

Restorative Practices in Schools: Far-Reaching Implications

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In 1999, the New Zealand Ministry of Education contracted a team from the University of Waikato to develop a process for conferencing in schools. The brief was to utilise restorative justice principles to develop a conferencing process for use in schools. The purpose was to test whether such an approach to wrongdoing could reduce the exponential increase of suspensions, particularly of Maori boys, who were, and still are, disproportionately represented in reported numbers of suspensions, stand-downs and exclusions.

We introduced the process into five schools initially, and a further 24 schools subsequently sent staff for training. In the participating schools, numbers of suspensions went down, as they have declined in most schools where similar initiatives have continued. Reasons for this reduction in suspensions may well include the well-known Hawthorne effect – the effect of being in the spotlight.

Our projects were strictly professional development for staff, rather than research per se. In developing our process, we drew upon the practices of family group conferencing developed by the Department of Social Welfare in the early 1990s in New Zealand, principles of restorative justice then being brought forward by Howard Zehr (1990, 1994), and the theoretical and practice resources of narrative therapy (Monk et al., 1997; White and Epston, 1992).

The values and principles of restorative justice were described in the first chapter of this book. However, the primary purpose of schools, namely the learning and development of children and young people, is very different from the correctional focus that is central to the legal system. Exploration of these differences would be a valuable project, regrettably one that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, I shall simply raise some conceptual issues that arise in approaching the use of restorative principles in schools.

Details of a process for conducting a restorative conference in a school setting are provided in chapter 11. Different approaches to conferencing use subtly different processes, and they may also emphasise different outcomes. Similarly, different people expect different outcomes from the introduction of

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these practices into schools. Policy makers and school principals, parents and academics will, not surprisingly, emphasise different aspects. For some, the primary outcome sought is the development of a specific plan for managing and monitoring behaviour in the future. Others may want to see achievement in learning as a test of success.

The University of Waikato approach to the conferencing process – more recently applied to 'small' or 'deans' conversations – does not deny the importance of these objectives, but it does place primary importance on two things that are prior conditions for cooperative behaviour and collaboration in learning: one is preserving and/or restoring the dignity of those involved in the conference, the other is peaceful coexistence through respectful relationships (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004).

My professional interest is in theorising the notion of restoration in a way that explains both the individual and the social psychology of restorative practices, including the process of conferencing, without resorting to a deficit account of the young person (Drewery, 2004). The way language is used in conferencing is a primary focus of my theoretical interest, because it is primarily through language that new meanings, new relationships and new personal identities are produced (Drewery, 2005). In a restorative conversation, therefore, what is said, how it is said, and when and in what order it is said are theoretically and practically important because the process is what produces new identities and new relationships.

The introduction of restorative conferencing into schools in the late 1990s was initially part of what the Ministry of Education called the Suspension Reduction Initiative. More recently, the ministry has been focused on the Student Engagement Initiative.

The intention of the Suspension Reduction Initiative was to reduce the numbers of students who were being suspended, expelled or excluded. In 1999, around the time our new conferencing process was being trialled, the Ministry of Education published *Guidance for Principals and Boards of Trustees on Stand-Downs, Suspensions, Exclusions and Expulsions*. These guidelines introduced *new* definitions and a new category, stand-down. Stand-down means the removal of a student from school for a specified period of no more than 5 days, and no more than 10 days in total in one year.¹

¹ Suspension means the formal removal of a student from school until the board of trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting. The principal is the only one who can make the decision to stand down or suspend a student from a school. The board may decide to lift the suspension, with or without reasonable conditions, or to exclude

These initiatives have been only partially successful. Over the last few years, suspensions and expulsions have decreased slightly, but the number of stand-downs has continued to increase. Early leaving exemptions for students who wish to leave school before they reach the legal leaving age are also on the increase.

According to the Ministry of Education (2007a), 22,467 stand-downs were reported in 2006. This compared with 21,862 in 2005. The most common reasons for stand-downs in 2006 were continual disobedience (26%), physical assault on other students (24%) and verbal abuse of staff (15%). These behaviours accounted for 65% of stand-downs each year from 2000 to 2006. There were 5,008 suspension cases in 2006 compared with 5,145 in 2005. Continual disobedience (27%), misuse of drugs (20%) and physical assault on other students (18%) accounted for 65% of these in 2006.

