Keeping kids off the suspension merry-go-round – a restorative conferencing project in schools

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Sandy Gibbard’s social work training began as a mature student, graduating in 1995. Working for Barnardos grounded her interest in strengthening families through improved parenting skills and communication within families. Education has been a feature of her social work practice and the Restorative Conferencing Project provided a unique opportunity for education and social change. Currently she works as a social worker at Wanganui Girls’ College.

Abstract

This article documents the Wanganui Restorative Conferencing in Schools pilot scheme 2000-2002. The Wanganui Project was established in the latter half of the year 2000 and continued up to the end of the year 2002. The project builds on the Waikato Project (1998-1999), an 18-month pilot project under the direction of John Winslade and team from Waikato University who initiated the groundwork in establishing Restorative Conferencing practice as an alternative to stand downs and suspensions in the secondary school system (Winslade, 2000).

I wish to acknowledge the Waikato Project Team’s work and the influence it had on the processes used by the Wanganui Project and also the thinking, which informs this article.

Objectives

The objective of this article is
1. to document the work of the Wanganui Project and, in doing so,
2. to raise interest in Restorative Conferencing as an alternative way of working with difficult behaviour in the school setting,
3. to be informative and to offer some reflection.

It is not intended to describe a ‘how to’ process but to document and discuss a particular pilot scheme and to offer some comment. Change to a Restorative Justice approach is major social change and as such it is a journey of transformation. Pilot schemes are a legitimate and valuable part of that journey.

Introduction

Restorative Conferencing employs the principles of Restorative Justice and applies them with a narrative perspective to student misdemeanours within the school setting, where the student is at risk of stand down or suspension.

Restorative Justice is a way of thinking about responding to wrong-doing, which sees wrongdoing as injury to the victim and the community, rather than an offence against the state (or in this case the school). It is not seen so much as a breaking of rules but rather as a breakdown of the relationship between the victim/community and the offender. The primary purpose of Restorative Justice, therefore, is to repair the harm done and to restore relationships to the state
they were before the wrongdoing occurred. There are key values and principles, which guide this way of practising. They include the need for community involvement, equal participation of all parties involved (this includes the victim and any other affected party), accepting responsibility for, and the consequences of, the wrongdoing by the offender. It is about uplifting both victim and offender. Through the conferencing process the student is supported to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his/her behaviour and to seek out ways to make amends and make positive behavioural changes. The retributive philosophy of blame and punishment is replaced with a philosophy of repair and reconciliation.

Restorative Conferencing is a method of working which will have appeal to school social workers, and to others in the school disciplinary system who perceive the inadequacies of current stand down/suspension practices. It is not the intent of this article to critically analyse current practices. Suffice to say, these inadequacies contribute to both the instigator of the misconduct (the offending student) and any recipient (a victim) of their behaviour often being disempowered by the process; stigmatisation of the instigator; alienation of the instigator from the school community; exclusion of the recipient from the process; failure to reintegrate, leading to negative attitudes and risk of further harm for the recipient. Often, suspended students and their families’ feel angry and/or let down by the system.

**Background**

This is divided into two parts – general background to applying Restorative Justice in the secondary school system, and specific background to this particular project.

**General background**

Restorative Justice in various forms has been piloted within the New Zealand criminal justice system for some time. Its focus is on encouraging responsibility (on the part of the offender), restitution (for the victim), and reparation (to the community) in the hope that this will assist with the healing process for the victim, and help the offender avoid recidivism.

Within the school setting however, this must go much further to include reconciliation, reintegration and restoration. Unlike within the justice system where offenders and victims usually do not have to be exposed to each other in daily living, within the school setting the offending student and the victim must continue to exist harmoniously within the school on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, a degree of reconciliation of the relationship between these two parties must be achieved for the recipient to feel safe; the instigator must be reintegrated into the social structures of the school from a position of shame to one of being able to re-engage with the learning process and to maintain his/her dignity.

