

**Sustaining Our Restorative Journey:
A Singapore Perspective.**

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1. Introduction

In his opening address at the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Work Plan Seminar 2011, Singapore's Minister for Education, Mr Heng Swee Keat, stressed the importance in providing a student-centric and values-driven holistic education for our students. This increased focus in instilling values and developing character is timely in the face of both internal and external challenges. According to Mr Heng, to thrive in this increasingly challenging and competitive environment, our students will need to be equipped with both values and competencies through a student-centric and values-driven education. In order to achieve this, Mr Heng reiterated the importance of empowering schools and enabling educators to strive and ensure that all schools - in every neighbourhood - are good schools. So, what is a good school?

"A good school is not one which produces straight As or top honours per se; a good school is not merely 'good' relative to others. Rather it is one that caters to the needs of its students well."

"A good school needs to know who their students are at the point of entry, studies their needs and strengths; states what it would like them to become when they leave the school."

"A good school creates a positive experience for each student and provides a supportive and appreciative environment for teachers to experience the joy in impacting lives."

(Excerpts taken from the Speech by Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister of Education at the MOE Work Plan Seminar 2011)

Examining the different facets of a "good school" defined above, one imperative "ingredient" that will support schools on this journey is to build positive relationships. For a school to cater the needs of its students, teachers need to establish positive relationships to identify the students' strengths and weaknesses. Positive teacher-student

relationships can contribute significantly, not only to students' wellbeing and pro-social behaviour but also to their learning outcomes (McGrath and Noble, 2007). According to McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead and Weedon (2008), quality relationships can be established by developing a school ethos built on the premises of restorative practices.

Although the impact of restorative practices in school settings has been evaluated and assessed to be effective in various countries around the world, currently, there is no study to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices in Singapore schools. Having been introduced and piloted in Singapore schools in 2005, restorative practices was initially seen as an additional tool in the area of behaviour management. However, as schools embrace the principles of restorative practices, it is now looked upon as an ethos and culture of the school, focusing mainly on building positive relationships (Chan and Ismail, 2007).

This paper seeks to examine the progress of restorative practices in Ping Yi Secondary School, a government school in Singapore that has piloted the use of restorative practices since 2005. Based on the literature review of the indicators of measurement used in other countries, an evaluation model will be proposed to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices using Ping Yi Secondary School as a case study.

2. Ping Yi's Restorative Journey

Having piloted restorative practices since 2005, Ping Yi Secondary School has since endeavoured to embrace restorative principles as part of the school's ethos. The progress of Ping Yi's restorative journey has been a positive and enriching one for the past seven years. This section aims to provide an account of the school's journey in

restorative practices. After seven years of implementation, Ping Yi Secondary is still considered to be in the developmental stages where the school seeks to establish a model of evaluation to assess her restorative journey thus far. Ping Yi's experience with restorative practices can be broadly classified into two broad stages. The first is "Inspiring a shared vision" and the second stage is "Strengthening our belief and deepening our practice".

2.1 Inspiring A Shared Vision

When Ping Yi first got acquainted with restorative practices, it was seen more as an additional tool to manage misbehaviour. As the school started to learn more about restorative practices and embarked on a learning journey to Australia in 2006, the whole perspective of restorative practices changed and it was no longer looked upon as a disciplinary tool but an ethos - one that focuses on building positive relationships. The school management formed a core team and deliberated with staff on a shared vision of restorative practices. Three key elements proved to be vital in this stage.

The first element is "Leadership". Till today, one of the pillars of support in sustaining a restorative culture in the school is the strong belief by the school leadership. Although the school had a change in school leadership at the end of 2008, the new leadership embraced the belief of restorative practices and continued to "walk the talk" and role modeled the importance of building quality relationships.

The second element is for every member of the staff to "know why they are doing what they are doing". Constant dialogue and sharing sessions are conducted formally and informally to ensure that all members of the staff are clear about the rationale and the

approach the school is taking as a whole and everyone speaks the same language. In the process of doing so, a substantial amount of time was allocated for the communication of rationale and intent. Looking back at how the school has been transformed, the numerous sessions spent clarifying doubts and encouraging everyone was well worth it.