Students who are male, Maori or 14 years old continue to be over-represented in stand-down and suspension statistics compared with their proportions in the general school population.

Pasifika students, both male and female, have comparatively high rates of stand-down.

Secondary schools are more likely to use stand-downs and suspensions than are primary schools. Between 2002 and 2006, about 25% of all schools (primary and secondary) used suspension. In 2006, this figure included 65% of secondary schools. In 2006, 25% of secondary schools suspended students at an average rate of twice the national average (Ministry of Education, 2007a). In 2004, 83% of primary schools had no suspensions. Of all schools that suspended students (25%), about 10% were responsible for 43% of all suspensions (Ministry of Education, 2005). I calculate this to mean that 2.5% of all schools were responsible for 43% of suspensions. It would have been interesting to analyse this figure in relation to the claim that students from decile² 1 and 2 schools

or expel the student. Exclusion means the formal removal of a student aged under 16 years from the school, with the requirement that the student enrol elsewhere. In this case the principal of the excluding school "must try to arrange for the student to attend another school" within 10 days, and to inform the Ministry of Education if they are not successful (section 15(5) of the Education Act 1989). Expulsion means the formal removal of a student aged 16 or over from school, and the student may enrol elsewhere (Ministry of Education, 1999). There is another category, exemption, which permits students under the school leaving age to leave school without a requirement to re-enrol.

2. A school's decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socioeconomic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socioeconomic communities, whereas decile 10

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were 4.9 times more likely to be suspended than were students in the highest quintile (deciles 9 and 10) (Ministry of Education, 2007b), but there were insufficient data available to do so. *A Report on New Zealand Student Engagement 2006* states that decile 2-5 schools make up the bulk of schools standing down students (Ministry of Education, 2007a). Equivalent data were not reported for suspensions. Although the age-standardised rate of suspensions per 1,000 students went down from 2000 to 2006 (8.0 students per 1,000 in 2000 compared with 7.0 students per 1,000 in 2006), the rate of stand-downs has not (26.1 students per 1,000 in 2000 to 31.4 students per 1,000 in 2006) (Ministry of Education, 2007b).

Thus, in spite of the overall reduction in suspensions, there are still rather large numbers of students who are temporarily excluded from schools under the heading 'stand-downs'. How should we interpret these numbers, each instance of which reflects significant disruption to the lives of the students concerned and their families, as well as significant misery in the working lives of teachers and school managers? Why would 14-year-old, male, Maori and Pasifika students be excluded (however briefly) in greater numbers than others? Is it true that students from low decile schools are more likely to be excluded? And finally, how shocking is it, in fact, that a little over one in 30 students is given the equivalent of timeout each year?

The matter of discipline in schools has previously been treated as a child development issue, and as such left to teachers, parents and other education professionals such as counsellors and resource teachers for learning and behaviour. Adolescence is a formative time. One developmental theorist, Anna Freud, even went so far as to suggest that not experiencing storm and stress during adolescence is itself abnormal. Moral development also features during this period: young people are inevitably faced with many conflicting questions about what is right and in whom they should place their trust.

The world has changed significantly in the last half century, and this must have an impact on growing up in a post-modern world. One interpretation of the whakatauki (proverb), "Ka pa te ruha, ka hao te rangatahi" (When the old net is worn out and cast aside, the new net is put into use), encapsulates the expectation that at some time, the older generation might have to step aside and let the young take over (Keelan, 2004). Of course, every generation faces the problem of transmitting its values and assisting young people to learn how to manage situations where they come in conflict with social norms. At the same

schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of these students. Census information is used to calculate the decile (Ministry of Education, 2006b).

time, history shows that each generation also has its own 'truth', its own 'take' on the social conditions it meets, and almost by definition, it will of necessity not only learn from, but also surpass, the experience of previous generations.

Teachers' skills in behaviour management are also in focus in relation to this problem. Both the teaching profession and policy makers (and possibly the general population) tend to view the problem of managing behaviour in the classroom as a professional skill to be learned by teachers, and link this directly to the figures on stand-downs and suspensions. The most recent statement of intent from the Ministry of Education links personalised learning, presence, engagement and achievement (Ministry of Education, 2007c). Transgression of classroom and school norms of behaviour by students may also be thought of as resulting from problematic peer group influence or poor parenting.