It is acknowledged and of concern, that the current use of stand-down/suspension/expulsion to address problem behaviour in schools, is struggling. Ministry of Education secondary school statistics from January 2002 to July 2004 show stand downs of 35,593 involving 26,097 students. That there were more stand downs than students involved indicates that 27% of the students are stood down twice or more. Similar statistics exist for suspension figures. (Data in its present format carries too many variables to allow for accurate percentage determination.) We need to strengthen the idea of keeping at-risk students within their school environment and not just pass the problem elsewhere.

The Restorative Conferencing model offers an alternative way of working which focuses not so much on ‘fixing a problem but on transforming a problem’ (Winslade, 2000) with those involved in order to regain a balance in a student’s school life. It has the ability to address the needs of the recipient of misbehaviour as well as the needs of the instigating student. When students have to face up to their wrongdoing, and to actively plan for avoidance of similar behaviour in the future, they are less likely to become repeat offenders. For recipients to hear an instigator genuinely acknowledge their wrongdoing in front of conference participants and to receive confirmation that the behaviour will not reoccur, is reassuring. Restorative Justice
practises a non-confrontational approach and, therefore, creates fewer barriers to participation and the owning of responsibility, thus enhancing the cooperation of the offending student. It also allows for the recipient to have a voice in the outcome. The instigator becomes well aware of the unacceptability of the behaviour.

Restoration involves an aware-ness for schools that:
- Retributive action (stand down/suspension) may not be the only option. Although it works in many cases, 25-30% of stand down/suspension cases are recidivists.
- It may require a philosophical shift about how a school chooses to deal with serious misdemeanors.
- Previous interventions have not prevented re-offending for some students. Perhaps a different approach may have different results.

It is an attractive option for schools who:
- are wanting to do something more constructive than continu-ally punish and eventually exclude or expel troublesome young people,
- want to acknowledge the impact on a victim in a given incident and offer them the option of having a greater say in the process of setting things to right,
- want to recognise those who fall foul of the school’s authorities and their families, who without a similar process may be left feeling frustrated and angry at the system that seems to abandon their education needs (Winslade, 2000).

It is a process which will be familiar to Maori who are accustomed to meeting to discuss difficult issues; of allowing people to speak plainly; of listening long and hard to all sides of an issue until it is resolved by consensus. Restorative Conferencing reflects this practice.

Past pilot schemes both in New Zealand and in Australia and the USA have shown Restorative Conferencing to be a viable alternative to suspensions and expulsion. One of the greatest impacts has been on the retention rates of students who had participated in a Restorative Confer-ence, and who otherwise were highly likely to have been suspended.

Findings from the Queensland Education Department 1996 report (Thorsborne, 1996) include:
- participants were highly satisfied with the process and its outcome,
- high compliance rates with the terms of the agreement by offenders,
- low rates of recidivism,
- the majority of offenders felt they were more accepted, cared about and more closely connected to other conference participants than before,
- a majority of victims felt safer and more able to manage similar situations than before conferencing.

Specific background to the Wanganui Project

The new millennium was a time for celebrations and new initiatives/projects to blossom. Such was the mood when Sacred Heart College Wanganui embarked early in the year 2000 on setting up a Restorative Justice Project within a secondary school setting. The school is a secondary school for girls with a roll of approximately 300. The purpose was to deal with discipline issues in a way which avoided the stigma of suspension for the instigating student and at the same time acknowledged the position of the person affected by the misbehaviour. It was an attempt to do something at the top of the cliff rather than leave the ambulance at the bottom to pick up those students who slide down the slippery slope. These students often do the suspension merry-go-round through several schools before eventually dropping out of schooling and onto the street, where the community picks up the, by now seriously displaced and often-offending, young person.

Funding was achieved through Wanganui Community Foundation for a three year pilot, including the cost of an evaluation. Unfortunately, the Project finished prematurely after two years due to the base school being amalgamated with another secondary school.

