

Restorative Practices at Queanbeyan South, an Australian Primary School

BY ABBEY J. PORTER

Restorative practices have proved a success at a primary school in Australia, where teachers have discovered that discipline works much better when the children themselves take part in the process.

A few years ago, Queanbeyan South Public School, in New South Wales, just outside the Australian capital of Canberra, was struggling with persistent problems of bullying, violence and absenteeism among its pupils. Conventional punishments like detentions and suspensions didn't seem to help. "We were just chasing our tails," recalled teacher Elizabeth Harley, who said that disrespect for authority and low self-esteem were common among the students.



A student and teacher work together at Queanbeyan South Primary School.

The school has an ethnically diverse student body of about 660 children, many from low-income households. Aboriginal children, who make up about 15 percent of the student population, presented a particular challenge, Harley said, in part because many had parents who, often due to their own negative school experiences, did not support their children's schooling.

Said Harley, "Our suspension records were the highest in Queanbeyan, and we

had a number of kids in detention on a regular basis." But, she realized, placing children in detention wasn't doing them any good. "They began to treat it as a bit of a joke. For the hard-core, repeat offenders, it wasn't making any difference whatsoever."

"Once children got into this antisocial behavior and were punished at school, it usually lent itself to further alienation," said principal Paul Britton, a veteran educator. Separating children from school isolates them from their peers, causes them to miss schoolwork and gives them more opportunities to develop problem behaviors, he pointed out.

Ready to try a different approach, Britton contacted Matt Casey, a former police officer who trains schools and social service providers in restorative practices through Real Justice Australia, an affiliate of the International Institute for Restorative Practices. In January 2003, Casey conducted a training session for teachers and administrators at Queanbeyan South. He introduced a restorative approach to discipline that encourages students to talk about and reflect on their behavior, take responsibility for their actions and find ways to "make things right" with those they have hurt.

Britton liked the idea that "children were forced to face the consequences of their actions, meet face-to-face with their victims and do something to make things better." The approach also seemed an excellent fit with the culture of caring, support and respect that Britton was promoting in the school.

Casey encouraged teachers to think about the relationships they developed

Queanbeyan South Public School is a 2004 winner of an Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Award, sponsored by the governments of Australia and New Zealand, for "Real Justice in a Safe and Happy School."

with their pupils, advocating a "firm but fair" approach, with a high level of control and discipline but also plenty of support and encouragement. He also introduced staff to the "script" at the heart of the restorative approach: a list of questions that asks victim and offender to reflect on the incident in question and come up with appropriate ways to make amends. The questions, which include—Who has been affected by what you have done? and What impact has this incident had on you and others?—can be used in a variety of situations, from informal intervention in playground disputes to formal conferences in which the affected parties address the transgression.

The questions reflect a non-blaming approach, said Britton. The first one, What happened?, is far less accusatory than What did you do? With the script, he said, "kids know someone will listen to their side of things." Knowing that their side has been heard, they are far more likely to accept the agreed-upon consequences.

Britton emphasizes the fact that the restorative approach gives children an opportunity to repair the harm they have caused. He has found that the last question on the script, What do you think you need to do to make things right?, is key to that process: "Often, that will build a

bridge between the victim and the perpetrator.”

Britton saw that happen in one case in which children sold fake raffle tickets to senior citizens. After a conference was held, the offenders paid back the money and performed gardening for an elderly victim as restitution. This restored the relationship between the children and the woman they had wronged, who came to see them as “young boys, instead of hoodlums.”

For teachers like Elizabeth Harley, the restorative approach was not dramatically different from business as usual—talking things out, developing relationships and trying to understand where the children were coming from. But Harley believes that Casey’s training provided such methods with more credibility among the more authoritarian, punitive teachers, who thought that talking things out was “too soft” or a “cop-out.” “It changed their approach with children,” said Harley. “Quite a number of them found that they had results, and it was a lot easier to talk things through.”

The program also provided structure and consistency. “When we decided as a school that we would all follow this program, that was the thing that turned the school around,” said Harley. “Every teacher started a very organized and structured approach. When conflicts occurred, we followed the Real Justice script, and the children knew that script.”

The children proved to be surprisingly good self-disciplinarians, ready to negotiate with each other and take responsibility for their behavior. “A lot of them are prepared to say, ‘I’ve done something wrong, and I’ll accept the consequences,’” said Harley. “Little kids are good at [knowing] what to do to make things right. It’s a matter of being able to ask the right questions.”

Restorative practices have brought about many changes at Queanbeyan South. In the two years since Matt Casey



A happy student at Queanbeyan South

conducted his initial training session, the incidence of student violence, detentions and suspensions has plunged dramatically. The school’s “detention room” has become a “conference room.” The prospect of going through the conference script has proved an effective deterrent. “Some of the students hated having to answer those questions,” Harley chuckled, “and that alone stopped many of them from going into detention.”

While the approach has produced positive effects throughout the school, the results have been “especially spectacular” among Aboriginal students, said Britton. In 2004, not one Aboriginal child was suspended at Queanbeyan South, a school whose indigenous population once had a reputation for violence and gang activity.

Above all, restorative practices have brought about a positive change in the culture of the school. “We’ve got the best morale we’ve ever had,” said Britton. “People feel good about themselves, and the children seem to be happier. They feel more enfranchised, and that people care about them. I believe Real Justice is a part of all that.”

Britton also believes there is now more learning going on in the school. “Children try harder because they know they’re not going to be condemned for failure or mistakes,” he said. With restorative practices, problematic behaviors are censured while the worth of the individual is upheld. “We always focus on the thing that has gone wrong, rather than the person,”

Harley explained. “I think it’s had a general raising of self-esteem with a lot of these children, who suddenly believe, ‘I can talk my problems out.’”

Parents, too, are more supportive and less resentful of restorative methods than of the usual disciplinary measures. Restorative practices encourage family involvement, and parents appreciate the opportunity to participate. Britton recalled one case in which two children had assaulted another child, and the parents of the victim and perpetrators took part in a conference to hash out consequences. “The parents were part of the solution, rather than just being on the receiving end,” he said.

Parental involvement also helps ensure that children’s promises of restoration are kept. Restorative practices work especially well with the indigenous community, said Britton, as the sense of kinship is strong among them, and members of the extended family tend to get involved in their children’s disciplinary issues.

Trainer Matt Casey encourages teachers to look for ways to use restorative practices “in every instance with kids, rather than waiting for things to go wrong.” He believes that restorative practices can lead students and teachers to a better understanding of themselves and of others. “It starts you on a path where you find you must reevaluate your behavior on every level,” said Casey. “You can’t just leave it at the school door and walk out.”

Britton, too, thinks that restorative practices could have far-reaching effects. By reducing animosity and breaking down barriers between students and groups, he believes, restorative practices are preparing the children of Queanbeyan South to deal with issues far beyond the classroom. “They might go out and help make the world a little bit better, rather than worse,” said Britton. “If we build bridges instead of walls, we’ve got a far better chance.”