My colleagues Russell Bishop, Mere Berryman, Sarah-Jane Tiakiwai and Cath Richardson (2004) asked students and teachers what was the most important thing affecting students' achievement. Students said they work hard for teachers with whom they have a good relationship, and teachers overwhelmingly blamed lack of student achievement on parents who do not value schooling and education. This finding has prompted the Ministry of Education to fund a large professional development programme, Te Kotahitanga, which is aimed at addressing this apparent mismatch, particularly in relation to Maori students (Ministry of Education, 2006c). By implication, that project also lays some of the blame for poor student achievement at the feet of teachers. One cannot dispute that student attendance is one of the most significant variables influencing student achievement in senior secondary school (Hughes et al., 1999). But whilst Bishop and colleagues have suggested that there could be a systematic discrepancy in teachers' expectations of Maori students, poor student engagement overall is almost certainly not down to any single cause, and could well relate to a variety of factors, many of which are beyond the control of either parents or teachers.

In a post-modern world – where the pace of social change and the multiplicity of influential factors have outstripped anyone's capacity to keep up with them – it is possible that the disaffection of young people from schools may also incorporate a message for those of us who are trying to maintain stability within the status quo. The figures for stand-downs, suspensions and exclusions are unprecedented, to a point where discipline in schools has become a broad social issue. Thus, it would be worth inquiring how much of this problem is a reflection of young people's resistance to schooling practices, including both behavioural expectations and curriculum. The fact that young people are maturing earlier than before, yet are expected to stay at school for

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longer, may be placing unexamined strains on our schools, families and students themselves. If developmental theory is right, that this is a time when identity formation, including moral development, is thought to be a primary psychosocial task, then it is normal to see it as a time of protest, questioning rules and challenging set boundaries. Continual disobedience, verbal abuse and physical assault are unacceptable, yet sometimes they are also hallmarks of protest. The way schools respond to these incidents is an important modelling opportunity for young people to learn how to respond appropriately and effectively to conflict. Schools are an important instrument of socialisation – a fact that is very present for those working in them, but which often seems to be forgotten in current debates about learning and achievement related to outcomes in the National Certificate in Educational Achievement.

From a school's perspective, the problem of reducing suspensions, rather than being about increasing student engagement, often translates into a question about how to get its students and their families to conform to the expectations of the school – to follow the rules. If stand-downs and suspensions are indicators of 'a form of behaviour management', and restorative conferencing is brought in to address this problem of escalating exclusions of one sort or another, then restorative conferencing and other practices such as restorative conversations are being understood as disciplinary measures designed to maintain a particular regime of morality. This sounds more draconian than most of us who espouse restorative principles would like – indeed, it appears to run contrary to the principles.

This is because, intuitively, restoration is not centrally about discipline. Our team found as our projects have gone on that when a school takes on the idea of restorative conferencing, it is by implication embracing in some cases a very different approach to relationships between staff and students, and sometimes among staff, from that which may have prevailed until that time. I think that this is because the notion of restoration draws attention to the ways in which both staff and students show respect for one another – or not. A focus on restoration contrasts starkly with processes of conflict resolution based on opposition and competition, or on conferencing that is focused on criminal wrongdoing and commensurate punishment.

One of the principles of restorative justice is respect: at the University of Waikato we believe one of the outcomes of a restorative process should be to restore the mana of the young person who has offended, of those who have been offended against, and of anyone else whose care for the young person has also been offended against. Indeed, our first project was named Te Hui Whakatika by our colleague Angus Macfarlane, who introduced us to the peacemaking

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process of his Te Arawa ancestor Hikairo (see Macfarlane, 2000). Mana is a word that signals not only respect and personal dignity, it also refers to the agency of the young person. I believe that sometimes the Pākeha-dominated education system treads unwarily on the mana of our young people. A Maori approach to education has always sought to build on or scaffold what is good about mokopuna (Tangaere, 1997) – rather than to punish them. There is an openness about the way young people are cared for in many families: this includes an expectation that the mana of all involved should always remain intact. Many people, including many Maori, are very sensitive to transgression of this value, whether it be against one of their own, or by them. This may be especially so when a family is frequently and systematically placed in this position.

