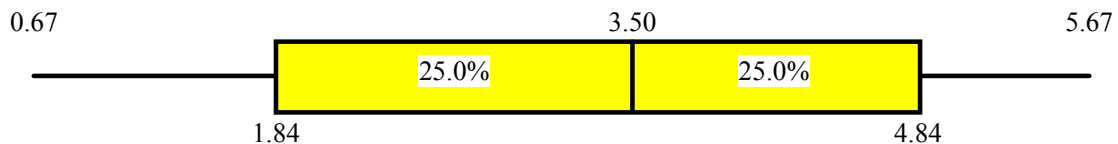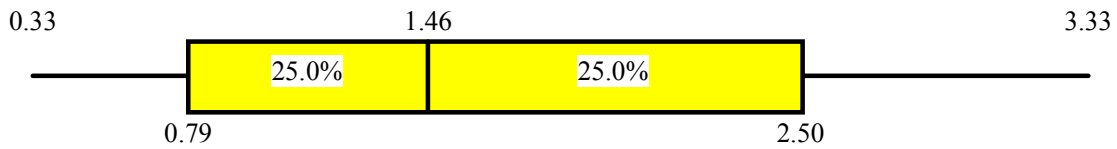
Bar chart of recalcitrant latecomers

Table 2: No. of recalcitrant latecomers (late more than 5 times in a term)

Above: Box plot showing the median % of students who were late for school more than 5 times per level in term 1.

0.33   1.46   3.33

25.0%   25.0%

0.79   2.50

Above: Box plot showing the median percentage of students who were late for school more than 5 times per level in term 2.

Based on the comparison, the median percentage of students who were late for school on average per level is 1.46% in term 2. This is about 2% lower than the median percentage of students who were late on average per level in term 1. Thus, the use of restorative principles to address the issue of latecoming proved to be a success. In addition, an analysis of other offence data from 2005 – 2007 also saw an improvement, which indicates a more positive school tone (See Tables 3-4).
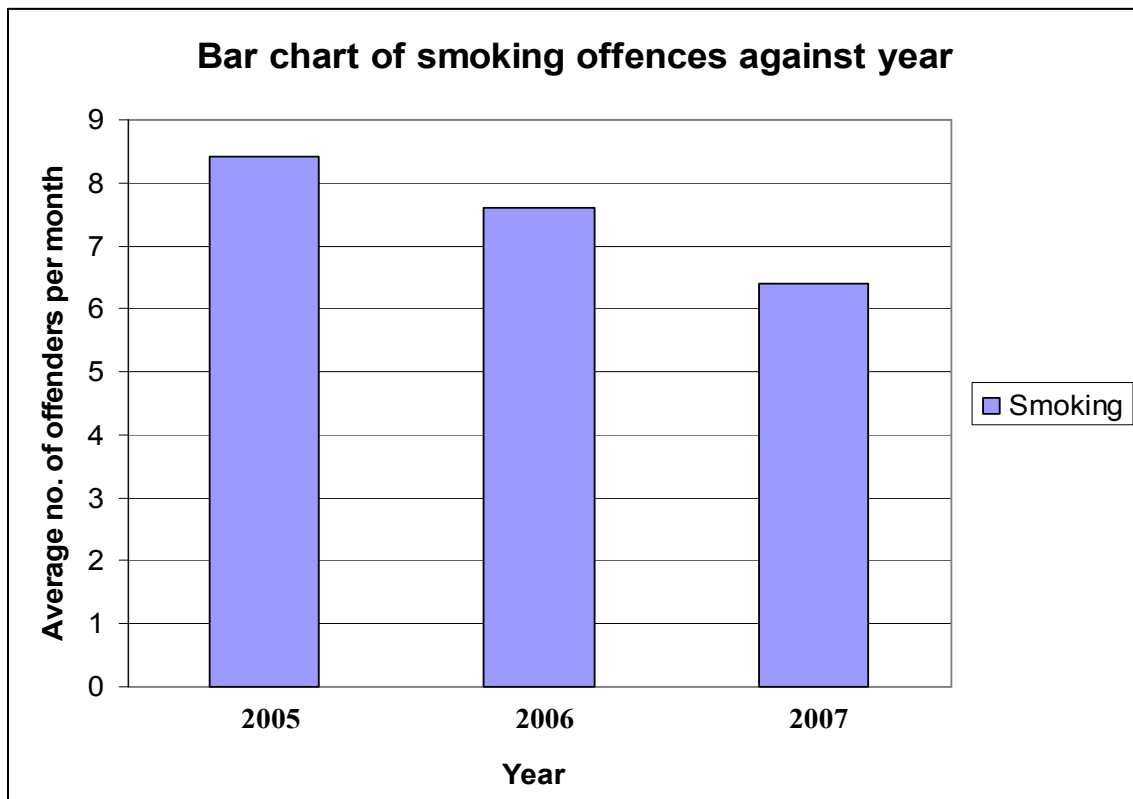