The third element vital to the success of this stage is the "buy-in" from staff. Initially, when restorative practices was first introduced, one of the greatest challenges was getting "buy-in" from staff. The core team's patience and commitment to role model the process over the years was instrumental in achieving a greater "buy-in". Throughout the implementation years, the core team placed great emphasis in listening to staff feedback for improvement. The staff has since realised that restorative practices is not the panacea to all issues and that it will fail at times because we are in the business of touching lives and shaping young minds and every child is different. However, if we stay true to our mission of building quality relationships, our collective effort will one day impact our students positively.

2.2 Strengthening Our Belief and Deepening Our Practice

Having set the general direction to bring restorative practices further, the school embarked on the next stage of development, spending the next few years on "strengthening our belief and deepening our practice".

The initial framework for restorative practices was reviewed and improved upon to better align with the school's direction for restorative practices to be pervasive. The new framework stressed the importance of values and included the guiding principles of restorative practices to guide its implementation plans. With the new framework in place,

there is a clearer distinction between the tools available and the areas where restorative practices are applied within the school setting.

One of the pillars of support in Ping Yi's restorative journey is the emphasis placed on training and development. Since its implementation in 2005, the school has devoted its mid year staff seminar in June to restorative practices and character development. The one-day session is spent on strengthening staff's understanding of restorative principles (i.e. revisiting the theoretical underpinnings of restorative practices, rationale for the use of affective statements and understanding the school's restorative ethos) or deepening staff's competency to practice the related tools (i.e. using the script, facilitating circles effectively and infusing games in circle time). In order to ensure that staff competency is maintained at a high level, new members of the staff (beginning teachers or new teachers posted to the school) are inducted to the school's restorative practices when they join the school.

To facilitate a conducive environment for the restorative ethos to flourish, the organisation has put in place a host of systems and structures to support and sustain the efforts of the school. The Year Head System and the House System are two of such examples to complement the school's efforts to build positive relationships.

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.

Since 2010, the school has successfully piloted "Circle Time" in the formal curriculum for form teachers to build, repair and strengthen their relationships with their form class. The use of circles is now a pervasive tool in both instructional and non-instructional programmes. In addition, the school implemented "Knowing You" sessions in 2012 for form teachers to have one-on-one sessions with students in their form class. This platform has complemented the existing structures and efforts to build stronger relationships.

3. Evaluating Ping Yi's Restorative Journey

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. However, there are currently no studies made to evaluate the effectiveness of restorative practices in Singapore schools. In this section, an attempt will be made to examine the indicators used by educational institutions in different countries to measure the effectiveness of restorative approaches. Having in mind the different indicators used, an evaluation model to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices in Singapore schools will be proposed. The evaluation model will also be used to assess Ping Yi's restorative journey thus far.

3.1 Literature Review of restorative approaches

Restorative Practices is widely adopted and implemented in schools around the world. A list of measurement indicators from a literature review of studies carried out in various countries (i.e. Hong Kong, Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand and Canada) was identified for the purpose of this paper. From the literature review, the effectiveness of restorative approaches was assessed by indicators related to students' behaviour, quality of relationships, academic outcomes, school culture and perception of the state of discipline in the school.

Student behaviour remains one of the most frequently measured indicators to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices. George and McConville (2003) and Buckley and Maxwell (2007) surmised in their studies that the use of restorative practices has indeed brought about an improvement in student behaviour with a reduction in student offences, detention and suspension. Wong and Lo (2010) reported in their study of fifty schools in Hong Kong that after adopting a whole school approach using

restorative practices to address bullying, perception of discipline in the school has improved.

True to the spirit of building quality relationships using restorative practices, various studies have reported an improvement in the relationships between students and between students and teachers. A study of three schools in East Sussex yielded some significant findings on the effective establishment of restorative practices. Howard (2009) reported that when restorative practices is integrated within the school system, relationships between students and teachers and between students and students will improve significantly.