Nevertheless, it is a family's job to be on the side of their young: to empathise with them and to see that they grow up well. Schools too are charged with this responsibility. Arguably, a primary outcome of any form of education for young people is about becoming a sovereign person, an individual with opinions and ideas, who can contribute to society in personally unique ways. This outcome includes but transcends the notion of achievement or learning encapsulated in the National Certificate in Educational Achievement. At the same time, the process that occurs within the exchange, whether it be a restorative conference or a similar kind of conversation – or, more likely, many such conversations – is a process that will contribute to the formation of both personal and community identity. Thus, a restorative process is transformative of relationships, builds identity and community, and is therefore profoundly educational.

The process that we devised begins well before the actual meeting, where the designated person finds out who should be party to the meeting. Once the meeting is convened, there is a set sequence of questions that are addressed: the problem is named, with as many descriptions as possible. Eventually the group agrees on what the problem ought to be called. A name is chosen that does not make the problem an inevitable characteristic of the offender, but offers some space between the young person and the problem.

Then the effects of the problem are also named. The young person is often so ashamed at what is being said at this point that they cannot hold their head up, and the grandparents (or other supporters) might start to get very concerned that this is turning into a bashing. This is the turn of those who have been affected, to let out and name their worst experiences.

Then alternatives to the current story are sought: are there times when this young person acted differently, or is this negative story all that can be said about

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this young person? Once some differently focused stories are told, the facilitator asks what these alternatives suggest about the young person. The supporters start to relax as they give their loving and empathic view of their young one. Gradually, the young person's body language changes. They might say what the effects of the problem are on them: and they may even volunteer what they think can be done about it. They may apologise. The formal part of the meeting should end with a clear and do-able plan that has the support of all, with clear responsibilities for reporting and follow up. Often this is the role of the school counsellor. Informally, afterwards, over a cup of tea, it is not unusual to hear the two families make connections, apologise and make plans to follow up themselves.

What I have described here is an orchestrated, emotional journey, taken by a group of people who do not normally come together. It is designed to ensure that all present get to say what they need others to hear; it is also designed to keep hope alive. The separating of the problem from the person of the offender maintains the dignity of the latter as a sovereign person who can do differently. The young person has undergone a psychological process that is capable of transforming their identity as a wrongdoer to someone who has the opportunity to retrieve a status that carries respect. The space given to the voices of those affected, the new, alternative perceptions of the young person that are offered, and their witnessing of the contrition of the young person and their family, inevitably change their demeanour towards the offender. When the parties learn about the weaknesses and humanness of those who have previously been seen only as offenders, opponents or competitors, there is often a kind of catharsis. People can forgive a lot when they understand how something came to happen. But this is not magic. Their generosity is often conditional, and the young person must often be helped to take advantage of the opportunity that has been created for them to make amends. Making a satisfactory plan and seeing it through is also central to the process for all. Sometimes the plan includes agreed punishment: this may even be suggested by the offender or their supporters.

Interest in the use of principles of restorative justice in schools using 'restorative conferencing' began with a question about whether the formal use of conferencing in disciplinary matters could lead to fewer suspensions. The association with the success of family group conferencing with young people by the then Department of Social Welfare is clear. Initial evidence showed that there was a lot of satisfaction with the process among participants in our initial project, but that conferencing used up a lot of time on the part of all involved (Adair and Dixon, 2000). The Ministry of Education has so far declined to introduce the process into schools in a systematic fashion. Many schools have

taken the initiative, meanwhile, investing their own funds to engage private providers to train their staff to use a conferencing process. More recently, the term 'restorative practices' has become fashionable, indicating a move in emphasis, away from the correctional connotations of the family group conference and the criminal associations of the legal system, towards a more educational focus on ways of interacting that have at their centre the learning and development of the young people involved. The range of practices now referred to under this heading may or may not also have some explicit form of correctional or disciplinary intent. Restorative practices in schools include less confrontational discipline, and a focus on relational practices earlier in the chain of command, for example in the classroom, between students and teachers, between students in the playground, and in the dean's or principal's office. In short, the introduction of restorative practices involves the entire culture or ethos of a school. This move accords well with our experience: after doing numerous conferences, we ended up feeling that conferencing should be the last in a long chain of formal and informal interactions that are characterised by a desire to engage in respectful relationships at every level. This focus on a 'restorative' school culture is quite a different concept from that which sees conferencing as simply a disciplinary measure.

