Stepping Off The Merry-Go-Round:
Successfully Transitioning to Restorative Practices in Schools

by

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Abstract

Being convinced of the benefits of restorative practices in schools, the purpose of this study was to identify the factors that would lead to the successful implementation of restorative practices in a school setting. A review of literature suggested six key elements were necessary; a perceived need for a change, staff buy-in, training, student participation and ownership, the incorporation of restorative practices into daily routines, fully voluntary participation in restorative processes, and training for all staff before and after implementation. A survey was conducted in a small BC school that had implemented restorative practices beginning in 2010 in order to explore the factors that supported or inhibited the successful implementation of restorative practices. The results of this study supported four of these elements (all except for student participation and the daily use of restorative practices); and while there were no data refuting the other two elements, neither was enough data gathered to concretely support them. Recommendations were made as to how these elements could successfully be incorporated into implementation.

Keywords: restorative practices, survey research, secondary school, school discipline
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Merry-Go-Round of Traditional Discipline

Since taking on the role of principal at a small rural high school in the fall of 2014, I have been involved in the disciplinary process for many students. This process has involved students who have either committed serious offences in the school, such as violent behaviour, cyber bullying, or vandalism; or they have been referred to the administration by a teacher or support staff member for a lesser offence that they are requesting assistance in dealing with. Most commonly, referrals are for defiance (which, as identified by Smith, Fisher and Frey (2015) encompasses a broad and vaguely defined range of behaviour but in a general sense involves some form of not following directions or classroom rules) or repeated low-level behaviour such as not coming prepared to class, being on a cell-phone during class, or talking to a classmate during a lesson. More serious offences could include swearing at a teacher, being physically aggressive, or unsafe behaviour. These behaviours may or may not have been addressed by the teacher before referral; but it is not unusual for the office referrals to result from initially low-level behaviour on the part of the student that then escalates in response to teacher intervention.

Historically, the disciplinary action taken in the school by both classroom teachers and administration is of a traditional punitive nature, meaning it involved consequences of some sort that were not typically related to the offense. Interventions on the part of the teacher usually involved talking to the student, a call home, a detention, being sent from the classroom, or occasionally some other loss of privilege. Interventions from the administration ranged from a conversation with the student, a call home to the parent, being out of a class for a block or a longer period of time, detention at lunch or after school, parent meetings (typically with the student) or school-based team meetings, in-school or out-of-school suspension, and eventually
succession and referral to the district’s Disciplinary Review Committee, depending on the seriousness and frequency of the behaviour.

For students with chronic low-level behaviour, following the district’s guidelines of escalating consequences meant that students could be suspended for non-violent behaviour that was relatively harmless but causing continuous disruption in classrooms and hallways. Regardless of the behaviour they were exhibiting, for students who chronically acted out the inevitable exclusionary disciplinary action did not typically result in a positive behavioural change, in fact it often escalated their behaviour which in turn led to more serious consequences. I observed that the disciplinary process (and in particular exclusionary discipline) was harming the student-teacher relationship, the student and parent connection to the school, as well as negatively impacting the student’s academic achievement if the discipline process involved removal from the classroom or school.

Traditional discipline, it seemed to me, was like an endless merry-go-round for some students; once they stepped onto it they never stepped off, and in fact they continued to accelerate on it until dizzy, sickened, and disoriented, they hurtled off and hit the playground dirt full force. Though we referred to our disciplinary techniques as consequences, or even natural consequences, what we were actually doing in most cases was punishing the student; and though the punishment we meted out could provide a temporary relief for the classroom teacher and their classmates, it was damaging relationships and student learning for the person causing the harm, ignoring the needs of the person harmed, and most often without any change in student behaviour.
It’s a Blur Out There

If students were on the disciplinary merry-go-round, one might assume that school staff were the ones propelling it in its endless cycle, but it is not that simple. Even staff who recognized that the disciplinary process was not typically effective at bringing about changes in student behaviour, and at a gut level wanted a different way of dealing with student misbehaviour, found themselves meting out traditional punishment along with everyone else – myself included. That’s because the real driver behind the ride wasn’t the staff themselves per se, but the existing disciplinary culture that existed in the school and the wider community, and that culture swept the staff along with it. In a very real sense, staff are right on the merry-go-round with the students; and just as on a real merry-go-round the surrounding scenery becomes blurred, the riders only able to focus on what is on the ride spinning with them, within a school setting it can be challenging to see a world outside of the existing school culture. Embedded practices were carried on with little thought or exploration of alternatives because they were assumed to be effective.

In my experience, the prevalent culture of traditional punitive and exclusionary discipline relied on three fundamental beliefs that at a gut level I felt were somewhat erroneous. First and foremost, it assumed that discomfort (the punishment) is enough to stop a behaviour, without necessarily understanding the roots of that behaviour; and also that if a mild deterrent is not enough to end the behaviour, escalating the punishment will eventually bring about the desired result. This tended to work for students whose infractions were infrequent, so called “good kids:” but failed miserably for another segment of the student population whose behaviour simply continued or escalated alongside the consequences. The assumption that punishment would change behaviour could easily backfire; if for example a student acted out to avoid work,
sending them out of the classroom actually reinforced their behaviour if the reasons behind the work avoidance were not being acknowledged and addressed.

It also assumed that students who misbehaved should be made an example of; the punishment that had been meted out to one student would act as a deterrent to others. However, my observation was that the so-called “good kids” did not require a deterrent to begin with; and while some students may have been at least temporarily deterred from their behaviour, other students carried on with their behaviour regardless of the punishment their peers were receiving. Worse still, some students would even escalate their misbehaviour when they saw their friends being punished!

Lastly, there was an assumption that once a student caused a significant enough or continuous enough disruption to the learning environment that removing the student was necessary to give the teacher and other students a break and ensure a productive and safe learning environment. While at times removal of a student is at least temporarily necessary to ensure a safe learning environment, and while it is true that a constantly disrupted or unsafe learning environment infringes upon the rights of other students and the staff, the culture of exclusionary discipline assumes that removal is the only (or at the very least, the easiest) solution when a student displays severe or persistent misbehaviour. It fails to try and understand what is behind a student’s actions, and help them to change their behaviour so that they can stay in or re-enter the learning environment as a productive member.

It is important to note that this culture would not continue to exist in my school if it was not thought at least at some level to be working. The culture of punishment is at least in part pervasive not only because it is often the easiest response, but because it is perceived to be effective. The discomfort of having a student misbehave ceases when they are removed either
temporarily or permanently from a classroom or the school environment; and removal has, at some level, actually fixed the immediate problem of disruption to the learning environment. However, little regard was given to the fact that for many misbehaving students, it didn’t stop it from occurring again.

This focus on control and punishment was also largely ignoring those who had been harmed. Over time, I realized that when one student harmed another, the student harmed was for all intents and purposes powerless over what happened next. Although they might speak to a staff member about what had happened, after reporting they rarely had the option of addressing the person who had caused the harm directly, nor did they have a say in what would happen after an incident was referred to the administration. While a referral to a counselor might be made to help a student work through any harm or conflict, rarely did those harmed and those causing the harm sit down together to understand each other, and where possible work to resolve conflict or repair harm done. As long as the person causing the harm was punished, and the harmful behaviour ceased, the process was perceived to be working.

In my opinion, the existing disciplinary culture was linked to valuing control over relationship; it seemed to me that the focus was on having a complicit student body, rather than an empathetic and responsive one. It was more important that students stopped misbehaviour, or that at the least that it didn’t bother others, rather than trying to understand the behaviour and helping students change. Staff – teachers and administrators in particular – were viewed as an authority to be obeyed, rather than as fellow members of the school community. In this setting, students, parents and staff saw administrators as where the buck stops. As the process was described to me by a former administrator of the district, if a student was referred to the administration it was expected that the administrator would use a “big enough stick,” to let
everyone know that “something had been done” – even if the administrator knew it wouldn’t result in a lasting change. If it was perceived that the administrator had been too soft – that is, that the punishment had not been severe enough in view of the offence – there was a judgement that the problem had not been adequately dealt with. If a student had been harmed, often the primary concern of their parent(s) was how severe the punishment would be for the student who had done the harm. I increasingly felt that the expectation of the school community was that my purpose as principal in the disciplinary process was to mete out punishment, rather than to help students learn, build connections, and repair relationships.

**How Do We Step Off of the Merry-Go-Round?**

Confronted with this dilemma, I began asking the question: is there action we can take that will help learners change their behaviour – to see how their actions are affecting others, and learn new ways of dealing with the situations that are causing them to act out? My vice-principal and I began to respond less punitively to student behaviour by talking through situations with students who had caused harm, trying to help them see how their behaviour was impacting others. However, it quickly became clear that we were missing a piece of the puzzle. We needed something more than just talk. We needed a proven process that would replace the punishment we typically used if teachers were to have faith that student behaviour was being taken seriously and dealt with, and if students were to take accountability for their actions and change their behaviour so that they could meet teacher and school expectations in an authentic fashion. As I began researching alternative disciplinary processes, restorative practices caught my attention; and after some initial online reading into the topic, which for the most part consisted of anecdotal reports from schools using the process, I began to wonder if this could be worth a try in our school to address the questions and challenges we were facing.
After discussing with my superintendent the possibilities that restorative practices could hold, she happened to be talking about it with a superintendent in another small school district. He mentioned that a high school principal in his district had implemented restorative practices five years prior, and in the last year had not had to suspend a single student to their district disciplinary committee – something that was a relatively frequent practice at my high school for incidents that included violence, drug and alcohol infractions, and ongoing low-level behaviour where we had exhausted the school’s disciplinary.

I contacted the principal, and found out that her high school was a school of nearly identical size (approximately 300 students) and similar demographic to mine. She told me that five years prior, in 2010, she and two full-time vice principals could not keep up with the disciplinary referrals they received. Five years in, with only one full-time vice principal they now received approximately one discipline referral each day. Conversations with students that centered around restorative practices were being had between classroom teachers and students after an in-class incident, whereas five years ago it would have been an administrator having the conversation. She really believed that restorative practices had changed the culture of how the school responded to negative student behaviours, but even more so had resulted in lowered number of incidences of negative student behaviour – meaning the practices had led to actual changes in behaviour. This was the part that really caught my attention, as I had rarely, if ever, seen a change in behaviour as a result of punishment.

As I began my thesis work, I knew I wanted to focus on restorative practices, but my research question was not clear in my mind. As I worked my way through the literature on the topic, at my high school we moved through our first year and into our second year of implementation of restorative practices. Although I knew our process wasn’t perfect and still
required refinement, I began to believe that the real value of restorative practices lay in how it was perceived by students and parents. Still in its infant stages of implementation, appreciation was primarily being expressed by parents for an approach that didn’t default to removal from the school environment; parents didn’t want their children to fall behind in school. Parents were also glad that the school was helping their child reflect on what had happened, and was seeking the input of those involved on what action should be taken to make things right. In a very few cases, this view of the administration as seeking solutions rather than punishing resulted in wholesale changes in student (and even parent) behaviour and more positive student and parent relationships with the school – a result I had never witnessed from a suspension. But despite seeing these positive fruits, restorative practices were still largely being used only as an administrative intervention tool, and not on a wider scale by staff in the building.