Buckley and Maxwell (2007), in their study of fifteen secondary schools in New Zealand, examined the vital role of restorative practices in the school setting. In addition to an improvement in student behaviour and student attendance, Buckley and Maxwell (2007) also found restorative practices to be effective in bringing about better academic achievements.

3.2 Model to evaluate the effectiveness of RP in Singapore schools

According to McCold and Wachtel (2003), only when all primary stakeholders are actively involved can we term a process to be fully restorative. Similarly, for restorative practices to be effective in a school setting, involvement and feedback from all stakeholders (students, school, parents and the community) need to be sought in the process of evaluation.

The proposed model of evaluation consists of three parts. The first part delineates the key stakeholders in the evaluation (See Figure 1). The key stakeholders are defined as

the "students", "school", "parents" and "community". "Community" in this case is defined as individuals who are not directly part of the school organisation (i.e. residents from the neighbourhood, interns posted to the school and members of the teaching fraternity).

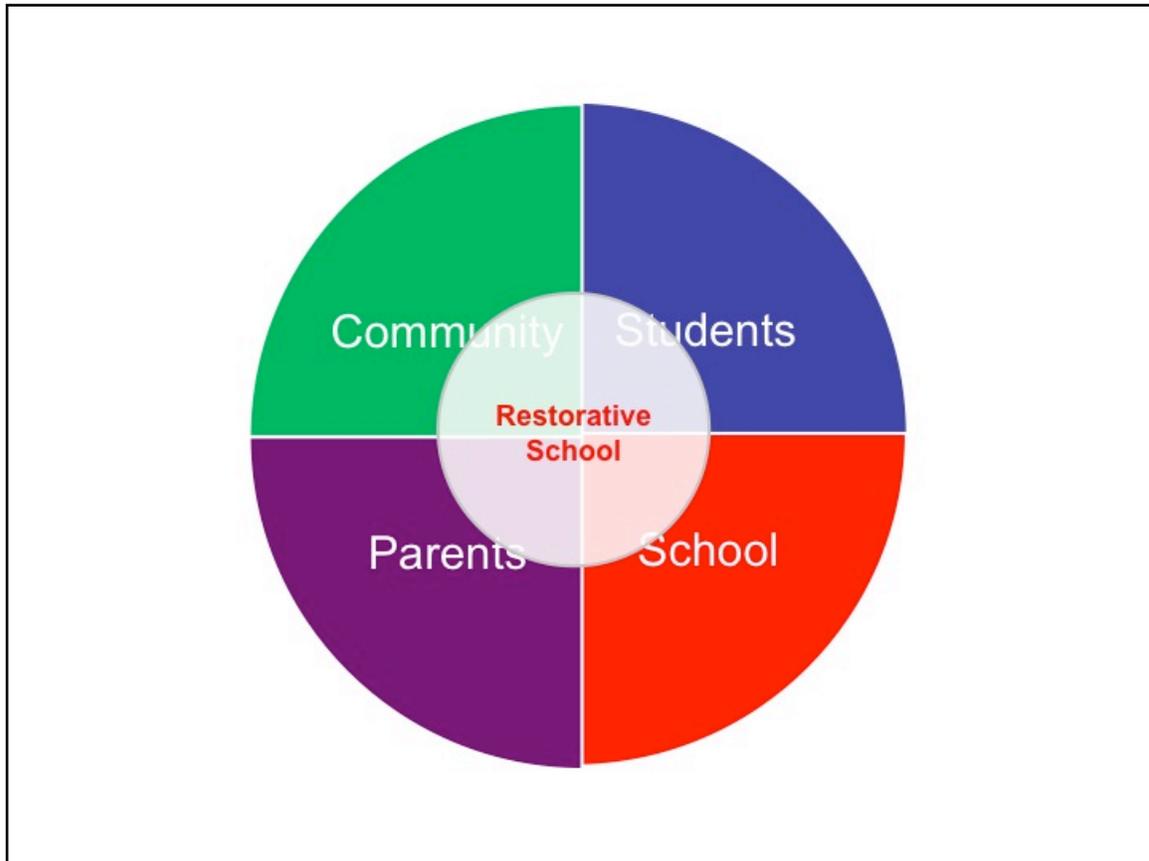


Figure 1 - Model of Evaluation Part 1 (Stakeholders)

