

# THE MacKILLOP MODEL OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

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Have you heard students say the following?

- 'It's not fair.'
- 'It wasn't my fault.'
- 'They wouldn't listen to me.'
- 'She's always getting me into trouble.'
- 'We were only joking.'

Have you heard teachers speak in this manner?

- 'I can't do anything with that kid.'
- 'We need to revisit that anti-bullying and teasing policy.'
- 'Kids are certainly different these days.'

Could these words be spoken by a parent at home?

- 'What did the teacher do when you told her?'
- 'Stand up for yourself. If he hits you, you have the right to hit him back.'

If any of these statements sound familiar, then restorative practice may be just what you need to help students, staff and parents to find healthy ways of relating in school, at home and in the workplace.

You may be thinking, 'Yes, we'd all like healthy relationships, but how do you build relationships and then maintain them?'

Like many of my colleagues, I have been concerned over a number of years with the need to establish effective practices and policies that are restorative. Keen to look at student



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behaviours, engagement in learning, social appropriateness and pastoral needs of the students, I knew it was essential to find an appropriate framework. Any effective framework requires common language, common understandings and agreed-upon strategies for implementation. Together with my leadership team, I began to search.

Restorative practice met these requirements. The process finds its modern origin in the juvenile justice system. It has gradually made its way into the community service area, into secondary schools and now into the primary school domain.

A Catholic two-stream primary school in Penrith at the foot of the beautiful Blue Mountains, Mary MacKillop Primary has developed restorative practice as a way of building healthy relationships. We are in the developmental stages of our implementation of the MacKillop Model of Restorative Practice and in the process of gathering data to support what we believe to be true—that restorative practice is making a difference to the culture of our school. We are still on a journey of discovery and refinement, but I would like to share with you a summary of that journey to this point.

Students with problematic behaviours usually provide the initial impetus for rethinking a safer school environment; very quickly we saw that the way to really provide a safer environment for learning and for socialising was to introduce this framework to all the stakeholders in an explicit way and to ensure this introduction took place as early as possible.

Creating a safer school is essentially around teaching children to engage in quality relationships. These relationships become the building block for all learning. We are all familiar with outcomes-based education and with the indicators that are the pointers on the journey. Relationships, up to this point, have rarely been shaped by a similar set of guideposts. It is clear that in schools, homes and society in general we suffer dislocation. This dislocation impacts on learning, family life and workplace relations.

At Mary MacKillop Primary we were no different from many schools. We had developed processes and practices to a point where the children were able to articulate and (we believed) understand all that was required for the development of good relationships.

From time to time, incidents on the playground and occasionally in some classrooms alerted us to the fact that our safe and caring environment was being stretched. The changing face of our school community was being revealed through the various stresses that are particular to our times, including fragmented and blended families together with a higher than average number of deaths of parents and other family members. Teachers and other staff members struggled to guide, support

and challenge students acting out of hurt, confusion and, for some, a sense of being grossly disconnected. These were questions shared by a caring and committed parent body.

Teachers continued to actively monitor and negotiate relationship difficulties. The difficulties were not endemic but were consistently pointing to deeper hurts and tensions.

A frustrated teacher declared one day after an incident involving emotional bullying (referring to the students), 'They know what to say, but they just don't really understand, and they can't empathize with anyone else's pain.'

This was sadly the truth. These students had experienced years of immersion in anti-bullying and teasing policies, they knew bullying was wrong, they could talk the appropriate talk, they knew the school policies, but they just didn't get it! The idea that their actions had an impact on others, and that those actions resulted in our school sometimes feeling unsafe for others, was new and startling information for these students.

It was about that time I was introduced to restorative practice by the Australian director of Real Justice, Terry O'Connell. After viewing a presentation and much discussion, I was convinced that this might be the framework we were seeking.

The staff began the journey towards the more explicit framework that would hopefully guide our efforts to build healthy relationships among students, teachers and parents. On the journey, members of staff were joined by parents, each eager to be fully briefed and engaged in this process.