This led to a gradual refinement of my research question. I was already convinced of the value that restorative practices could hold, and now wondered – what steps could be taken to make the implementation of restorative practices successful, school-wide, and sustainable? At that point, I wondered – how could we learn from the staff of this other school that anecdotally was seeing success as we began to undertake our own implementation of restorative practices? What steps did they take, what supports were useful, and what did staff see as the benefits of restorative practices? Were there things that staff thought didn’t work, or supports they wished they had been able to access?
Research Question

Seeking to understand how to have a more universal implementation of restorative practices at all levels of staff at my high school gave rise to my research question:

“What can be learned from a staff about the implementation of restorative practices at their school that can help lead to the successful sustainable implementation of restorative practices in other school settings?”

It is my hope that my research will benefit formal and informal leaders in implementing restorative practices in their own school environments.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Understanding Why Punishment Doesn’t Work

Traditional discipline models in schools have tended to focus on a system of rules and punishments for breaking those rules. When a student causes harm, the focus is on three questions: What rule has been broken? Who did it? What sanction do they deserve? (Bargen, 2010). Typical punishment for student offenses can vary, but frequently involves exclusionary tactics such as seating apart from others or detention at break times, while for serious or repeat behaviour students are frequently suspended. This imposition of punishment has as its foundation the value of control (Varnham, 2005) and is based on the beliefs that unpleasant results will deter both the person causing the harm and others who witness the punishment (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2009; Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Close-Conoly & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006), and provide a better learning environment for other students (Skiba et al., 2006).

However, a steadily growing body of evidence increasingly indicates that suspension does little to change existing or deter future behaviour, make schools safer, or improve school climate (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2015; Skiba et al., 2006; Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles & Espelage, 2016; Varnham, 2005); in fact, there is evidence that points to the contrary. Suspending students actually increases the likelihood of the person causing the harm re-offending (Ortega et al., 2016 and Varnham, 2005), and data shows that high suspension rates are correlated with less overall student satisfaction with school climate as well as lowered academic achievement (Skiba et al., 2006; Gregory et al., 2015). Varnham (2005) also refers to research having established that “bullies generally have low levels of empathy, that they tend to be highly impulsive, and that they retaliate when punished” (p. 94). This growing
body of evidence has in recent years prompted two prominent American associations, the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, to publicly call into question the effectiveness of exclusionary discipline. While addressing the zero-tolerance policies common in the United States, both bodies looked at the impact of suspension and expulsion in general. The former commissioned the 2006 research by Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Close-Conoly and Garcia-Vazquez in order to have a data-based exploration of exclusionary and zero-tolerance discipline and published a summary of their results and recommendations in 2008; while the latter published a policy statement in 2013 that concluded:

…research continues to demonstrate that…out-of-school suspension and expulsion that are used too readily are ineffective deterrents to inappropriate behavior and are harmful and counterproductive to the student, the family, the school district, and the community as a whole, both short- and long-term. (Lamont, 2013, p. e1005).

Although Skiba et. al (2006) remind the reader that causal relationships between exclusionary punishment and the correlated negative student, school and community effects are currently not well established through research, their review of the evidence does offer suggestions as to why punitive systems fail. They refer to the earlier research of Comer and Poussaint (1992) who found that it is normative for adolescents to make poor decisions due to an immature brain development, and suggest that the lack of connection between discipline process and developmental theory results in discipline processes that can undermine relationships between students and staff, school connectedness, and student perceptions of fairness. Furthermore, Comer and Poussaint state that in and of itself punishment by exclusion carries risks:
…the potential effects of alienation, rejection and isolation associated with punitive and exclusionary school discipline are well documented, and may distance youth from healthy peer communities, accelerate contact with delinquent peers, reduce the amount of adult supervision they receive, and enhance the likelihood of marginalization. (as cited in Skiba et al., 2006, p. 81)

A lack of proper understanding of the seriousness (or lack thereof) of student behaviour on the part of school staff may also result in an over-extension of punishment, resulting in serious consequences for minor or even innocent misbehaviour; this can further frustrate and alienate students and parents (Skiba et al., 2006).

Proponents and practitioners of restorative justice point to further reasons that traditional disciplinary systems that rely on punishment are ineffective, although their conclusions are not well researched. They focus on the fact that in these traditional systems punishment is imposed on the person causing the harm, who is passive and powerless in the process (Costello et al., 2009; Ortega et al., 2016). Because of this powerlessness, the person causing the harm does not have to take responsibility or have accountability for their actions; rather, they tend to respond with anger. This can result in them shifting their focus from the person they have harmed to the punisher, experiencing feelings of resentment and/or victimization, or blaming the person they harmed for their punishment (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Costello et al., 2009). Costelo et al. (2009) also argue that punishment serves to shame and alienate students, stigmatizing them as bad because their personhood is not separated from their behaviours. They suggest that these factors will result in those causing harm to have a lack of connection with their school, instead seeking connection with others who have similar behaviours. Even when punishment does function as a deterrent, it only does so when the person causing the harm is in view of the
punishing authority, and the poor behaviour will continue once they are no longer being observed (Amstutz and Mullet & Costelo et al.).

Aside from the evidence that indicates punishment does not deter bad behaviour, there is also the fact that it does not address the needs of the person harmed. Although the argument against traditional discipline tends to focus more on the fact that it does not change bad behaviour, the explicit and intentional focus on the needs of the person harmed in the use of restorative practices implies a very real deficiency in this regard when it comes to traditional discipline. Varnham (2005) points out that with traditional discipline in schools, restoration for the person harmed is not a focus, and that this deprives the person harmed of the “emotional or symbolic” restoration which research indicates is important for those harmed to heal (p. 94). In this way, punishment not only ignores the needs of the person causing the harm, but of the person harmed as well.

Why Are Restorative Practices a Viable Alternative?

If punishment (and in particular exclusionary discipline) is ineffective and possibly even damaging to the person causing the harm and the wider school community, what is the alternative? One possibility is the use of restorative practices, an approach that has been gaining support in education in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Restorative practices in schools as we know them, while having ties to and characteristics of various indigenous, religious, or other cultural practices (Bargen, 2010), are also somewhat distinct from them, having been informed by modern research on education, conflict resolution and developmental psychology. They have as their philosophical roots constructivism, critical reflection, and psycho-education; and while primarily drawing on the use of restorative justice
techniques used in the criminal justice system, they are further informed by conflict resolution education, character education, and emotional literacy (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015).

Bargen (2010), in a manner similar to other restorative advocates (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015) draws on the experience of educators in the Langley district since 2001 as well as the writings of Howard Zehr to contrast mainstream punishment models with restorative practices by comparing the questions asked in response to an offence (p. 14), as shown in Figure 2.1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainstream Discipline</th>
<th>Restorative Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What rule has been broken?</td>
<td>• Who has been harmed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who did it?</td>
<td>• What are the needs of the person who has been harmed? Whose responsibility are these?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What sanction do they deserve?</td>
<td>• What can be done to make things right?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.1 Mainstream vs. Restorative Practices: this figure illustrates the difference between the primary aims of mainstream discipline and restorative practices*

A review of literature yields a set of common principles and goals present in restorative practices when a person causes harm:

- to invite the full participation of all those affected by an event in a collaborative process;
- to understand the harm done, and to develop empathy for all of those impacted by it;
- to give voice to both the person harmed and the person causing the harm and identify their needs;
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• to identify whose obligation it is to meet the needs of the person harmed and the person causing the harm;
• through personal reflection on the part of the person causing the harm and dialogue with all of those impacted by an event, seek responsibility and accountability for the person causing the harm;
• as much as is possible, to heal relationships that have been damaged by the harm;
• to help reintegrate the person causing the harm (and person harmed, if necessary) back into the community; and,
• to strengthen the system to prevent future harms (and if necessary change it if it is in some way contributing to the harm).

(Amstutz & Mullet, 2015, pp. 10-11, 14, 26 - 28; Bargen, 2010, pp. 15-16, 36; Gregory et al., 2015, p. 3; Espelage et. al, 2016, p. 459; Varnham, 2005, p. 92)

Amstutz and Mullet (2015), citing Richard Zehr (2002), point out that this intentional care and focus on the person harmed is a component usually missing from traditional disciplinary models; and Varnham (2005), referring to the work of John Braithwaite (1989), further stresses that the above principles give restorative practices a particular effectiveness in meeting the different needs of each individual person harmed. At the same time, practitioners of restorative practices acknowledge that the needs of each individual person causing the harm are different, and draw on developmental theory to argue that discipline, like instruction, should be differentiated to meet the different needs of each learner (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015).
**Keys to Successful Implementation of Restorative Practices in Schools**

**Obtaining buy-in.** The implementation of restorative practices in a school setting requires the buy-in of its stakeholders; it is difficult for restorative practices to take root in a school community skeptical of their use (Bargen, 2010). While there does not need to be a behavioural crisis in a school to implement restorative practices, there does need to be a perceived need for change from the school community; whether it be desiring a better school culture and better relationships, more engagement at school, or better behaviour from students (Costello et al., 2009). Although any individual member of the school community can be an agent of change, from their experience Costello et al. (2009) have found sustainable whole-school change will not occur without the support and commitment of the school principal.

This need for staff buy-in is reflected in the findings of McLuskey, Lloyd, Stead, Kan, Riddell, & Weedon (2008, as cited in Gregory et al., 2015) who in a study of schools employing restorative practices found the actual level of implementation varied widely from school to school; they suggested there is a link between how fully restorative practices could be implemented and the existing fundamental ideological beliefs about how to manage student behaviour. If there is no perceived need for change – for example, if the prevailing culture is one where punitive discipline is seen as an effective deterrent – the implementation of restorative practices is impeded. Teacher perceptions of the time and effort involved in the use of restorative practices can also affect implementation. Varnham (2005) refers to a pilot project in five schools in New Zealand in 2000, where despite the success of the trial, participant satisfaction, and substantial interest from other schools, restorative practices were still not being implemented in other schools. Those involved suggested that it was seen by “over-stretched educators as too hard and too consuming of both energy and resources” (p. 95).
This suggests that as a part of implementation, intervention may be necessary to shift disciplinary values in the school and help increase teacher buy-in (Gregory et al., 2015). Transparency and early communication about any changes to discipline procedures are critical, and instruction and training are necessary early on to respond to staff questions and concerns (Costello et al., 2009). Costello and colleagues advise against a staged approach to implementation (where at first only those interested are educated, and then that circle is gradually expanded), suggesting instead that all staff (including support staff) are initially trained in how to use restorative practices. Doing so enables all staff to try the practices and be involved in discussion about them at the same time. This, they argue, gives the best opportunity for gaining momentum and credibility as staff see the practices working.