The second part of the evaluation model consists of the different modes of measurement. These modes of measurement range from quantitative data to qualitative data from different sources. Some of the modes of measurement are existing instruments currently used by Singapore schools to measure the quality of relationships and school climate (See Figure 2). For example, the Quality School Experience (QSE) Survey is administered by the Ministry of Education annually for all Secondary 2 and 4 students.

The QSE survey measures students' perception of learning structures and affective domains related to quality of relationships. The School Climate Survey (SCS) is administered by the Ministry of Education once every two years to elicit teachers' perception of the school culture, which include indicators like student motivation and state of discipline in the school. The remaining modes of measurement deal with students' behavioural data and verbatim feedback from parents and the community, including members of the teaching fraternity.

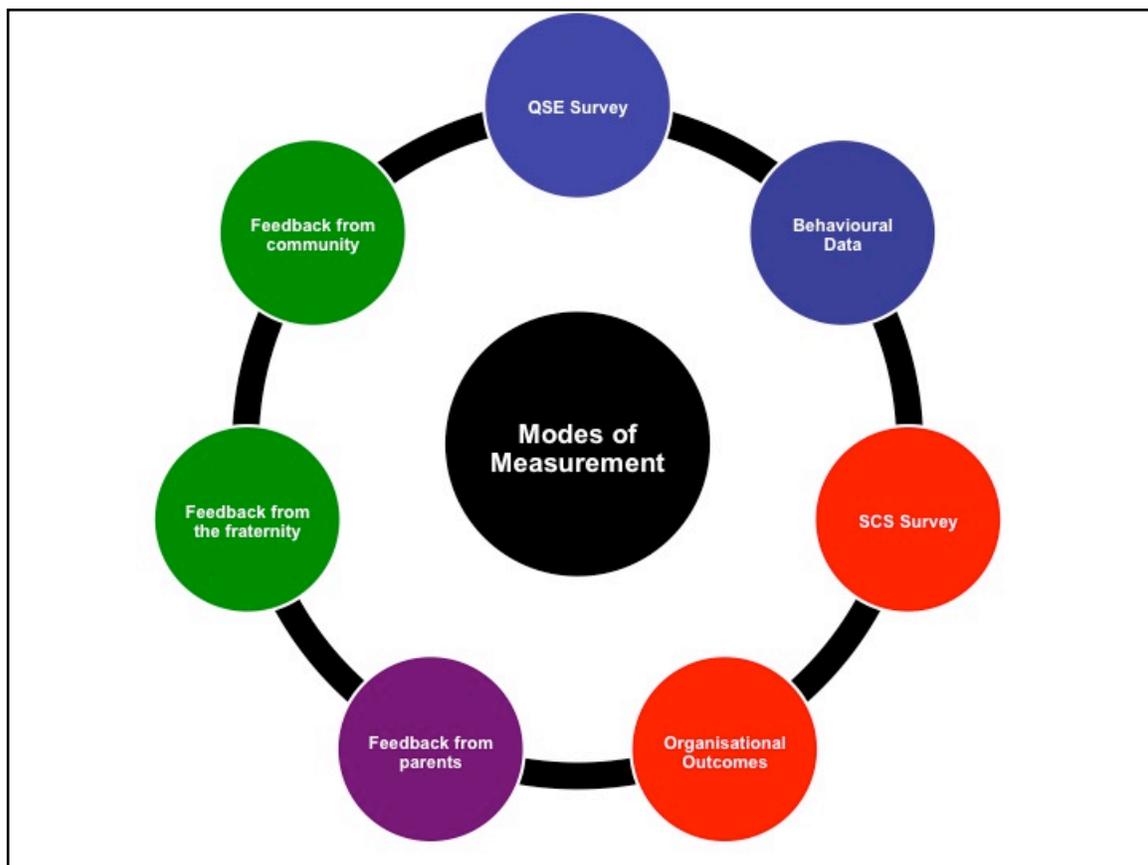


Figure 2 - Model of Evaluation Part 2 (Modes of Measurement)