The Waikato Project evaluation made several recommendations for ongoing development and these were picked up and acted on by the Wanganui Project. One of these was that an
independent coordinator be used to provide a different dynamic to school staff carrying out the function. A coordinator was appointed and began working part time in August 2000. The remainder of the year was spent in development of the project, training, establishing networks and promotional work i.e. informing staff, students, parents and the school community on the work about to be undertaken. Processes for referral procedures were also developed. Auckland University was engaged to provide an independent evaluation. This involved surveying participants, observing at conferences and interviewing some participants and school personnel.

The intention was to establish the project in a base school (Sacred Heart College) and then once it was up and running smoothly, for the service to become available to other secondary schools in the district.

The process

Restorative Conferencing provides an opportunity for students at risk of stand down or suspension to participate in a process that supports them to accept responsibility and be accountable for their actions. Any recipient of the wrongdoing is also invited to be actively involved. The approach comes from a positive philosophy, operating from a healing perspective rather than from the traditional blaming perspective. Student/school/family/whanau/community are all involved.

The initial minimum criteria for considering a formal Restorative Conference, as an appropriate way to address the misconduct, is that the behaviour was serious enough to warrant considering stand down or suspension action. As the process evolves, other criteria emerge such as:

- the instigator must acknowledge his/her wrongdoing,
- the instigator must be willing to accept responsibility for his/her part in the wrongdoing (if this is not established the victim is at risk of being re-victimised during the conference, as responsibility becomes debated),
- participants must be willing to participate in the conference and to cooperate with the process,
- student/family/supports and others affected by the misconduct on both sides of the incident must be represented at the conference.

The conference focus is on:

- making amends,
- opening up the possibility for change,
- offering hope for the future, and
- restoring relationships and, therefore, regaining a balance in a students school life.

The process involves:

1. A pre-conference/hui to explain the conferencing process to participants and family/whanau. (Each student/family/whanau unit separately). If there is agreement to proceed then...
2. The conference/hui itself where, in a supportive environment, the wrongful conduct is discussed and a plan of action arrived at to right the wrong. The plan is arrived at by consensus by all conference/hui participants. The instigator makes a commitment to fulfill the plan.
3. The coordinator provides follow up support and monitoring until the plan is completed. If the plan is defaulted the student is referred back to the school disciplinary system.
4. The coordinator-student relation-ship may continue informally as and when the student requires.

The process operated on a referral basis from the disciplinary system, so as to distance the restorative aspect from a traditionally punitive disciplinary system. The independence of the Restorative Justice Coordinator from a retributive disciplinary system is an important dynamic. The student can then perceive they have been given another chance to change their behaviour and make amends, rather than perceiving they are still going to be punished, but in a different way.
One parent stated:

Once she (student) realised we weren’t there to lecture but to work through the issues, the threat of authority had gone and she responded to that. She changed her body language.

The emphasis must come off punishment and shift to natural or logical consequences and making amends. The mindset needed is that the student is not the problem, the behaviour is the problem. By the use of narrative theory and externalisation (White and Epston, 1990) the discussion can be less personally damning for the student and more therapeutic in terms of healing relationships. The focus is that relationships have been damaged by the wrongful conduct and, therefore, healing is required. Reconciliation can then take place and the student reintegrated into the school community.

A school working in this way must decide at what point in their disciplinary system they intend to use a formal Restorative Conference. Some conferences have been convened at the direction of the Board of Trustees as a requirement of a suspension meeting. Others have been convened instead of stand down or suspension action. There are no rights or wrongs, each school must decide for themselves how they will incorporate restorative practices into their existing systems. The formal conference will be most effective when restorative practices are part of the school culture and used as part of the pastoral care responsibilities of the school rather than just as a means to reduce stand downs and suspensions. Restorative practices include a range of responses to misconduct from minor to serious. They may include at one end of the continuum techniques of affective statements through to, impromptu dialogue, semi-structured mediations, group meetings, through to a formal conference/hui.