Communication to all parts of the school community are an integral part of building “momentum and enthusiasm” (Bargen, 2010, p. 43) for the implementation of restorative practices. Beyond the staff and students Bargen encourages informing and including parents in the implementation as much as possible, to help to shift parent mindsets on discipline and increase their support for restorative practices. Not only should it be explained how restorative practices work and the potential impact on their children, Bargen suggests including them in the same training opportunities that are provided to staff and students.

If teacher buy-in influences the degree to which they will implement restorative practices, then obtaining it is critical due to the potential payoff. Research by Gregory et al. (2015) found the degree of implementation was linked directly to the quality of teacher-student relationships, as measured by an increase in student respect for their teachers and a reduction in teacher use of office referrals and exclusionary discipline. Furthermore, their research suggested that a higher degree of restorative practices implementation resulted in more equitable discipline, as the racial
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minority discipline gap (i.e. the gap between numbers of discipline referrals for racial minorities and Caucasian students) was lower for teachers who had a high degree of implementation.

**Student participation and Ownership.** Beyond the need for staff to buy in, Varnham indicates that effective implementation of restorative practices also requires a focus on young people and their role in the school community (2005). This is supported by Gregory et al. (2015), who suggest that student perceptions on the implementation of restorative practices are important to take into consideration. They connect their research to the work of Pearrow and Pollack (2012, as cited in Gregory et al.), who argue that youth need to be involved collaboratively in processes to bring about change in their schools, as well as the work of Wachtel (2012), who argues that in a restorative classroom youth should participate in the decision making:

Throughout all RP [restorative practices] elements, student opinion and emotional reaction are mindfully integrated into all procedures. RP emphasizes fair process and its three guiding principles: engagement (involve students in decision making), explanation (provide rationale for decisions), and expectation clarity (widespread understanding of behavioural expectations and consequences for infractions). (as cited in Gregory et al., 2015, p. 6)

Student participation, along with an environment in which students are cared for, supported, and where the adults are consistent in their expectations for student behaviour, lends itself to an authoritative style of socializing adolescents (as compared to permissive or authoritarian), which theory and research suggest adolescents are most responsive to. This incorporation of student input and active participation in the implementation of school rules and disciplinary processes, particularly when they are perceived to be fair, may increase the
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legitimacy of teacher and administrative authority, which builds student cooperation (Gregory et al., 2015).

More so, their research found that “student report, but not teacher report, of RP implementation was associated with teacher respect [as measured by students] and teacher use of discipline referrals (Gregory et al., 2015, p.20),” indicating that students were more accurate at assessing the implementation integrity of restorative practices than the teachers using them. They note the connection to the work of McLuskey et al. (2008, as cited in Gregory et al., 2015), who found in their study that a higher degree of restorative practices implementation was correlated to the integration of student voice and the degree to which students felt heard. As such, regularly collecting student feedback on restorative practices implementation and providing that data to teachers should help teachers better assess the degree and authenticity of their implementation (Gregory et al., 2015).

Bargen (2010), relating the model used in Langley (SD 35) schools, advocates for the creation of trained student-led mediation teams that can handle lower-level conflict between students, and making membership in these teams attractive to students. Varnham (2005) also speaks to the benefits of peer mediation employed in schools in New Zealand and the US. Although indicating that there is a lack of data showing peer mediation reduces “violence, anti-social behaviour, or student conflict” (Varnham, 2005, p. 91), she makes reference to research results that showed peer mediation can:

Offer students a chance to see conflict as a positive opportunity to learn more about others; provide a structure for students to handle conflicts; teach acceptance of responsibility; develop a life skill that enables students to treat others with more respect and communicate more effectively; promote understanding and sensitivity to the needs of
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others; increase student interest in the justice and legal system; promote a higher level of citizenship activity; help build a better school environment; reduce discipline referrals; and increase teaching time. (p. 90)

Using a variety of restorative practices to increase capacity. In the actual implementation of restorative practices, there are a variety of strategies that can be employed. Gregory et al. (2015) point out that restorative practices include a set of strategies intended to help prevent infractions in the first place. As an example of this, in secondary schools a flexible, non-scripted mediation can be used to help students work through issues in a safe space away from their friends and peers, with the intent of resolving issues prior to a fight or other serious conflict taking place (Bargen, 2010). For minor situations, Bargen contends that this process does not even need to involve school staff; to this end, in the Langley school district schools using restorative practices recruit students to act as peer mediators for these conversations, increasing the student participation and ownership of conflict resolution and reducing teacher and administrative time used in the process. However, “when a situation is more complex and there is a risk of a situation not being resolved without participation of other students/parental support” or if a serious offence has occurred, more formal circles, conferences, or community forums can be used to address the harm (Bargen, p. 35). And while there is perhaps a tendency to think that restorative practices are not appropriate for the most serious offences, Varnham (2005) refers to Braithwaite (1989) in arguing that even for the most violent of offences, restorative practices can still be used to the benefit of both person causing the harm and person harmed.

In terms of building both staff and student capacity for using restorative practices, both Bargen (2010) and Gregory et al. (2015) suggest that teachers use circles on a regular basis in
their classrooms – for example, to establish classroom rules, behaviour expectations, or simply for community discussion. Various types of circles can be used – beginning-of-day circles, anytime circles, end-of-day circles, farewell circles, and school staff circles – to help embed the practices, expectations and values of circles into everyday routine, making it easier when one has to deal with more serious issues (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015).

**Voluntary participation as a key component.** Bargen (2010) stresses that a key component to the success of restorative practices is the empowerment of youth by having them buy into the process willingly rather than being forced to participate in a process where they face a person they have been harmed by or been in conflict with. Likewise, Wachtel, O’Connell and Wachtel (2010) state that those harmed and those causing harm must voluntarily agree to participate. If the person harmed chooses not to participate, a conference may still be held, although the facilitator should still present the perspective of the person harmed through an advocate or reading a statement written by them (Wachtel et al., 2010).

For the person who has committed the harm, if they are not willing to acknowledge the harm done or take responsibility for their actions, Amstutz and Mullet (2015) indicate that a restorative process may not be appropriate, and punishment may still be necessary in order to try to prevent further opportunities for harm. However, in these instances there should still be an emphasis on and plan for transitioning the student towards a more empathic and responsible mindset. Wachtel et al. agree that “at a minimum offenders should admit to the offense to be eligible for a conference” (p. 187); but they advocate more strongly to still hold a conference even though “some offenders may minimize or displace responsibility” (p. 187):

When offenders present a less than ideal attitude, facilitators should not avoid conferencing. Some facilitators think they can predict which offenders will not
participate or benefit from a conference, but that is unlikely…Facilitators should not impose their fears. (Wachtel et al., 2010, p. 180)

In this situation, the attitude or claims of the person who caused harm should be presented to the person harmed and letting them decide if the conference should proceed, provided the facilitator believes no further harm is likely to result. This provides the person harmed with the opportunity to still talk directly to the person who harmed them, which is often what they want and need (Wachtel et al., 2010).

While Amstutz and Mullet (2015) and Wachtel et al. (2010) present from the restorative practitioners’ viewpoint, Varnham (2005) presents from the researcher’s viewpoint. She does not delve into the circumstances in which a conference should take place, but rather focuses on the circumstances in which those harmed are dissatisfied with the process. She first makes reference to the research of Heather Strang (2000), who studied the response of those harmed to the criminal restorative justice process in Canberra. Strang noted that in comparison to the traditional criminal justice system, the individual harmed tended to be more satisfied; any dissatisfaction they expressed related mainly to poor administration of the process. She also cites the earlier research of Maxwell and Morris (1993), who found that only 50% of those harmed (in comparison with 85% of person causing the harms and their parents) were satisfied with the outcome of restorative processes. In that research, the persons harmed responded that they were dissatisfied when they perceived that consequences were too lenient, when they were not informed of the outcome of the process, or when “person causing the harms did not show themselves to be truly sorry” (Maxwell and Morris, 1993, as cited in Varnham, 2005, p. 94). Varnham warns, then, that when restorative practices are used in schools that the facilitation and intended outcomes need to be carefully considered in light of all stakeholders, including the
person harmed – meaning that it may not be appropriate to have a person causing the harm go through a restorative process when there is reasonable belief that they will not engage positively in the process, given the high likelihood for dissatisfaction with the result on the part of the person harmed.

While the research of Strang (2000) and Maxwell and Morris (1993) was conducted in the criminal justice system, Ortega et al. (2016) conducted their study conducted in an educational setting; it was one of the first descriptive studies of restorative circles in schools that looked at the experiences of participants as well as the factors influencing their perceptions. As a part of the study, they documented the negative outcomes stated by students and staff interviewed after having gone through restorative circles in a high school setting. For students, these negative effects included:

- being frustrated when they believed peers in the circle were lying, which they tended to relate to these students either not wanting to participate or not having a restorative mindset;
- being frustrated when peers in the circle just wanted to “fight it out” (p. 463);
- being disappointed when peers would not participate in a circle by not being vulnerable, speaking, or not taking the circle seriously;
- being disappointed when not everyone affected by a situation was present.

For adults, the negative effects included:

- being frustrated when they believed students in the circle were lying, which they tended to relate to students being uncomfortable or untrusting of peers and in particular the facilitator;
• being frustrated seeing the frustration of students in response to their peers lying;
• being frustrated when peers in the circle just wanted to “fight it out”; and,
• being disappointed when students would not openly share or take the process seriously.

Two possible strategies for overcoming these negative experiences are “full voluntariness” and “community ownership” (Ortega et al., 2016, p. 466). Ortega et al. suggest that full voluntariness produces the best outcomes. They suggest that although participation by students in restorative circles was in theory voluntary, students (i.e., those who had caused harm) may have been motivated to participate in a belief that it would result in a less severe punishment or under pressure from adults, believing their participation was a requirement or was the punishment for their offense in and of itself. Referring to the research of Evans & Lester (2013) they suggest that restorative circles should work independently of the disciplinary system and not as a part of it in order to facilitate full voluntary participation. Bargen (2010) also warns about the loss of empowerment that can occur by making students participate in restorative processes with those they have harmed or been harmed when they do not want to, a danger particularly present in “school settings that have a culture that imposes top-down authority from adults” (p. 32).

To facilitate a sense of community ownership, Ortega et al. (2016) suggest having the restorative processes administered and facilitated by trusted and respected members of the school community, rather than using facilitators from outside of the school community. Involving outside community members that were not well known to the students as facilitators, the researchers believed, led to a lack of trust and openness on the part of student participants that is necessary for the restorative process to work. This strategy is used in the Langley district’s implementation, where facilitators in schools are usually trained staff members or students from
those schools (Bargen, 2010), with the exception of the most serious offences in which case facilitators from the Community Justice Initiatives may be used.

**Training and facilitation.** Wachtel et al. (2010) also speak to facilitation, although more in the context of criminal justice; they indicate that reading a few handbooks on restorative practices is not sufficient to train a facilitator to handle conferences for violent offences or incidences involving significant trauma for the person harmed. In these instances, significant training or experience in dealing with serious crimes and those harmed is important. They list a wide range of potential facilitators depending on the context: professionals and specialists, screened and trained volunteers, or peers, although they stipulate that a facilitator should not have been affected by the incident itself, or have been involved in a counselling/support role with either the person causing the harm or person harmed (p. 181). However, as mentioned earlier, the research of Ortega et al. (2016) suggests that in the school context, a trusted member of the school community would be best suited to the facilitator role in most situations.