The framework, initially constructed by former police sergeant Terry O'Connell, is composed of a number of elements and understandings including a belief in fair process. It is underpinned by the research of American psychiatrist Donald Nathanson and Australian criminologist John Braithwaite, and also by the work of Ted Wachtel and Paul McCold of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, who designed the 'relational window' (or 'social discipline window'). However, perhaps the most critical element for schools is to be found in the restorative questions. There are two sets of questions, one for the perpetrator and one for the person who has been harmed.

The following questions are asked of those who have caused harm:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking about at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you did?
- In what way?
- What do you think you need to do to make things right?

The second set of questions is asked of those who have suffered harm:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has this incident had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

There are some practical considerations in beginning to use these questions. In order to embed the questions in our practice, students, teachers, classrooms and playground were all provided with copies of the questions on cards, posters and signs.

The questions offer students an opportunity to talk, listen, think and act. They levy responsibility in a fair but firm way on the students struggling to manage their behaviours. For those who have been hurt, the restorative model of high expectations combined with high support helps them work through the hurt, to meet the offender, to discuss the issues and be part of the healing and learning process.

This approach helps to lessen anxiety around issues. Anger is managed and appropriately expressed, a new objectivity is introduced and the way forward is clear and agreed upon by all stakeholders.

After being heard and involved in all that has been decided, students can go forward satisfied with the process they have experienced. Teachers are clearer and more confident in dealing with students at the point of the incident. There is an opportunity for objectivity and self-searching, which acts a circuit breaker when things go wrong.

One of the most radical components of the MacKillop Model of Restorative Practice is the involvement of all three sectors of the school community. Presentations were made to the whole school staff, parents and students. The order in which these groups were involved was important, as part of the process was to set up terms of engagement where students and their parents could talk and understand the same language.

I believe we can develop in our students the capacity to form workable and healthy relationships, and to find ways to work through challenges and failures, when we establish a framework for common reference. The experience at Mary MacKillop Primary has shown that this is possible.

Put simply, the restorative practice framework is a process for forming effective relationships and a way of restoring them when they break down.

You may ask, do we still need formal student management processes? The answer is yes.

However, we have found that the number of incidents reported to administration has consistently fallen in number and consistently decreased in severity. Our aim is that all interactions are characterized by a restorative approach.

Restorative practice can be employed in any school system looking to build a positive school culture. Many teachers and parents are pleased to be affirmed in their own existing relationships with children. The opportunity to skill our children for the complexities of the 21st century is both a necessity and a privilege. Restorative practice is one way to do that.

Today we hear comments from students such as:

‘At home when I had a fight with my sister, I went in my room and read these questions to myself and it really helped.’

—Natalie

‘It has helped me when I have had a fight with a boy in our class. A teacher asked us those questions and after we had answered them and listened to both sides of the story I felt better.’

—Andrew

‘I was outside and had a fight with some of my friends and I was angry and sat in front of the sign with the questions on it and the questions helped me a lot.’

—Samantha

‘On a number of different occasions, when I was arguing with people, I thought about the restorative practice and what I had learnt from it. I then talked to the person that I was fighting with and we resolved our problems.’

—Anne

‘If there is a fight happening with two of my friends or any of them, I would know not to take sides. I know what questions to ask but sort of stay out of it at the same time.’

—Renee

Teachers respond that:

‘I’ve become a better listener. I have discovered bigger issues behind the behaviours.’

‘The children are beginning to trust themselves.’

‘My relationships with the children have matured.’

‘The children have begun to make small decisions.’

‘For the children who could not verbalize, I ask them to draw what they were trying to say. I also asked them to draw what they wanted to be different.’

Parents shared that:

‘Restorative practice has changed my life.’

‘Why didn’t you have this when my older children were at school?’

‘Thank you for making sure we were a part of this new way of working with our children.’