## Outcomes

Over the project’s duration at-risk students from three schools participated in Restorative Conferences/hui. The number of transgressing students who participated in conferences was 25. The behaviours addressed included continual disobedience, failure to participate/opting out behaviour, bullying/harassment, physical assault, verbal assault, threatening behaviour towards student/teacher, serious relationship problems between students, drug taking and supply, truancy, teacher/student relationship problem. In all cases, the incident of wrongdoing was resolved. For a few, no further problems arose. The comments made during follow-up interviews with student and teachers illustrate this.

I get on with my teachers now. I just don’t let the little things annoy me. I used to act like a dick. I don’t do that anymore. I used to be so immature (student).

Much better attitude generally, very respectful, cooperative (teacher).

Big improvement in attitude (teacher).

For others, minor behavioural difficulties did continue to occur but within the range of normal classroom management thresholds. Expectations of complete behaviour changes immediately for students exhibiting serious behavioural problems are unrealistic. The worst-behaved student in the school is not going to become the best-behaved student overnight.

Two students continued to be of more serious concern and assistance from Specialist Group Education was sought. One other was later suspended for other incidents (there was only one chance at Restorative Conferencing at the base school). The most promising aspect I believe, was that all continued to be engaged with their education and that issues continued to be worked through so that the potential for major incidents arising was minimised. It is interesting to note that early in the project students were given the option of Restorative Conferencing or the traditional disciplinary measures of stand down. Those who chose the traditional pathway were followed up six months later and all were divorced from their education.

The process was appreciated at many levels, as reflected in comments from participants on the next page.

Surveys carried out by Auckland University show that the project was particularly effective at the student/family/whanau level.
Survey findings show that satisfaction with the process on the part of participants was generally high (96%). Information obtained from families/whanau supported the use of Restorative Conferencing as a constructive and helpful means of assisting at-risk students to make positive change. It also appears that Restorative Conferencing has fostered better communication between school and families/whanau (Dixon and Widdowson, 2002: 7).

Using Restorative Conferencing as an alternative to the stand down and suspension measures, has aided victims to feel their needs and voice have been heard and they have had a part in the outcome for the wrongdoer. The wrongdoer has had to face up to their responsibilities and meet the consequences decided on by all the participants at the meeting. The plan outcomes are agreed by all participants to be fair, reasonable and constructive.

**Discussion**

**The Restorative Conferencing/school interface**

This is an area, which requires further refinement. Change from a retributive system to a restorative system does not happen overnight. The various tensions operating require a settling in time and ongoing modification until refinement is complete. This project was still making those refinements at the time the project came to an end. However, a discussion of those tensions and developments is useful.

1. As stated earlier, the coordinator operated outside of the discipline system. While this helped with the dynamics (of the student perceiving the coordinator as an independent entity), it also served to isolate the coordinator from the school system. This led to the exclusion of the coordinator from decision making around students at risk of stand down/suspension. The evaluation report stated:
   It is recommended that all those currently involved in making decisions about treatment of at-risk students, at all levels, (e.g. BOT, principal, assistant principal, deputy principal, deans) coordinate their efforts with those of the Restorative Conferencing Coordinator. Full inclusion of the Coordinator in decision making about individual students following offending is necessary (Dixon and Widdowson, 2002: 18).

2. The criteria for referral were not explicit and appeared to be inconsistent.
   While minimum criteria existed within the Restorative Conferencing entity, the basis on which a student was referred from school seemed haphazard. The evaluation noted:
   Clear criteria and procedure should be jointly (school and Restorative Conferencing Coordinator) determined to ensure consistency in application of the process and to fully integrate it within the discipline system (Dixon and Widdowson, 2002).