Throughout the literature, training of students and staff that will be involved in the facilitation of restorative practices or of stakeholders whose support and understanding of the process will be required, provided by experienced and qualified restorative practitioners, is frequently referenced as a key component in the successful implementation of restorative practices (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015; Bargen, 2010; Costello et al., 2009; Gregory et al., 2015; Varnham, 2005; Wachtel et al., 2010). Although not explicitly spelled out, this recurring mention of training as a first step tends to suggest that schools as a whole should not attempt to tackle the implementation of restorative practices if those administering the process have only a rudimentary knowledge of the practices. Bargen (2010) also suggests that for restorative practices to be sustainable and result in long-term cultural change, an ongoing training plan
needs to be incorporated to account for staff and student movement, loss of interest or simple forgetfulness.

**Summary of Key Components for Implementation of Restorative Practices**

As I moved through the literature, I began to see common themes of the process schools should use in implementing restorative practices, as well as factors that produced dissatisfaction with the participants. In summary, I identified the following key components in the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools:

- a perception on the part of the school community that there is a need for a change;
- buy in from stakeholders, in particular the staff, facilitated by open communication about restorative practices;
- student participation and ownership;
- incorporating restorative practices into the daily fabric of the school;
- encouraging fully voluntary participation; and,
- training of facilitators and other members of the school community prior to and ongoing after implementation.

Note that in this context voluntary participation does *not* mean staff choosing whether or not to implement restorative processes; but rather both the person causing the harm and the person harmed or affected (whether a staff member or student) choosing to participate in conferences, and identifying if the person who caused the harm is participating with proper intention rather than just trying to evade punishment or in the belief that they are required to participate.

In my own experiences as an administrator, I frequently encountered the “punitive mindset,” where control was valued and punishment seen as an effective deterrent; and I know firsthand the roadblocks that this can present to staff buy-in of restorative practices. As a result
of this mindset, when a student went through the restorative process, stakeholders (staff members, but at times students and parents as well) waited to see if the obligations of the agreement matches the traditional disciplinary consequences in severity, if the student met them, and if they would offend again.

In essence, staff were looking for the same outcomes with both processes; and as I moved through the review of the literature, I realized that not enough had been done to help shift the mindsets of staff, students and parents before and during the implementation of restorative practices. With this experience, I realized that in my research exploring how staff mindsets were related to the six key elements of implementation would give the greatest benefit in providing recommendations to schools in their own implementation of restorative practices.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

In my review of the literature, I was struck by Varnham’s reference to the research of Heather Strang (2000), in which Strang noted that the dissatisfaction of those harmed participating in restorative practices lay not with the process itself, but rather in its “bungled administration” (Varnham, 2005, p. 92). This reinforced my research focus; rather than focusing on the change that restorative practices can affect in schools, the purpose would be to determine what factors contribute to a successful and sustainable implementation of restorative practices in schools – in essence, how can schools avoid bungling the process? Both the initial success and the sustainability would rely on the buy-in of all stakeholders; and school staff are the most critical stakeholders to achieving whole-school buy-in. Using a survey tool in order to include as many responses and from as wide a range of school staff as possible, my research attempts to discern from a school staff with several years of experience to draw on what has worked, what can be done differently or better in the implementation of restorative practices, and what has resulted in both positive and negative shifts in staff mindsets so that other schools can replicate their successes and avoid their mistakes.

Sample

The sample consisted of the entire staff of a small grade 8 – 12 high school in BC, serving approximately 300 students in a small community. The school has utilized restorative practices since the 2010 school year, when the administration had voluntarily participated in training sessions presented by the Fraser Region Community Justice Initiatives, an organization which provides a large percentage of the training for school-based restorative practices in BC; some staff members then participated in training sessions offered within their district. In the
school’s literature, restorative practices are presented as an embedded approach to discipline; the staff handbook states that violations of the school’s student code of conduct are approached through a restorative lens “which involves reflective questions, restitution and mediation so that consequences are restorative in nature rather than punitive,” although it does state that serious offences may result in a suspension and/or referral to the District Discipline Committee. It further details what the principles of restorative action are in a format similar to that presented by Bargen (2010).

The sample size was thirty-five staff members, including the administration, teachers, and support staff. Of these, nine responded to the survey distributed, a response rate of 26%, with respondents representing administration, teachers, and support staff. Although the survey was designed with two possible response “paths” – one for staff who had only taught in an environment where restorative practices were used, and another for teachers who had transitioned from traditional disciplinary approaches to restorative practices, all nine respondents corresponded to the latter group – that is, they had transitioned from a traditional disciplinary environment to one where restorative practices were used.

**Instrument**

An online anonymous survey (see Appendix A for a print copy of the survey) was developed that utilized a mix of both open and closed questions to analyze the staff’s personal views, experiences and use of restorative practices, as well as their observations on the wider school implementation. The intent was to be able to tie the respondent’s training and knowledge, views, use, and experiences of restorative practices together to try and identify the factors that led to buy-in – that is, a more positive mindset and a higher self-reporting of use. The design of
the questions was influenced by the research, which indicated that staff buy-in and training were critical to effective implementation.

In the survey, a five-point Likert scale was used to measure the respondent’s self-assessment of:

- their understanding of restorative practices;
- how fully the school and the individual respondent had implemented restorative practices; and,
- whether or not the use of restorative practices had altered their self-efficacy in terms of classroom management, responding to negative student behaviour, and helping students to change negative behaviours.

A “Yes or No” response, along with open response questions, was also used to identify whether a respondent had received formal training, who had provided it, and whether it had helped them in their own implementation. Open questions were used to explore:

- how and when a respondent uses restorative practices;
- resources and supports they found useful, or wished they had been provided with;
- the respondent’s assessment of how restorative practices influenced overall school climate and that of their own work environment;
- what they identified as key benefits and deficits of restorative practices;
- how they had viewed restorative practices when first introduced and how they view them now;
- whether how they handled student behaviour had changed with the introduction of restorative practices or not; and,
- any other factors they believed would contribute to a successful and sustainable implementation of restorative practices in a school environment.
Methodology

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Vancouver Island University (VIU) Research Ethics Board (REB), the superintendent of the district, and the principal of the school. The staff of the school were provided with a recruitment letter (see Appendix B) via an email distributed by the school’s administrative assistant; respondents could then access the online survey on the Survey Monkey platform via the URL provided in the letter. Both the letter and the start of the survey explained that the survey was anonymous, voluntary, and the associated risks, including the data being hosted on a US server. When they accessed the online survey, respondents had to answer a “Yes or No” question indicating if they had read the letter, acknowledged the risks, and gave consent to participate in the survey.

Validity and Limitations

The overall validity of the research tool is theoretical, as although the questions are based in the restorative practices literature, it is not a tested tool. I have a background in survey design via a sample survey design course through the University of Victoria, a part of which encompassed designing surveys to avoid question and surveyor bias; in addition, the survey tool was presented to a VIU assigned supervisor for review, prior to its submission to the VIU REB for approval. Due to restrictions of length, there were limitations within the survey tool in terms of exploring all aspects of implementation; and in hindsight the survey tool would have benefited from exploring more specifics of what actions were undertaken to encourage schoolwide implementation, how staff use restorative practices on a daily basis, and the nature of student involvement in restorative processes.

With a stated intent of the research aiming to identify the factors that lead to a successful and sustainable implementation of restorative practices in schools, if a respondent had a negative mindset towards restorative practices, it could have biased them in their survey responses from
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the outset. As well, the time factor involved in completing the survey due to the number of open-response questions (average response time was 28 minutes) could have discouraged a higher response rate, which would have provided a more statistically valid assessment of staff viewpoints.

The first major limitation of the research is the response rate relative to the sample size. Generally speaking, the smaller the sample size, the higher the response rate required to ensure accuracy; assuming a normal population, the margin of error at a 95% confidence interval for my research is going to be large, and includes the possibility of error due to non-observation (that is to say that certain staff points of view could have been entirely excluded). With this in mind, the results cannot be extrapolated as an accurate representation of the entire sample population. In addition, due to the relatively low response rates within the respective teacher and support staff subpopulations, it is not appropriate to extrapolate respondent responses to those individual subgroups, except in a few instances where there are notable discrepancies between the responses of these subgroups. As such, analysis and discussion is limited more to what can be learned from the trends and themes found within the responses gathered from the staff as a whole, and their implications for further research, rather than considering the responses to be statistically significant or representative of the sample population or its subgroupings.

The second major limitation of the survey tool is the respondents’ self-assessments of their use of restorative practices, as well as the use and effect of restorative practices in the school in general. As suggested by the study carried out by Gregory et al. (2015), teacher self-assessment of their own use of restorative practices was not accurate, and thus the implementation of restorative practices as suggested by respondents may be inaccurate for these individual staff members. In addition, an individual staff member’s limited scope of perspective
may inaccurately reflect the reality in the school, and may not be representative of the wider student, parent, and overall school community perspective, which are not considered in this study. The effects of this limitation are minimized by only examining these responses in the context of the teacher’s mindset towards restorative practices, as opposed to considering them as accurate measures of the actual implementation and effects of restorative practice used in the school.

Analysis

In examining the data, I first looked at respondents’ self-assessment of their understanding of restorative practices, level of formal training, and their subsequent self-assessment of the degree of implementation of restorative practices in their own work and in the school in general. Mindsets towards restorative practices and its effects were analyzed to try and identify factors that led to supportive or critical mindsets, and factors that influenced change in these mindsets. Finally, because of the emphasis placed on training of staff as a critical component in the implementation of restorative practices in the literature, relationships between formal training, understanding, implementation and mindsets were also explored. Due to the limitations of the sample size for the study, statistical analysis was limited to identifying trends for the purpose of drawing out themes among respondent answers. Measures of range, central tendency, etc. should not be considered statistically significant.
Chapter 4 – Results

Understanding and Training

To self-assess their understanding of restorative practices, respondents used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1 - I do not understand restorative practices at all” to “5 – I fully understand restorative practices.” No respondent selected a level of understanding below 3 (Figure 4.1), with a mean level of understanding of 4.1, indicating that overall staff members believed themselves to have a high level of understanding of restorative practices.

![Understanding of Restorative Practices](image)

Figure 4.1 Understanding of restorative practices; this figure illustrates respondents’ self-assessments of their own understanding of restorative practices.
When it came to training, three of the respondents indicated they had received formal training or certification, with six reporting no formal training or certification. Of the three that had reported formal training, the training ranged from sessions provided by the school’s administration to formal sessions with instructors specializing in restorative practices; the benefit associated with the training varied, with the least formal training resulting in the least favourable response in terms of benefit to the respondent (Figure 4.2).