However, this interpretation of the concept is itself not clearly agreed on. Battles for the ethos of the school frequently ensued during our introduction of restorative practices: the primary objection by those opposed to it was that it was 'nothing more than a slap on the wrist with a wet bus ticket'. Anecdotal evidence and the report by Buckley and Maxwell (2007) support this perception. This kind of objection is borne of a (mis)understanding of the practices as simply a (weak) form of punishment. It also overlooks the (once again anecdotal) accounts of students who have gone through a conferencing process, and who attest to how hard it was for them to do so. In spite of the difficulties, however, some amazing things can come out of a conference. These include better teacher—student relationships, better relationships between school and home, better understanding between students, and increased participation by the community in the school.

Perhaps because conferences often happen after school or in the evening, or perhaps because they did not appreciate these other objectives, classroom teachers sometimes resisted participation — even when it may have been their own interactions that had brought the student to this point. Yet when they did come to a conference, teachers almost always found out something about the 'problem' student that they did not know before, which changed their view completely. Several teachers were so overcome by what they heard that they

cried. At one such conference, one young man sat between his mother and sister, with his father and his father's girlfriend on the other side of the table. His teacher, who had been driven to distraction, said that she hated the days when she had his class, and lay awake the night before dreading it. The young man told of how pissed off he was that his father is no longer around, because he loved fixing cars with him, and wanted to become a mechanic. The pleasure of mucking about with cars had now gone. He told of his hatred of the father's new girlfriend, and how his life now felt as though it had no purpose. The conference ended with the student apologising to the teacher, saying he had no idea she would care that much. The girlfriend committed herself to the young man's growth and development, and the father made plans to spend time helping his son fix a car he had left behind. The plan included a programme for helping the student to catch up, and help from the school counsellor (also present) for him to write letters of apology to other teachers not present, outlining how he was proposing to catch up, and asking for their support. The presence of the dean, and his mother and sister were central to the success of this conference, because of the communal relationships that were involved. In such instances, we saw relationships not only between teacher and student transformed before our eyes, but also in the entire family, such is the power of the process. These teachers then helped to promote the use of conferencing in their schools.

Conferencing can also transform the relationships between school, home and community. We saw a school learn, for example, that a young man, brought to conference because of frequent lateness and fighting in the playground, was actually taking responsibility for his younger siblings, and all were being cared for by their grandfather, who was working to keep the family going, against great odds. A useful response to such a situation is surely not to blame such a man, but rather, to find ways to support him. Through a conferencing process, which by its nature brings together the community of care around a young person, the school can learn about the effects of its rules on students' families, and also on relationships between students. By including peers in the conference, it is possible to get a very different perspective on both the problem, and what to do about it. For instance, regular fighting in the playground might be shown up as the effect of bullying on someone who was in a weakened position in their peer group because of non-school-related responsibilities, when all this had previously been hidden and called something else. A further spin-off from this kind of conference has been that the kaumatua (elder) who supported the family was invited to talk with the deputy principal, and eventually they worked together for better links between the school and the local runanga.

The way the school communicates with its constituency may also be transformed by what happens in a conference: one of the first bits of feedback we received on our training was from a secondary school counsellor of a large urban school, who reported bringing together the parents of two boys who were at loggerheads. After the formal conversation one of the parents said, "Well, that is the best conversation we've ever had with this school!". However, such transformations of relationship depend on the capacity of the school to learn and change. To use restorative conferencing solely as a one-way, top-down process is to mistake a major point, which is, that the transformation and restoration of a relationship is a multi-directional process. These practices are not for schools that are not interested in learning about, and potentially improving on, the effects of their own regulatory and other professional practices on students and their communities.

One of the things we developed in our projects was a description of a restorative school, which emphasised:

- working for respectful relationships among all members of the school community;
- focusing on encouragement and possibility rather than failure and deficit;
- having teachers see themselves as in relation with students and their parents, not as authorities over them;
- having a focus on restoring order by restoring relationships rather than restoring authority when disciplinary offences occur;
- including parents and visitors, who are welcomed as part of the school community; and
- ensuring the environment is one where children and staff can enjoy their school life and have fun (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004).