Table 3: Smoking related offences
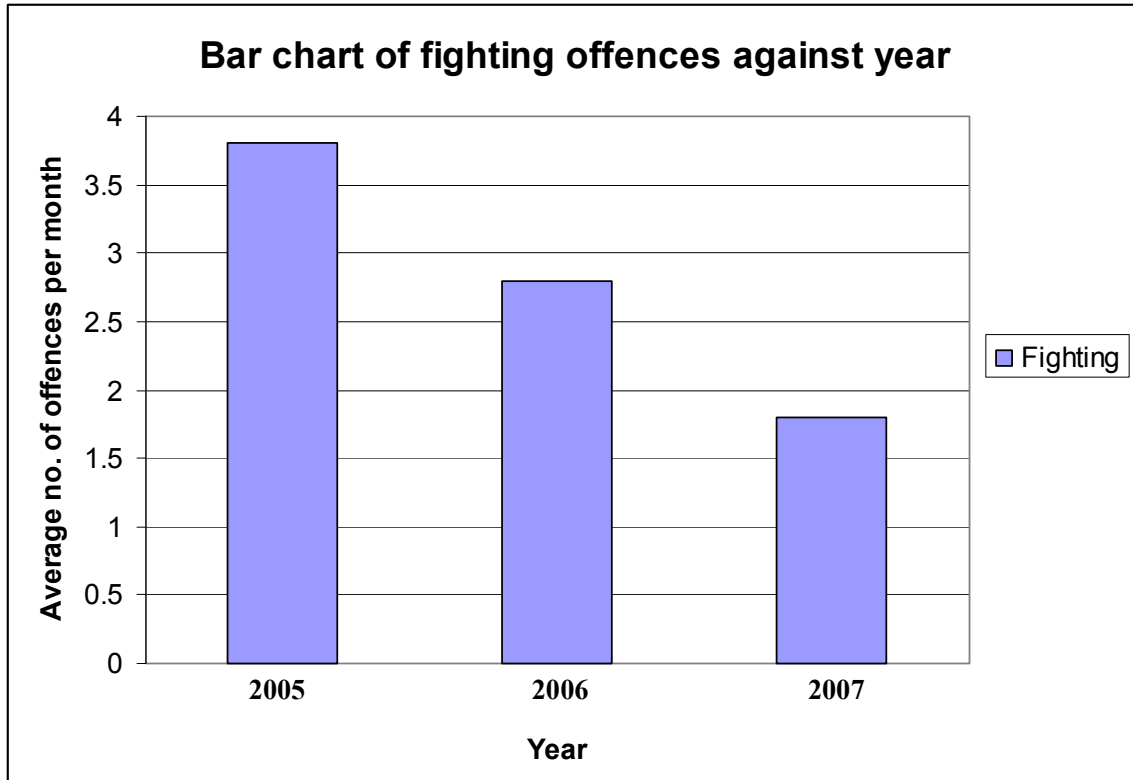
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Bar chart of fighting offences against year