**Formal Training as Reported by Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What formal training or certification did you receive?</th>
<th>Who Provided the training?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A day of practice with other staff</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School district workshop</td>
<td>Unknown by respondent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three day workshop and three one-day workshops</td>
<td>Community Justice Initiatives Association of Langley BC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.2 Formal training as reported by respondents: the table details training, indicating the relative benefit as reported by respondents.*

Respondents were asked an open-ended question on what other resources or supports had helped them to learn about, understand, and implement restorative practices. Two reported no additional useful resources; the majority listed participating in restorative processes, while the remainder reported staff information sessions, mentorship, or reading literature on the subject (Figure 4.3). In general, for individual staff members participation in the restorative process
seemed to be seen as the most beneficial experience in understanding and/or implementing restorative practices.

![Additional Useful Resources & Supports Provided to Respondents](image)

*Figure 4.3 Additional useful resources and supports provided to respondents: this figure details resources aside from training that staff found beneficial in their implementation of restorative practices.*

When asked if there were other opportunities, resources, or supports they wished they had been provided with, the most common response was “no” regardless of the respondent’s assessment of their understanding, with one respondent indicating vaguely that they would have liked more
opportunities, and one indicating they would have liked access to more academic research regarding efficacy and reasons for use.

Overall, respondents had little formal training (i.e., training provided by a specialist in restorative practices); the mention of information sessions given for staff by the administration implies that the majority of staff members would have received this as a minimum. There is little indication that the majority of respondents used resources beyond their own participation in restorative conferences (such as attending workshops or reading literature on the subject); nor does it appear that respondents were seeking out ways to further their understanding or increase their capacity, regardless of their training, level of understanding, or degree of implementation.

**Implementation of Restorative Practices**

Respondents were asked about both their own implementation of restorative practices, as well as their impression of the use of restorative practices in the school as a whole; more specifically, they were asked if they and the school as a whole used traditional discipline, restorative practices, or a mix of the two to deal with negative student behaviour (Figures 4.4 and 4.5 respectively). Overall results for individuals were weighted slightly towards more traditional discipline, while in contrast respondents felt very strongly that in the school as a whole restorative practices were used to deal with almost all negative student behaviours.
Figure 4.4 Respondent implementation of restorative practices: this figure illustrates respondents’ self-assessments of their own implementation of restorative practices.
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Figure 4.5 School implementation of restorative practices; this figure illustrates respondents’ view of how fully restorative practices were implemented in the school as a whole.

With a mean self-assessment of implementation for individual staff members of 2.7, and for the school as a whole a mean of 4.6, the difference between these two figures is notable. Why is there such a difference between respondent use and overall use? The data, unfortunately, does not indicate the reasons but there are two possible reasons that come to mind. First, the disparity possibly suggests a degree of non-observation in the survey responses. As there is at least a perception amongst respondents that others in the school are using restorative practices to a far greater degree than is suggested by the individual survey results, it may be possible that a group of staff members with a higher degree of implementation did not respond to the study, and
therefore this information is not represented in the individual responses. Second, the view may be representative of how the administration handles issues that are referred to them, and this has been interpreted by respondents as the wider school picture.

The reader must be cautioned against assuming that low degrees of implementation are always indicative of a lack of a “restorative mindset” or a negative attitude towards the use of restorative practices. One member of the support staff who had self-assessed implementation of 1 in the open-ended responses explained that they reported student misbehaviour to the administration, who then handled the disciplinary process and decided on the action to be taken: “Discipline is always in the administrator’s hands. I only report the negative behaviour”. This would not be an uncommon scenario for support staff in many schools. However, that same respondent’s answers indicated a good understanding of restorative practices, and they reported positive beliefs about the use of restorative practices and positive outcomes from their participation in the restorative process: “I hope students will better understand that I am not just an enforcer of rules. I want them to be better. I believe they see that I respect them and in turn they respect me.” This support staff member has a strong restorative mindset, but they were indicating a low degree of implementation because they did not have ownership of the process.

An open-ended question was asked about the decision-making process used to determine if restorative practices or traditional discipline would be used in dealing with student behaviour; answers were as varied as respondents. However, sorting responses by the staff member’s self-assessed degree of implementation (Figure 4.4) yielded a general trend. Those who rated their use of restorative practices at a 1 to 2 did not use any discernment process, participating only when required to by the administration and at all other times using traditional disciplinary methods. At a 3 to 4, there was an individual discernment process based on various criteria: the
time available to the staff member, the seriousness of the offense, or a judgment on the part of the staff member on the student’s ability to learn from the process. At a 5, restorative practices were always used except when the student causing the harm or their parent chose traditional discipline, or the student had a diagnosed condition not seen to be compatible with restorative practices (e.g. ODD or detachment disorder).

Interestingly enough, in the 3 to 4 range, depending on the respondent a more serious offense could result either in a decision to use restorative practices, or a decision to use a punitive measure. Some staff members thought that restorative practices should only be used for minor offences while more serious offences required punishment; on the other hand, some staff members thought that minor offences were best dealt with using a quick punishment, rather than taking the time for restorative processes, while more serious offences warranted the time necessary for the restorative approach. In some cases, staff members held both views, that is to say for some staff members there is a “middle ground” of behaviour where restorative practices are an acceptable response, but for minor or serious offences traditional discipline was the best approach.

When asked to compare how they dealt with negative student behaviour before/after the introduction of restorative practices, many respondents indicated they used a variety of traditional disciplinary consequences or strategies prior to implementation. These included exclusionary techniques such as detentions, with individual staff members saying they used “time outs” or even just “ignored them until they learned better manners.” Other strategies were employed such as simply telling students to change their behaviour, or as one staff member wrote, they used “dramatic disappointment.” For administrators, consequences would be
escalated to include suspension or referral to the district Student Conduct Committee for more serious or persistent behaviours.

Some respondents also described using strategies that were more reflective or relationship focused prior to the introduction of restorative practices. These included discussing the behaviour with the student; using conversation to help the student identify how they could have done things differently or to try and identify the roots of the negative behaviour; and pointing out positive behaviours for students who typically exhibited negative behaviours. Two staff members, one who reported having formal training and one who had not, wrote that they had already been using restorative practices prior to implementation, with both of them saying they used them “before they were called that.”

Those who reported that their methodology had not changed after implementation all had a self-assessed degree of implementation of 4 or lower on the Likert scale, with a mean implementation of 2. Within this group, it turns out that those who reported using a mix of restorative and traditional discipline had not actually changed their practice after the introduction of restorative practices in the school; rather they believed that prior to implementation their methodology was already restorative in nature, at least to some degree.

Those who reported that their methodology had changed after implementation were at a self-assessed implementation of 3 – 5 on the Likert scale, with a mean implementation of 4. They describe a variety of changes to their practice: making more efforts to connect with students and talking to them about their behaviour; using the language of restorative practices to begin conversations with students after they had misbehaved; and shifting from arbitrary consequences to looking at the harm done and those affected, with a focus on healing and learning. It was also noted by an administrator that for students using drugs or alcohol there was
a shift from punishment and expectations of complete abstinence, to more of a harm reduction approach.

**Mindsets Towards Restorative Practices**

When asked about their initial views of restorative practices, open-ended responses varied amongst participants but could be loosely categorized as either supportive or critical. Of the eight respondents that answered the question, four identified as being interested, optimistic, positive, or hopeful; while the other four identified as uneasy with or skeptical of the process, or believed restorative practices had no merit whatsoever. Some responses showed some crossover between supportive/critical, as in the case of one respondent who identified that although they were interested, they were also not pleased that traditional discipline was no longer used. Some of these views reported appeared to be first impressions upon hearing or learning about restorative practices, while at least one respondent based their initial critical viewpoint on their first and negative experience in a restorative conference.

When asked if their opinions about restorative practices had changed, the overall trend was slightly downward (Figure 4.6), with one respondent’s opinions being more positive, two having a more negative outlook, and the remainder remaining unchanged. The change to a more supportive viewpoint resulted from gaining experience with and becoming more comfortable with restorative conferences. One respondent described being able to share more openly and honestly with students, and seeing more mutual respect and better relationships with students as a result of conferences she had participated in. The change to a more critical viewpoint tended to result from negative experiences or perceptions of the restorative process. One respondent described the frustration of participating in a conference with a student who was lying, and how their own responses were “phony and forced” when asked how they felt about student behaviour.
in admin led conferences. Other respondents made reference elsewhere in their survey responses about feelings of frustration or ineffectiveness with students who were repeat offenders, did not show empathy, or appeared unwilling to change. It is perhaps of note that one of the respondents who moved from a more positive to more critical viewpoint is the same respondent who had stated that they would have liked more literature and research on the efficacy and reasoning behind restorative practices when they were implemented.

Figure 4.6 Changes in attitudes towards restorative practices. This figure compares initial and later attitudes towards restorative practices.

In reading through the responses, I found that more supportive initial views were held by those who tended to focus on themes of relationship and connection throughout all of their responses. In the case of one respondent who described their initial view as “Positive” and “Emotional” they referred to conversation, relationship building, and fostering empathy in their
responses. This was positively correlated with higher degrees of implementation; those with a higher degree of implementation also tended to have themes of relationship and connection in relation to dealing with student misbehaviour throughout their responses. In contrast, if a respondent had more negative initial impressions or lower degrees of implementation the more likely they were to have themes of consequences or punishment, or the inability of students to change. An example would be the staff member that described their initial impression as “I thought they were a bunch of hooey” and in their responses referred to kids doing dumb things, students not being able to look outside of themselves, and said they ignore students who misbehave.

Staff mindsets towards restorative practices should be reflected in changes to their self-efficacy when it comes to dealing with negative student behaviour. As such, the survey explored if and by what factor restorative practices had influenced a staff member’s self-efficacy to deal with negative student behaviour as it occurs; their ability to help students change their behaviour; and for classroom teachers, their classroom management. A series of 5-point Likert scale questions were used, with 1 indicating not effective and 5 indicating very effective.

The mean self-assessed ability to deal with negative student behaviour saw an increase from 3.8 to 4.4 after the introduction of restorative practices. The largest increases in self-efficacy were noted by those who had a higher degree of implementation (3 or higher), although not all respondents at this degree of implementation noted an increase. No respondent indicated a decrease in self-efficacy. One respondent who said they had not implemented restorative practices at all noted an increase in their ability to deal with negative behaviour (from 4 to 5), due to their participation in restorative processes initiated by the administration.
The mean self-assessed ability in classroom management, which was only completed by teaching staff, saw no change; and the mean self-assessed ability to help students change their behaviour saw an increase from 3 to 3.6, with only one staff member noting a drop of self-efficacy (from 2 to 1). This staff member had a low degree of implementation, limiting their use of restorative practices to participation in conferences when required by the administration, and a generally critical view of restorative practices. In many of their responses they referenced the amount of time restorative processes take and had a perception that they did not result in a change in student behaviour.