This is a list that almost all school personnel recognise as reflecting their values. And yet our experiences in introducing restorative practices to schools show some very disparate interpretations of, and ways of approaching, these goals. It is also clear that some schools and perhaps many teachers do not see their mission as necessarily related to the expectations of the parents of their students. This is born out by the findings of a study by one of my master's thesis students, Fran Cahill, who interviewed Samoan parents about their expectations of the schools and the teachers who had charge of their children. She found that Samoan parents entrust their children to the care of teachers to deliver education on their behalf. They expect teachers to be there for their children in the same way that they themselves are there for the children at home. And they believe teachers are failing in this responsibility (Cahill, 2006).

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The research by my colleague Russell Bishop and others referred to above showed a major discrepancy between the perceptions of the teachers and those of the students about who holds what kinds of relational values. Of course, it is not possible for all teachers to care for the children in their classes the way the children's parents would do, but these results show that there is a problem here nevertheless. These are issues that are internal to the education system, relating to the way its constituent professionals conceive their work, and cannot be simply remedied by the formal or mandated introduction of restorative practices.

The notion of restorative justice originated in the justice system, and applying it to education must involve the recognition of the very different context of the school. Justice is about determining whether a crime has been committed and who is responsible. Education is about trying to produce young people who will become good citizens. Educationalists are not trained to judge whether young people have committed crimes. In some ways, the idea of restoration in schools is already very familiar to education professionals. The examples given have a quality of care about them that is not about judging whether a crime has been committed, but about how the young person(s) involved can best be brought back into the 'fold'. The parties to a conference in a school are most likely to be school administrators, family members, neighbours and classmates; these people will potentially see one another for substantial proportions of each day, into the future. Students are required by law to go to school from age 6 until they reach the age of 16 years. Parents are required to send their children to school, unless they go through a significant process to be excused. Families are therefore also often integral to resolving problems being experienced by pupils. More importantly, the purposes of education are very different from the purposes of justice, notwithstanding the latter's interest in rehabilitation. The context of justice is crime and punishment, where the context of education is development and learning. The starting point of the education system is that all children are there to be cared for and supported to grow and develop. I doubt that this is the primary stance of the legal system.

Schools are required by law to stand 'in loco parentis', and most teachers and administrators take this duty very seriously. A re-examination of this fundamental concept is long overdue. Such relinquishment of parental power may have been acceptable once, but it is doubtful whether all parents might reasonably be expected to share the values of the disciplinarians of the school in just the way that the concept appears to require. And this is the rub. Restorative practices lie across the boundaries between discipline and care. They call for a

more 'authoritative' or democratic form of parenting on the part of the school, whereas most disciplinary systems are based on a more authoritarian, top-down form of power (Marshall and Marshall, 1997). With increasing diversity in our communities, we cannot presume homogeneity of either parenting styles or values, just as we do not all have the same way of showing that we care. What is clear is that the form of the duty of care must change as the child grows. How it should change is at issue.

Policy at the national level has acknowledged and attempted to address the problem of growing diversity, not just in our schools but in our society. In schools, at the same time as there are calls for clear boundaries and better discipline, there has been an almost opposite tendency: schools and classrooms are also required to be 'inclusive'. Teacher education programmes are required to invest student teachers with the skills to manage inclusive classrooms. 'Diversity', like equity, has almost become a buzz word. Disparity of outcomes must be addressed. This means, among other things, that classroom teachers and school administrators must not discriminate on grounds of culture, race or ability. Teacher education students are also taught that they should meet the needs of each student, and approach each student's learning needs starting from where the student is, rather than where they 'should' be by any particular measure. Nowadays classrooms can have up to 30 nationalities (and 30 languages) represented, and a teacher may be at the same time required to teach inclusively mainstreamed students with a disability. As school communities become more diverse, teachers and administrators have an extremely complex, possibly impossible, job to satisfy the great array of expectations laid on them.

Surprisingly, there are some schools that seem to be managing to achieve these aims. I have not researched this, but I would hypothesise that these are (probably smaller) schools that (in a benign sense) take ownership over their students and behave as though they all belong to the same family. Many primary school classrooms have this quality: I believe that fewer secondary schools do (with the possible exception of some area schools).