Last but not least, the last part of the evaluation model (See Figure 3) consists of the different indicators chosen based on the literature review carried out in the previous

section. The indicators chosen correlate with the modes of measurement and consist of both quantitative and qualitative data.

- Indicators**
- Teacher-Student relationships
 - Peer relations
 - No. of major offences
 - Recidivism rate
 - Attendance rate
 - No. of students receiving school values award
 - Academic results
 - Staff perception on discipline and motivation
 - Staff Culture
 - Organisational outcomes
 - Feedback from parents, fraternity of teachers and community

Figure 3 - Model of Evaluation Part 3 (Indicators)

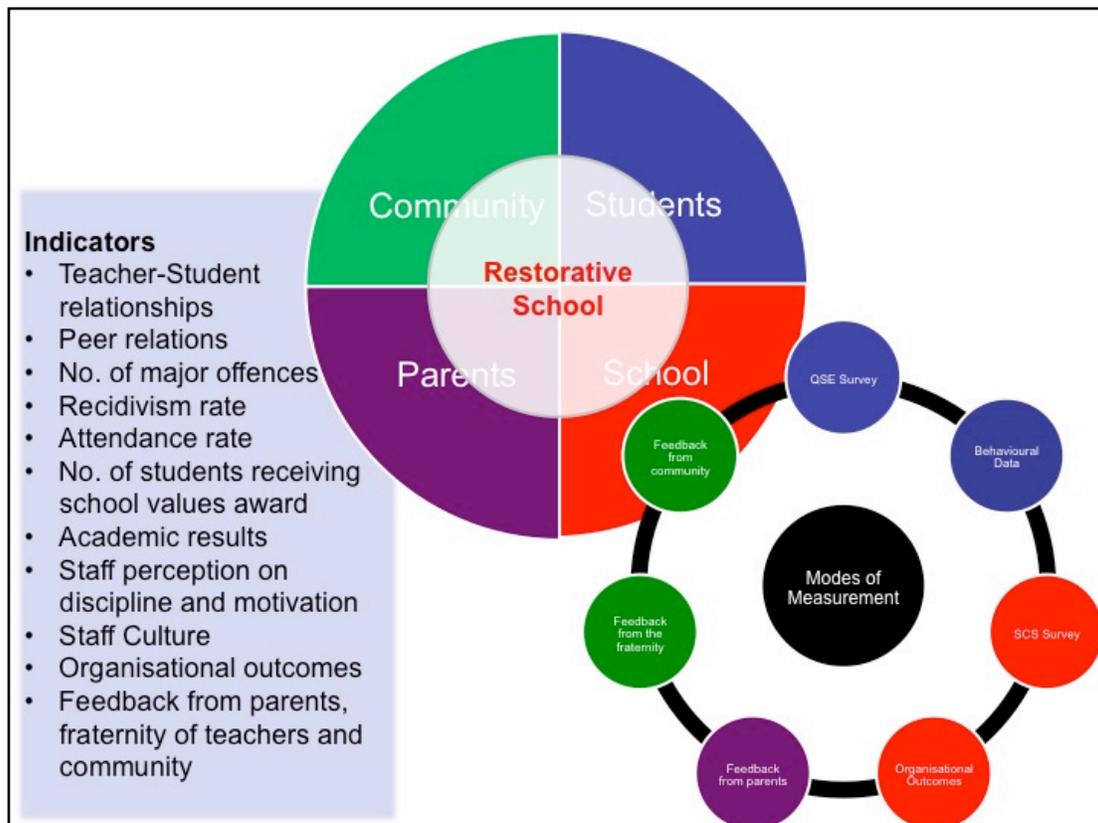


Figure 4 - Model of Evaluation

In summary, the proposed model of evaluation (See Figure 4) aims to assess the effectiveness of restorative practices in Singapore schools. The next section will attempt to use the proposed model of evaluation to measure the effectiveness of Ping Yi Secondary School's restorative journey.