Overall, it can be said that the implementation of restorative practices in the school increased the self-efficacy of respondents in their ability to address student misbehaviour, with an overall increase in self-efficacy for both dealing with negative student behaviour as it occurred and helping students to change their behaviour, while there was no reported change in self-efficacy for classroom management.

It is perhaps of significance in this one instance to differentiate between support staff and teaching staff; while no teacher indicated a change in their self-efficacy in any of the three areas (dealing with negative behaviour, classroom management, or helping students change behaviour), support staff saw a mean increase in their ability to deal with and help change negative student behaviour (0.75 and 0.25, respectively). One support staff member who wrote that how they dealt with student behaviour had not changed still showed an increase in their self-efficacy! This may be because with traditional discipline it is the norm for support staff to not assign consequences for student misbehaviour even if they were targeted by the misbehaviour; this is in contrast to teachers, who are more likely to be hold a student to talk to them, call home, give detentions, or assign other consequences. However, support staff could quite easily have a
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low-level restorative conversation with a student at the moment a student misbehaves, and they could also have a chance to discuss what had happened with a student if they participated in a restorative conference. This suggests that restorative practices may offer more recourse to support staff over traditional disciplinary methods in addressing student misbehaviour.

As the literature suggests buy-in is related to perceiving a need for change (Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel, 2009), responses were analyzed to look for indicators of a need for change and how that related to buy-in, degree of implementation and self-efficacy. Two staff members self-assessed low levels of efficacy when it came to dealing with student behaviour or helping students change their behaviour; (3, 2) and (3, 1) respectively. One of these staff members indicated in their written responses that they were looking for “alternatives to traditional school discipline.” This respondent participated in formal training; both had positive initial mindsets towards restorative practices; and they self-assessed a higher degree implementation (3 and 5, respectively). They also reported the largest gains in self-efficacy, with their final scores at (5, 3) and (5, 5) respectively. Staff members who reported higher initial levels of self-efficacy (one or more initial self-efficacy scores at a 4 or 5) had more varied initial views towards restorative practices, more varied degrees of implementation, in all cases but one no formal training, with one exception did not indicate an increase in self-efficacy after the introduction of restorative practices. Thus, in support of the literature, it appears that staff who believe they are currently not effective in responding to negative student behaviour will be more open to the introduction of restorative practices, more likely to implement them, and be more likely to report positive benefits as a result.
Positive and Negative Influences in Developing a Restorative Mindset

Staff responding to the survey detailed how they believed restorative practices had impacted student behaviour, had influenced their own work environment and the overall school climate, and reported what they saw as the key benefits or deficits of restorative practices. With staff buy-in identified as a critical element to implementation, these responses were analyzed in order to identify what aspects of restorative practices drew or lost their support.

When asked if restorative practices had reduced instances of negative student behaviour, four respondents said yes; four no; and one was undecided. When asked to explain their answer, and when asked how overall school climate had been effected, the answers were not so absolute – for instance, respondents at times saying “no” to the question would elaborate that they worked in some circumstance, or vice versa. As such in my analysis I used three groupings – those that believed restorative practices had no positive effects, those who believed they worked only in some circumstances, and those that believed they generally had a positive impact.

In the first group, it was generally expressed that staff could not influence the behaviour of students, as indicated by phrases such as “kids are kids,” “kids do dumb things,” a suggestion that students would learn to “evade” the restorative process; or the belief that students would not change their behaviour without a punishment. Respondents had a tendency to believe that students were not taking staff seriously when restorative practices were used, believed students were getting away with their misbehaviour, and as a result were continuing or even escalating behaviour. These views were connected to a lower reported degree of implementation (1 – 3), no formal training, and the aforementioned belief that consequences were effective deterrents.

In the second grouping (restorative practices sometimes work to reduce negative behaviour), qualifiers tended to be placed. Examples of responses in this category included that
restorative practices would work with students who were typically good and had supportive homes; they improved relationships, but might not be effective at changing behaviours; they worked if the student cares about their relationships within the school community, but if they believe as one staff member wrote that it is just a “hoop to jump through” then it is a “waste of time and in a way insulting,” and traditional discipline should be used instead. There is a connection to the first group of respondents here, in which it is believed that for at least some students, restorative practices are unable to have a positive impact on student behaviour.

In the third category, respondents felt strongly that restorative practices changed behaviour because they improved relationships; helped students to recognize and repair harm as well as thinking about potential consequences to their actions; received more parental support; and fostered resolution for both the person harmed and the person who caused the harm. In this group restorative practices were generally viewed as being proactive, in the sense that a student was more likely to think about their actions after going through the process; although for one respondent, there was again the qualifier that students had to have pre-existing cognitive and social-emotional conditions in order to benefit. For some of the respondents in this category, there was also a belief that all students going through the restorative process benefited regardless of their disposition, even the “hardened” student who didn’t immediately change their behaviour.

When asked about how restorative practices had influenced individual work and overall school environments, there were two general responses – one positive, one negative. Those that reported positive effects commented on the improvement in relationships within the school community (between students and staff, and parents and staff); that it was a more natural way to interact with students; and the growth of empathy in students going through the process. They also believed that student perception of staff members who used restorative practices was
improved, seeing them as more fair, willing to listen, and fostering trusting relationships. One respondent indicated positive effects on student perception of staff only if the process was “genuine,” not forced; another respondent indicated they weren’t sure of the impact, but were curious to know student opinion (and repeated their desire for student feedback elsewhere in their responses).

Those that reported negative effects tended to focus on the amount of time required for restorative processes and the fact that made staff members unavailable at times; challenges in dealing with staff members who were focused on their own goals rather than restorative goals; and a belief that at times punishment was more effective depending on the student or behaviour. These staff members did not believe that restorative practices influenced student perception of staff, or even believed that they contributed towards a more negative perception of staff, such as seeing them as not able to deal with student behaviour effectively.

In terms of key benefits and deficits, nearly all respondents identified improved relationships and growth in student reflection and empathy as a key benefit. Other key benefits detailed included an increase in trust (adults helping rather than punishing), students accepting more responsibility for their actions, identifying and solving problems, and giving those harmed a voice. An overall theme when it came to deficits was the perceived ineffectiveness of restorative practices if students were not honest, falsely engaged in the process (saying what staff members wanted to hear to avoid punishment), or if they continued their negative behaviour after a conference. Other deficits noted were the amount of time required to use restorative practices in comparison to traditional discipline, and the stressful and drawn out situations it could create for staff if not administered properly (there was no elaboration as to what this meant).
The Impact of Formal Professional Development/ Training

As the review of literature suggests, training is an essential component for the implementation of restorative practices; as such I interpreted the above results in terms of a respondent’s level of training. For this purpose, although one respondent identified the information session offered by the administrator as formal training, I considered it to be informal throughout this portion of the data analysis, as the administrator is not formally affiliated with an organization specializing in restorative practices training or certification.

First, there was little correlation between a staff member’s level of formal training and their self-assessed level of understanding of restorative practices (Figure 4.1); while both respondents who had formal training self-assessed themselves at a 5 for understanding, for respondents without formal training the mean self-assessed level of understanding was 3.9, with a mode of 4, indicating that most of these respondents still believed themselves to possess a high level of understanding (Figure 4.7). In the latter category, none of these respondents had reported reading literature on the matter; from the survey responses it appears that their learning about restorative practices was limited to information sessions given by the administration to the staff, their own use of restorative practices, or their participation in restorative conferences led by the administration.
Formal training was also positively correlated with more supportive views of restorative practices; respondents who had formal training reported that they had initially positive views about restorative practices, and they retained those positive views after implementation. Respondents without formal training were more likely to either have and retain initially negative views, or change from positive to negative views.

Not surprisingly, a strong correlation exists between formal training and levels of implementation. When the respondents’ degree of implementation (Figure 4.4) was related to whether or not they had formal training, respondents with formal training reported a high degree of implementation (4 to 5), while those with no formal training reported a lower degree of implementation (range 1 to 5, mean 2.1, mode 1) (Figure 4.8).
Figure 4.8 Level of implementation of restorative practices in relation to formal training: this figure contrasts the mean and range of respondents’ self-assessed implementation of restorative practices with and without formal training.

The previously noted lack of correlation between a respondent’s formal training and their self-assessed understanding of restorative practices could be present in a staff member’s assessment of their implementation as well. As previously noted, Gregory et al. (2015) suggest that staff self-assessments of their use of restorative practices are not accurate; and it is possible that respondents who do not have an understanding grounded in literature or training, could have a flawed or distorted view of restorative practices, leading them to believe they are implementing restorative practices to a greater degree than they actually are. This may be the case for respondents who indicated no formal training but self-assessed a high level of understanding (3 to 5) and higher degrees of implementation (3 and 4). It could also be reflected in one
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respondent’s assertion that they had been using restorative practices informally in their own work prior to the official introduction of restorative practices to the school, despite having no formal training and no indication they had reviewed literature on the subject.

Suggestions for Implementation

At the end of the survey, respondents were asked if there was any other information they wanted to share that would be beneficial in helping schools implement restorative practices successfully. In more than one response, ensuring there is follow-up to restorative conferences (although it is not specified, it is reasonable to assume that is in reference to communicating whether or not restorative agreements have been met), along with more education about and experience with restorative practices were identified as desirable practices. Other respondent suggestions included ensuring parents who believed in the process were involved; using other disciplinary methods to deal with students who continue their negative behaviour or do not take the process seriously; and ensuring that adults participating in the process show genuine care for students and strive to understand all sides of a situation.
Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Six Key Elements to Effective Implementation

As I became more convinced of the value that restorative practices presented to schools, both through my own experiences with restorative practices and my review of the literature, I began to wonder what steps were necessary to facilitate a successful and sustainable transition from traditional disciplinary practices to restorative practices in a school setting. How could a school community overcome the stumbling blocks presented during implementation? Progressing through the literature, I brought to light six key factors identified by both practitioners and researchers of restorative practices:

- a perceived need for change;
- buy-in from stakeholders in general, and in the school staff in particular;
- student participation and ownership;
- incorporating restorative practices into the daily fabric of the school;
- fully voluntary participation in conferences; and
- training for school staff prior to implementation and ongoing afterwards.

With these key factors identified, the results of the study will be discussed in the context of these six themes.

A Need for Change

The mindsets of staff members as to what constituted effective discipline certainly played a role in their views towards restorative practices and their degree of implementation. In general, staff members that referred to traditional discipline (i.e. punishment) as effective had initially critical mindsets towards restorative practices, while those with more of a relationship focus held more supportive views. There was also a noticeable trend when looking at respondent self-
efficacy towards dealing with student behaviour. Those who had lower self-efficacy were more likely to record a high implementation of restorative practices and more of a positive gain in self efficacy after using them; while in the same vein those who had higher self-efficacy were less likely to have a high implementation.

As low self-efficacy is not often understood to correspond to self-improvement and radical change, it should be noted that the implications of this result is dependent on the interpretation of the term “self-efficacy” in this study. The Likert scales used in this study allowed respondents to indicate how effective they currently believed themselves to be at responding to negative student behaviour; they were not reflecting on their potential to be more effective. The results would then be more reflective of the respondent’s view of the effectiveness of the methods they were using, as opposed to an assessment of their own capability. As such I interpreted the data to mean that staff members who reported low scores believed their current methods (which were punitive in nature) to not be effective and were more motivated to implement restorative practice; as contrasted to respondents with high scores, who believed that what they were doing was working, and so were not motivated to change.