Our experience in Northland suggested that many of the smaller, often poorer schools, that see themselves as integral to their communities, also saw it as their responsibility not to suspend if possible, and to take back students who had been suspended. These schools protested at being listed in the Suspension Reduction Initiative as 'high-suspending' schools. The absolute numbers of suspensions said little about the fact that their students were always expected back, and they were often managed by the school during their period of suspension. This seemed to be particularly the case where there was a strong

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link between the school and the community. Often these were predominantly Maori communities. These same schools, and many others like them around the country, work to keep their children and young people in school, and to bring them back in, even after exclusion. They use suspensions much like an ordinary family might use 'time out'. These schools often treat all students, including miscreants, as 'their own', thus taking very seriously their duty of care. In fact, across the country, only a few schools exclude or expel without taking some responsibility for what then happens to these students. For students under the legal leaving age this follow up is required by law, but I am referring to the many generous and ongoing demonstrations of concern for the future of these students. This kind of care is not accounted for in the statistics.

As indicated above, there is currently a huge amount of interest in the introduction of restorative practices in schools. However, there is not a lot of reliable research yet available to demonstrate the long-term effectiveness of these practices, or the favoured conditions of their introduction – or even what, exactly, they are. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to decide what, out of a complex number of interweaving and often immeasurable and uncontrollable factors, to study, besides suspension figures.

In one of the schools where we delivered a workshop, for example, one dean kept a file of the 'small conversations' he held in one term. Of the nine files, only one student came to his notice a second time. He thought this was significant, and praised our 'circle' process (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004). Whether it is down to the conversation process or not I have no idea, though I would like to think it is. Intuitively one might expect that more engaged students will show a higher rate of achievement, and there are some suggestions that this is borne out in practice (Bishop et al., 2007; Buckley and Maxwell, 2007). But whether restorative conferencing and restorative conversations have a bearing on student engagement, I do not know.

Rutter (1979) suggests that student performance often depends more on the culture of the school and whether or not it develops a climate of care. This is the model that most educators have been raised on, and what they currently already work for. I do believe that the achievement of academic goals is more likely to be enhanced by creating a constructive school climate where conflict is resolved in ways that build and enhance relationships. However, I would raise a note of caution, because the factors involved are extremely difficult to study, and for any positive response to a questionnaire there is often a contrary opinion and contrary evidence. For all we know, there may be other quite different factors influencing the growth in our society of resistance to schooling by what seems to be a growing number of students. Nevertheless, there are sufficient exciting

stories to suggest that the introduction of restorative practices into schools is worth further investigation.

In many ways, schools are already communities of care, but there is a need for a re-examination of the notion of care that predominates. A community of care is not necessarily one where we have a 'natural' or even a learned empathy for others: a true community of care comes into its own when respect is maintained and there is disagreement and strangeness (Young, 1990). This is a very different version of the caring community from that promoted by Rutter all those years ago. Such a (post-modern) community understands (or might have to learn) that meanings are negotiated, and that this can take both time and patience. It understands too the importance of having in place processes for the working through of such disagreements. Where schools care for their students as if they are part of the communal family – including the miscreants, the misfits, and the resisters (of which every family has some) – they are already well on the way. People who strive for and maintain such schools already deserve our respect.

Education is one of the Pakehd imports that Maori and Pasifika families value: and it is compulsory for children and young people aged 6-16 in New Zealand. Thus, schools have a unique and powerful place in our civic life. Most of today's schools are complex communities, reflecting the make up of our society, and they are in a powerful position to influence the way forward, towards whatever is meant by a restorative society. The role of education in such a vision ought not to be confined to ensuring that more students achieve set goals within a fixed curriculum. Education can be a major vehicle for the ongoing development of New Zealand as both a peaceful and a respectful society. Such a lofty objective will not be achieved by 'behaviour management', suspensions and exclusions (though no doubt these must also go on). I am arguing for a concept of restorative society that is about peaceful relating among diversity, and not simply about how we 'do' our disciplinary functions. In such a society, a primary objective of schooling could be to develop an understanding of how to achieve legitimate goals within relationships of mediation in complex communities. Unravelling what that means in practice will take a while. My vision for schools is also my vision of a restorative society, and schools could have a central role in reaching for this objective. This would imply a review of the role of schools in our society, which in turn would entail a much broader conversation.