Table 4: Fighting offences

The total number of offences referred by teachers has also declined sharply since 2005 (See Table 5). This seems to indicate the presence of a whole school approach in the area of pupil management, which we would consider a great step taken towards a restorative culture where every teacher cares and every child matters.
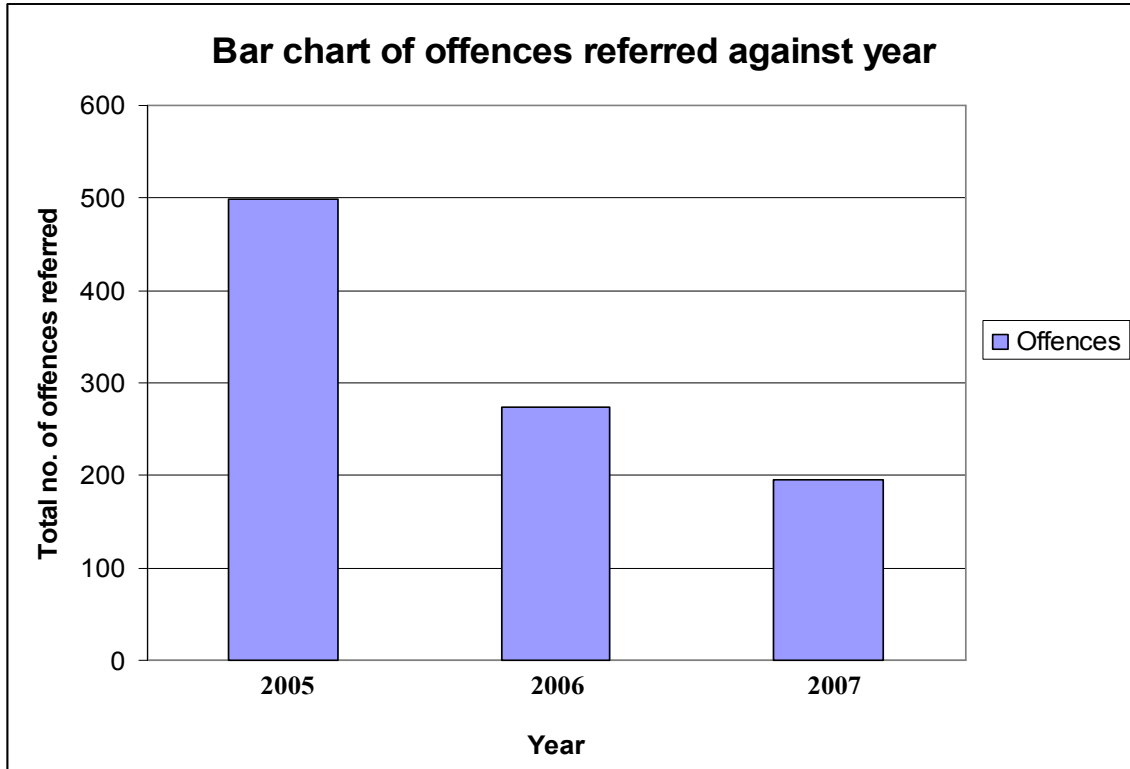
Bar chart of offences referred against year

Table 5: Total offences referred by teachers

Conclusion

Having been through about 3 years of implementation of the framework for restorative practices, Ping Yi Secondary School is still very much considered to be in the early stages on our restorative journey.

As mentioned by Blood and Thorsborne (2005), culture change does not happen overnight and that it will take about 3-5 years if change is to be sustained. Supported by the findings and observations so far, we strongly believe that we are in the right direction and are fully committed to implement restorative practices in our school with the belief that positive and deep relationships between all stakeholders is important for learning outcomes to be met. The level of understanding among staff (of restorative practices) has

certainly gone a few notches higher since we first introduced it in 2005. It is heartening to hear comments from staff and students such as:

"I've tried RP on various occasions. Sometimes it made a great difference in how things turned out"

"I have successfully facilitated RP between 2 boys who fought over a petty matter"

"Able to build closer relationship as students are able to open up to me and share their problems, making the classroom a safe environment"

"Deeper understanding of my students"

"Need to invest more time to build stronger bonds with students"

"Before the interdisciplinary project work, Navin and I were not friends. Then during project work, we helped each other and gave each other chocolates during Appreciation Time. Now, we don't fight anymore."

"During circle time, we get to contribute ideas on how to make our school better. Not all our ideas are accepted, but we get to understand why."

Moving ahead, the school will continue to persevere and engage more stakeholders (parents and student leaders) in the implementation of the framework. Through these initiatives, we hope to make restorative practices more pervasive and build stronger relationships among all stakeholders, bringing us closer towards a restorative school by 2010.

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