This result tends to support the argument that there needs to be a perceived need for change from the status quo in order to implement restorative practices. Without feeling that there is a better way of doing things, there is little impetus for change. So Bargen declares, “go where [you] are invited and welcomed” (p. 35, 2010)! However, Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel (2009) elaborate on this point, saying that the most important person to have on board is the school principal, as meaningful change cannot occur without their support and commitment. In the school in question, the principal did observe a need for change and was committed to the implementation of restorative practices. As discussed earlier, this may be at least part of the
reason for the discrepancy between lower respondent implementation and their perception of a much higher school-wide implementation of restorative practices.

I would suggest, then, that prior to implementing restorative practices in a school setting, efforts should be made to determine staff mindsets. Do they believe systems in place are working? Do they think they are effective at dealing with student misbehaviour? Do they believe they have solid, trusting relationships with students? The more dissatisfied staff are with traditional discipline, the more likely they are to see the need for change and engage in the implementation of restorative practices. With that said, perhaps the greatest indicator for a successful implementation – or at the very least, a necessary one - would be buy-in from the administrative team.

**Staff Buy-In**

However, if *only* the administration buys in, it is unlikely any lasting or significant change would result due to staff resistance. In Chapter 2, it was noted that in McLuskey et al.’s study (Gregory et al., 2015) that implementation of restorative practices in schools varied widely, with one of the reasons identified as the prevailing mindset in the school. If staff had a punitive mindset, and saw punishment as effective, it would be hard for restorative practices to take root; and this theme has certainly been echoed in this study. Staff with a low degree of implementation tended to indicate dissatisfaction that punishment was not used, or that they believed it was more effective in addressing student misbehaviour. The question then becomes – how does one change those negative mindsets?

The answer to this question is multifaceted. Much of the response is addressed through two strong themes that emerged from the study, fully voluntary participation and the value of training, which are discussed in further detail below; suffice it to say for now that I find that the
results of the study support both training and voluntary participation. However, I believe that this study supports the literature in some further strategies to help obtain staff buy-in.

In the study, there was frequent reference made to the frustration that results when staff members witness students go through the restorative process and then continue with their negative behaviours. While this is partly related to the notion of fully voluntary participation discussed below, it is my analysis that part of this is also going to be related to the respondent suggestion that consistent follow-up after conferences was needed, presumably to make sure and communicate that students were meeting the requirements of their agreements, and if they didn’t to have a plan and communicate what was being done. Ensuring that the person who caused the harm and the person harmed are still offered support beyond the end of the conference, that the person who caused the harm meets their agreements, that there are steps in place for if they do not, and that this information is communicated to staff members involved (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Bargen, 2010) will help staff members to see the process as one that encourages accountability.

The precious resource of time, a frequent stumbling block to staff buy-in for any initiative – and understandably so in an education system that places many demands on its school staff – is a challenging one to address. Staff frequently perceived that a major deficit of restorative practices is the time involved in the processes, indicating they did not have the time or that it made other staff and administration unavailable for lengthy periods of time. Some of that may be dealt with through training, where staff learn lower-level restorative interventions requiring less time than a conference or mediation; however, it is true that a restorative conference typically takes far more time both in its preparation and its execution than just
punishing a student. If it does not immediately alter the student’s behaviour, it can then give the impression that the time spent was wasted.

In some cases, scheduling restorative processes for out of school hours will decrease the amount of time staff are unavailable during the day – and this is typically appropriate for formal conferences (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015; Costello et al., 2009), as it lends itself to the formality of a conference and ensures that the time needed is available. However, for less serious intervention, it may interfere with the need or effectiveness of an immediate restorative response, particularly if one is trying to be proactive and preventative (for example, mediating a dispute before it turns into a fight). For these instances, the training of additional staff – in particular, the school counselor, but also staff members such as youth and family workers – and student peer mediators is one strategy that can be used to help alleviate the burden on school staff and administration.

However, it is my belief that the only real way to overcome this mindset is for staff members to see the benefits of restorative conferences; as one respondent noted, “all…staff members should experience the full conferences so that they can understand more fully what the positive outcomes are for everyone.” This sentiment is echoed by Costello and his colleagues: “One of the surprises that occurs when people have an open forum to safely express their feelings is that the participants benefit in ways that cannot be anticipated” (2009, p. 61). If staff do not see or understand the benefits, they will never be able to justify the time spent. Bargen stresses the importance of communication as a tool for building momentum and enthusiasm (2010); it is likely that this needs to include frequent sharing of success stories – moments when parents, students, or staff experienced real connection, healing, or hope through a restorative conference, in order to see benefits beyond just stopping a behaviour. Costello et al. (2009) also recommend
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building in time for staff to meet to specifically discuss student behaviour – to talk about approaches that they are trying, share ideas, seek support and mentorship. In this way staff can benefit from the experience of staff who are experts in the use of restorative practices and the years of collective experience present in the staff as a whole. They argue that this is just as important as giving meeting time to administrative or academic concerns, with results that are just as (or potentially more) important.

Student Involvement

The survey questions in this study do not explicitly address student participation or ownership of restorative practices; and thus, it is not within the scope of this study to closely examine this aspect of implementation. With that in mind, it is interesting to note that not one respondent wrote about student ownership or participation in the implementation process. I had the distinct impression from reading the responses that restorative practices were more done to students than done with them.

Gregory et al. (2015) note that even in 2015, “little is known about the experience of students in classrooms utilizing restorative practices” (p. 1) and that prior to their study there was very limited exploration of the relationship between the implementation of restorative practices and student outcomes or student relationships with their teachers. Anecdotally, some respondents expressed the belief that they had better relationships with students as a result of using restorative practices, and some believed it had reduced negative student behaviour. However, to really assess the impact of restorative practices, one would have to look to the student body for feedback; as one respondent stated more than once, “I’m REALLY curious about how students view restorative practices!” I would suggest that regular student surveys or interviews with them – both for those who have and have not participated in the restorative
process – could help gauge student response, and guide the implementation of restorative practices.

In this study the lack of connection between a teacher’s self-assessment of their understanding and implementation of restorative practices was not necessarily related to training or change in practice. In response, I would assert that Gregory et al.‘s (2015) finding that teacher self-assessment of their own implementation of restorative practices is not accurate is reflected in the results of this study. I whole-heartedly endorse their recommendation that student assessment of teacher implementation be regularly collected and provided to teachers as feedback. However, this requires a great deal of vulnerability and openness on the part of staff members, and I would suggest that the suitability of this action would depend on the staff’s perceived need for change and their willingness to accept potentially critical feedback.

**Fully Voluntary Participation**

School staff are in a unique position when it comes to the implementation of restorative practices within their schools. In the criminal justice application of restorative justice, a person harmed or bystander is not likely to be involved in the administration or implementation of a restorative justice program. However, in a school setting staff members are frequently involved in restorative conferences as the individual who was harmed or as an affected party; and at the same time they are expected to be practitioners and advocates of restorative practices in their classrooms.

With studies conducted in the criminal justice system, it was reported that those harmed and their families were generally satisfied with the restorative process 50% of the time (Varnham, 2005, p. 94); and while this is a much higher satisfaction rate for those harmed than with traditional punitive systems, it still means a person harmed has a one-in-two chance of a
negative experience with restorative practices. If similar satisfaction rates are assumed in educational settings, it means that there is a high likelihood for school staff to have a negative experience themselves if they participate in a restorative conference as a person harmed, or be witness to the negative experiences of those harmed if they are participate as an affected person, advocate or facilitator.

Research indicated that the person harmed tended to report negative attitudes towards the outcomes of restorative conferences if they felt the person causing the harm was lying, not sorry, or not taking the process seriously (Ortega et al., 2016). This theme was certainly present in the results of this study; respondents reported negative experiences with restorative processes if a student lied or otherwise didn’t take the process seriously, and for at least one respondent this left a lasting, overall negative impression of restorative practices. The literature had also indicated those harmed were unsatisfied when the administration of the restorative process was “botched” (Varnham, 2005); and in this study, the same respondent noted above wrote that they felt uncomfortable with having to share feelings in a restorative process led by the administration that they didn’t think was necessary, and that what they said in the conference felt forced and phony.

Should a staff member have a negative experience in a restorative conference – and it seems very likely that at some point they will – one would expect that buy-in from these staff members would be much more difficult to obtain, particularly if it occurs early in implementation. This is certainly suggested by the study results; those who had poor experiences or believed others to have had poor experiences tended to have more critical views of restorative practices and a lower degree of implementation. In looking for solutions to this
dilemma, I explored solutions to the question – is it possible to avoid these negative experiences for staff members?

In general, resources on restorative practices advocate that regardless of negative attitudes on the part of the person causing the harm, a conference should be held; positing that it is difficult for a facilitator to predetermine the outcome or impact of a conference of the person causing the harm (Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel, 2009). Indeed, one respondent identified that they thought there was benefit to going through a restorative process with even the most “hardened” student who was unwilling to change their behaviour. However, the goal is to try and obtain the buy-in of all staff members; and survey responses suggest that if a staff member has or witnesses a negative experience with restorative conferences prior to obtaining their buy-in, it may produce a negative, fixed mindset towards restorative practices that inhibits implementation. So, I would interpret the results of this study as suggesting that action must be taken to try and avoid holding conferences where staff members would experience a person who has caused them or someone else harm, lying, not expressing remorse, or generally not taking the process seriously.

Based on this interpretation, I make three suggestions. First, it may be necessary in school settings to give more consideration, especially during the implementation phase, to the attitudes of the person causing the harm. I believe it to be in the facilitator’s best interest to try and discern, through the pre-conference reflection process, whether a student is taking the process seriously and accepting responsibility for the harm they have caused. If the facilitator judges that the student is not actively engaged in the process, at the cost of unknown benefit to the student it may be better to use traditional discipline in these cases to avoid almost certain dissatisfaction on the part of staff members participating. The exception to this may be, as
Wachtel et al. (2010) suggest, if the person harmed is consulted and they still want to proceed with the restorative process.

Second, the literature advocates for fully voluntary participation of students in restorative processes (Bargen, 2010; Ortega et al., 2016); and in a wider context, the school should not try to pressure the person harmed or convince them that the conference is the only right course of action (Wachtel et al., 2010). I interpret the results of this study to suggest that if the teacher is the person harmed or an affected party, they too need to have the option of voluntary participation. A staff member may choose not to participate for a variety of reasons; perhaps they do not think the harm was serious enough to warrant a conference, they are hurt or angry and not ready to sit down with the student and talk about it, or they do not believe a restorative conference will be effective. Regardless of the reason, a staff member choosing not to participate does not mean that the administrator must resort to punishment for the student who caused harm. If the student wants to participate in a restorative conference and is engaged in the process, the conference can still be held just as it would be when any other victim chooses not to participate (Wachtel et al., 2010).