3.3 Evaluating the effectiveness of restorative practices in Ping Yi Secondary School

Ping Yi has piloted the use of restorative practices since 2005. For the past seven years, the use of restorative practices has evolved from a tool to manage misbehaviour to a culture and way of doing things in the school. Using the evaluation model proposed in the previous section, the impact of restorative practices on the school will be evaluated.

Ping Yi's QSE survey (to measure the quality of relationships) has yielded encouraging results. The overall mean rating index for the past five years has been above national mean. In addition, in the SCS conducted once every two years, there has been a consistent improvement in staff perception of student discipline and student motivation over previous surveys.

Students' behaviour has also improved over the past three years. The rate of major offences (See Figure 5) and offence recidivism rate (See Figure 6) have also declined steadily in the same period of time.

It is also founded in the belief that restorative practices can bring about better academic outcomes. Ping Yi has achieved academic value added results since 2006. In 2011, Ping Yi produced two of the nation's top GCE 'N' Level students, adding to the many accolades received by the school in recent years. Examples of the accolades received include the prestigious Outstanding Character Development Award and

Outstanding National Education Award in 2010 for excellent practices in the respective areas.

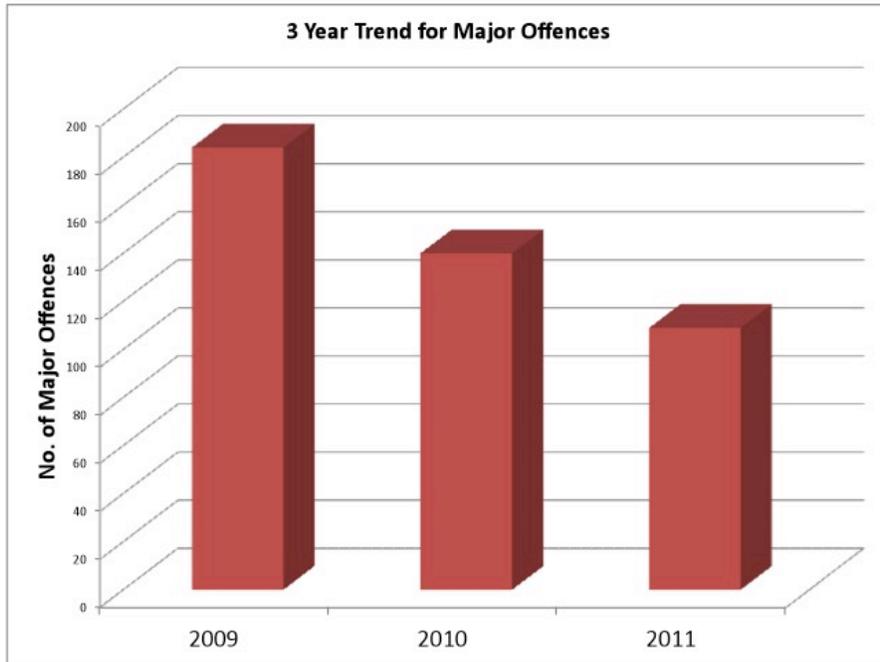


Figure 5 - Rate of Major Offences

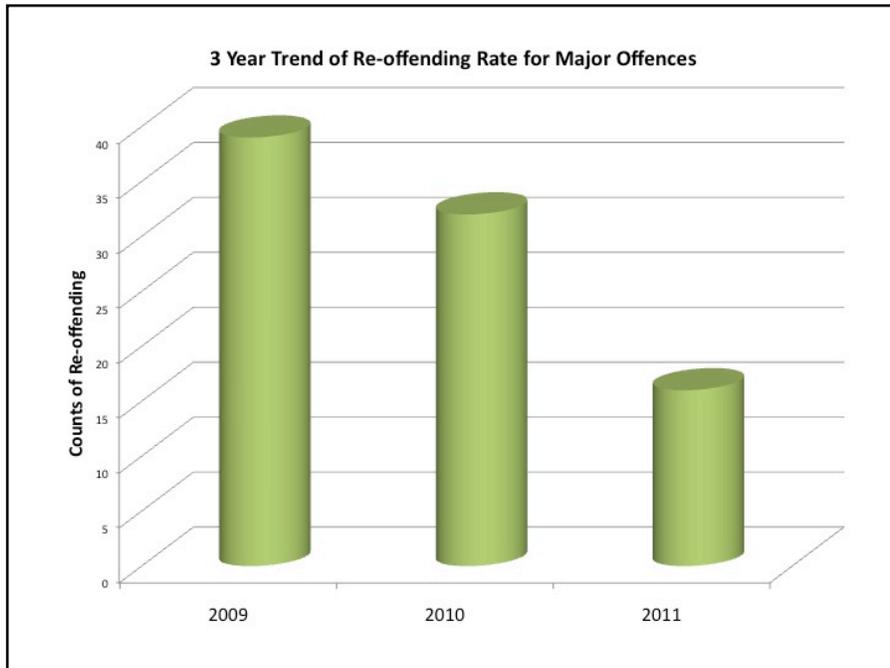


Figure 6 - Offence Recidivism Rate

For the past few years, Ping Yi has also received positive feedback from members of the public, parents, interns posted to the school and the fraternity of teachers, who have visited the school to learn about restorative practices. At the end of each visit, visitors would rate how they perceive Ping Yi as a restorative school (on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest). A total of 208 visitors from 87 schools provided their input to the survey and rated the school 8.05 out of 10 for being a restorative school. It is also heartening to hear comments and words of affirmation from our various stakeholders:

"I am very heartened by the positive impact of RP in my child in both instructional and non-instructional programmes."

"The teachers in Ping Yi are amazingly encouraging, warm and inspiring."