Because of the time (approximately two hours) to hold a conference and the lack of compensation for that time commitment, the school decided that teachers would not be required to attend but would be represented by a member of the discipline staff. With hindsight this proved to be a detrimental factor. Teachers know their students best in the school environment and can make valuable contributions to the conference/hui. It also deprived teachers of gaining insight into their student’s behaviour and the opportunity to hear their students in a different context.

   A major component of the conference/hui is the healing of relationships. This cannot take place if teachers are the ones the misbehaviour has impacted on (as in incidents involving classroom misbehaviour.) In the wider context teachers were also deprived of the opportunity to experience Restorative Conferencing and to gain knowledge about how it works. It is suggested by Dixon and Adair (2000) that one of the most effective ways of learning about Restorative Conferencing is through first hand experience of the process in action.

   Possibly as a consequence of the above, the referral (e.g. conflict between two students in class) was sometimes only a symptom of generalised behaviour. The conference successfully addresses what the referral incident is but the real issue the school wants addressed is often general classroom behaviour. In order for the real issue to be addressed the referral must reflect the real issue rather than the straw that broke the camel’s back. This will mean that to address the classroom behaviour we need classroom teachers at conferences. Often the healing of the
The student/teacher relationship is the missing element, in conferences. Teachers’ time is precious and the option of having conferences during school hours needs exploring. Teacher relief may need to be employed if a conference during school hours is to be an option. Conferences were mostly held towards the end of the day at the request of parents who needed to take time off work to attend. There is tension here between the needs of two stakeholders, which will require creative problem solving.

Some comments from participants on the conference process were:
I thought what a wonderful change from the past which involved blame. Very positive for the students (community member).
… no hitting out at anyone, no running down. It was relaxed and calm (parent).
It was all constructive, everyone conveyed their message. Nothing critical. (The facilitator) was part of that, how she outlined it and kept control of it (parent).
I could look over it (the behaviour). I saw what I was doing wrong. The conference helped because it gave me a chance to look at things (student).
I felt different. I improved in behaviour … I thought I’d behave better… I decided to (same student as above commenting some time later).
I think it has helped me avoid problems in school in the future. (student).

When participants were asked to compare Restorative Conferencing with the usual retributive process, comments made were:
Its not better to have stand downs ’cause that just gives you a day off school (student)
It’s the best way. Better than talking to the BOT and getting suspended ’cause that’s the easy way out. Restorative Conferencing might take longer but its successful. It (the incident) didn’t go on their record… it was successful too (supporting student).
Deep down it would have been nice to just have to deal with the school, but Restorative Conferencing brought the issues to a head. It’s good; it’s a support thing. It would have been difficult to talk about the sorts of things that came up, the anger we felt and the sadness, if we were meeting with the school. So it was good (parent).

Conclusion

It is hoped that this account of Restorative Conferencing in the school setting from a practitioner’s perspective tells a positive and innovative story. It is a different approach to addressing the problem of soaring stand down and suspension rates and the need to keep our troublesome students in schools. It has been experimental and requires further refinement, especially in getting whole of school buy-in to the process. This is a pivotal point for success. Dixon and Widdowson (2002) in the Evaluation Report state:
The results suggest that Restorative Conferencing may provide a valuable alternative to traditional responses to disciplin ary issues within schools. However, enacting significant social change within the school community of the kind required to make the shift from a retributive to a restorative culture is a process that requires continuous and sustained reflection as a community.
It has achieved remarkable responses from participants and very high rates of retention of at-risk students who would have otherwise been suspended. (All but two, who relocated: one abroad, one to another district within six months of referral, continued with their education at the base school.) A positive relationship between students and coordinator has assisted to nurture and sustain students through a difficult time in their school lives. Recipients of misbehavior have felt reassured in that they are supported and feel greater safety.
This project has contributed to furthering the understanding around the continuing implementation process of Restorative Conferencing in schools. It is hoped others will continue this work towards keeping our kids off the suspension merry-go-round.

References