"It was clear to me that the staff is an extremely cohesive and supportive unit."

"In Ping Yi, encouragement and motivation was provided in the morning together with Values for Breakfast, where teachers shared their life experiences with the students, showing them the right way to go when needing to make crucial decisions."

However, the most meaningful indicator for the school by far is the improved student attendance rate over the years. The number of students with less than 60% attendance declined from about 7.5% in 2008 to about 1.8% in 2011. The school firmly believes that restorative practices will only work if students are engaged and this can only happen if students are present in school for us to build, repair and strengthen the relationship with them.

The model of evaluation has provided a comprehensive account of Ping Yi's progress. The next section will discuss some possible strategies for the school to sustain her restorative journey.

4. Sustaining Ping Yi's Restorative Journey

According to McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead and Weedon (2008), the possibilities offered by restorative practices depend on the extent to which schools can sustain deep engagement with its principles. The previous section shed some light about the progress of restorative practices in Ping Yi. While the school has experienced some positive outcomes since its implementation, there is still much to do in sustaining the culture.

To create a sustainable restorative culture, one can draw parallel to Kim's Core Theory of Success (Kim, 1997). Based on Kim's framework (See Figure 7), there are four key components (relationships, collective thinking, actions and results) that are crucial to achieving and sustaining outcomes of the organisation. Kim (1997) surmised that the four components form a virtuous cycle. The framework suggests that with quality relationships, one that is founded on trust, openness and respect, will result in quality collective thinking, arising from quality conversations. This will lead to quality actions and bring about quality results, which will reinforce the quality of relationships in a virtuous cycle.

Another strategy to sustain a restorative culture is to continue to share and learn. Sustaining a restorative culture is a journey and there is so much to share and learn from

fellow practitioners, local or international. The culture of sharing best practices within the educational arena will also be crucial in sustaining the culture.

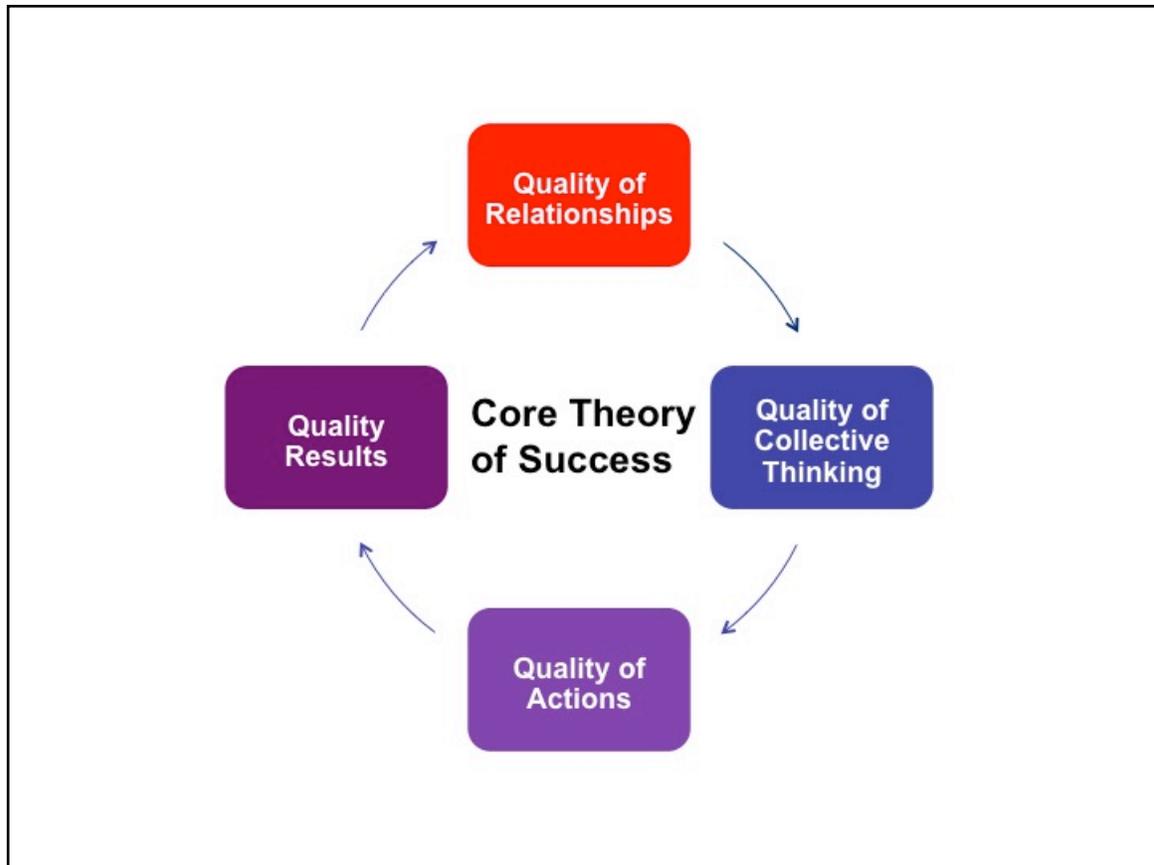


Figure 7 - Core Theory of Success (Kim, 1997)

To complement the idea of learning and sharing from each other, organisations from the same field of practice can come together and create support networks. In this way, self-sustaining networks can be created to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and expertise to allow members of each network to support each other and grow together.

5. Conclusion

Having been on this restorative journey for the past seven years, Ping Yi Secondary School still has much to learn and grow. The challenge for the school is to sustain the restorative culture and continue to impact and influence more schools to adopt the practice.

Moving forward, Ping Yi aspires to engage more parents and equip more of them with the restorative language to enhance their repertoire of skills in relationship building. Examining the findings and observations so far, we strongly believe that we are in the right direction and are fully committed to be a restorative school with the belief that positive and deep relationships between all stakeholders is important for learning outcomes to be met.

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