Lastly, when staff do participate in conferences their responses must be not be forced, regardless of the wishes of the facilitator or administrator. It is critical that a facilitator not impose their views or a pre-determined outcome on a conference, even if they do not agree with the end result: “The outcome of the conference belongs to the participants” (Wachtel et al., 2010., p. 218). Staff members, like any participant in a conference, must be allowed to be authentic, to share their thoughts and feelings about an incident, and not feel pressured to use scripted responses or follow a school line. To generate an authentic response from staff, who are often not used to being vulnerable with students and may be uncomfortable sharing how an
incident has effected them, would likely take the same pre-conference preparation as one would
do for any student – but a facilitator must be prepared to accept instances where a staff member
believes an incident is more serious or less serious than the facilitator.

These three actions would have as their aim not only a reduction in the number of
negative restorative experiences for staff, thus increasing their buy-in, but perhaps more
importantly it would afford staff members the same considerations as student participants in
restorative conferences.

Further to these suggestions, it is my opinion that further exploration of the impact of
positive or negative experiences in restorative processes on staff buy-in and implementation is
needed. Further study is also required as to the impact on students, staff, and the successful
implementation of restorative practices if proactive action is taken by facilitators to help ensure a
successful outcome of a restorative conference.

**Incorporating Restorative Practices Into The Everyday**

The survey did not address specifically if staff incorporated restorative processes into
their everyday routines, focusing instead on how they dealt with negative student behaviour.
This still gave some indication as to whether respondents were using restorative practices
frequently or proactively. At a minimum, some respondents described how they were now using
restorative language and encouraging student reflection as the starting point for dealing with
negative student behaviour. However, no teacher or support staff member made mention of
classroom circles, student-led mediation, or other such restorative practices being used on a daily
or more frequent basis.

While the introduction of such practices would require more training and education, it is
my belief that it would also help facilitate an increase in capacity for the use of restorative
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practices, a better understanding of the underlying values embodied in restorative practices, and increased student participation and ownership. The impact of such daily practices on buy-in and successful implementation of restorative practices would also be worth further exploration, as aside from student-led mediation little mention was made of these practices or their effects in the research literature that I reviewed.

The Benefits of Training

While the sample size is certainly too small to draw conclusive results, when analyzing responses through the lens of formal training I found support for the argument that initial and ongoing training is critical to the successful implementation of restorative practices. The positive correlation between formal training, implementation, and supportive views of restorative practices support the idea that formal training aids staff members in shifting mindsets on punishment; understanding how the restorative process is administered; and provides the confidence and knowledge needed to try restorative practices in their own work environments. The study results imply that this education is even desired by some staff, as in the case of one staff member who wished they had more access to literature and research on the benefits and rationale behind restorative practices, and another who noted that a “well trained staff and administration” were necessary for a successful implementation.

I also found that the survey results support Costelo et al.’s (2009) advice against the implementation of restorative practices through a staged approach. While the administration gave information sessions to staff, only staff who were interested attended a district workshop on restorative practices; in essence, staff were given the option of not having a thorough understanding of restorative practices. Given the positive results for those who had formal
training, it is likely that a higher rate of staff buy-in and implementation, would occur if *all* school staff participate in the training on restorative practices.

There was a definite expectation from some respondents that staff expected restorative practices to function in the same fashion as traditional discipline, or viewed it as a failure if student misbehaviour did not immediately stop after a conference. This indicates a lack of differentiation between the two processes, or even a lack of understanding of traditional discipline; for in the latter misbehaviour does not usually stop, it just results in the student causing harm being excluded. At the very least, formal training would help staff to have a better understanding of the goals and benefits of restorative practices, which might help reduce expectations that it yield the same results as traditional discipline.

Training could potentially assist in overcoming some of the critical mindsets encountered in this study. Some respondents thought that a restorative approach was not appropriate for minor offences, because it is too time consuming; a view that is not reflective of the creative, flexible, and informal approaches that can be used as part of a restorative toolkit. These include peer mediation, or for minor misbehaviour using the language of restorative practices (such as affective statements), giving students responsibilities rather than punishments, or having students reflect using restorative questions (Bargen, 2010; Costelo et al., 2009). Strategies such as these are all taught through training and print resources. In the same manner, additional learning could help staff members understand why restorative practices are still appropriate for more serious misbehaviour, particularly when the needs of the person harmed are taken into consideration.

Another negative mindset that could be influenced by training is the mindset that was expressed by one respondent as “kids will be kids” and that they just “do dumb things.” Grounded in both theory and research (Amstutz and Mullet, 2015), restorative practices teaches
staff that with guidance, students have the capability to reflect on and effect change upon their behaviour. Learning about the power of relationships in helping change behaviour is also an important component of the restorative mindset. I believe it was said best by one member of the support staff, describing how their practice had changed after the introduction of restorative practices: “I make a concerted effort to connect with students. When I do that, I encounter less behaviour issues.”

I also found that the survey results supported the recommendation for ongoing training past the implementation phase (Bargen, 2010). An administrator participating in the survey noted that due to staff turnover and varying levels of buy-in from existing staff, “it is necessary to have a lot of education, but also practical experience.” Although all of the respondents in this study had been in the school during the implementation of restorative practices, it would be worth studying the experiences of staff who enter a school where the use of restorative practices is already in use, and what scaffolding is necessary to help them understand and successfully implement restorative practices in their own classrooms.

It was certainly of interest to note the lack of correlation between formal training and a respondent’s self-assessment of their understanding of restorative practices. One respondent, with no formal training in restorative practices, assessed themselves to have a mid-level understanding. However, paraphrasing the respondent, they believed themselves to have “always done things that way” – a phrase not uncommon in education whenever new ideas are presented, particularly when there is resistance to having to change one’s existing practice. As Bargen notes:

> While school staff may feel [emphasis added] that they have a good grasp on what restorative justice is all about; it doesn’t hurt to consult with those who specialize in the
area…[to] ensure schools are closer to having a model that goes beyond simple problem solving mediation and integrates the values and principles of a restorative approach.” (Bargen, 2010, p. 33).

Normalizing training and education prior to and after implementation by providing it to all staff will help to diminish concerns of not wanting to be seen as ineffective or seeking help:

Most teachers are afraid to admit they need help because they don’t want to be seen as ineffective or weak. Leaders have to work to change this belief by making consultation and collaboration a regular part of the business of the school (Costelo et al., 2009, p. 92).

Further exploration on the correlation between staff training and successful implementation would be beneficial in understanding the relationship between the two. After a review of the literature and this study, I find myself wondering if training alone is a catalyst for better implementation, or if a perceived need for change is the initial drive behind training and therefore implementation? Regardless of that distinction I believe it is safe to say that formal training will still result in a better understanding of restorative practices and a higher quality of implementation, and for that reason alone training should be part of implementation for all staff members.

Summary

Stepping away from the merry-go-round of traditional discipline in schools is not by any stretch of the imagination an easy task. It requires changes to school culture, mindsets, and practice – a task that any educator would balk at. These are incredibly hard to influence and change, requiring dedication, energy, and resources. However, if like me you find yourself unable to help students change their behaviour, and are frustrated as you watch students repeat the same negative behaviours over and over again or escalate their behaviours despite being
punished, you find yourself motivated to tackle these challenges. Likewise, if you find that those students or staff members who have been harmed by other members of the school community are powerless, do not have a voice, and lack the opportunity to find closure and healing, you may find yourself motivated to tackle these challenges.

With the current research on punishment showing just how ineffective, or even damaging, it can be, I would argue that anyone aware of this growing body of evidence would find it worthwhile – and perhaps even obligatory – to explore alternative methods to traditional discipline. To not do so risks not meeting the needs of our students; in the case of a student causing harm, they may further disconnect from the school community as a result of punishment, and the person they have harmed does not have an opportunity to seek resolution and healing.

From what I have learned through extensive research, and in my own experience, restorative practices present a viable and effective alternative to traditional discipline. Research is revealing the positive impacts that restorative practices can have on student behaviour and connectedness, and these provide powerful and compelling reasons to consider their implementation. However, in my mind just as powerful a reason is the clear message the use of restorative practices sends to the school community about the high regard the school has for a core set of values – values of relationship, connectedness, understanding, empathy, ownership and healing.

For schools willing to tackle this change, from a review of the literature I have identified what I believe to be six key elements to aid in the successful implementation of restorative practices: a perceived need for change; buy-in from stakeholders in general, and in the school staff in particular; student participation and ownership; incorporating restorative practices into the daily fabric of the school; fully voluntary participation in conferences; and training for school
staff prior to implementation and ongoing afterwards. I find strong support for four of these elements in the results of this study (all except for student participation and the daily use of restorative practices); and while there was no data refuting the other two elements, neither was enough data gathered to support them. However, both student ownership and the incorporation of restorative practices into daily practices are both integral components of the core theory of restorative practices; in addition, student ownership of and active participation in their own education is well grounded in research. As such I would suggest these two elements be retained as key elements of implementation.

It is my belief that if schools take the leap to transition from traditional discipline to restorative practices, and utilize these six elements in their own implementation of restorative practices, they will realize a higher quality and higher degree of implementation – and be able to gain clarity, perspective, and a renewed sense of purpose as that mad and dizzying merry-go-round slowly grinds to a halt.
References


Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Letter

Voice, Needs, Empathy And Accountability:

Creating New Foundations For Student Discipline

**Principal Investigator**
Mark Theobald, Student
Master of Education
Vancouver Island University
mtheobald@sd81.bc.ca

**Student Supervisor**
Jeremy Morrow, EdD.
Department of Education
Vancouver Island University
Jeremy.Morrow@sd72.bc.ca

I am a student in the Master of Education in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University (VIU). My research, entitled “Creating New Foundations For Student Discipline,” aims to identify factors that contribute to successful and sustainable implementation of restorative practices. The use of restorative practices in schools has generated many anecdotal tales of success, but there is still very little research; my hope is that my research will contribute to the future successful implementation of restorative practices in school environments.

Research participants are being asked to complete an online survey by **Wednesday, November 8** through the Survey Monkey platform. The survey can be accessed through the URL [https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VIURPresearch](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VIURPresearch)

If you agree, you would be asked questions concerning your experiences with and opinions on the use of restorative practices. Your participation would require approximately 30 minutes of your time. Participation in the survey is anonymous; information collected on the identify of respondents will be restricted to identifying one’s self as an administrator, certified teacher, or member of the support staff. No other personal or identifying data will be collected in the survey or by Survey Monkey.

Due to the anonymity of respondents and the fact that the information collected during the interview is highly unlikely to be controversial, the research poses a minimal risk of harm; however, due to the qualitative nature of the information being collected, please note that there is a possibility that respondents may be identifiable through information quoted in the published thesis.
Should you choose to participate, the survey records will be kept confidential. Survey responses will be stored on the Survey Monkey server, accessible by a password-protected account that only I have access to, for initial data collection and data analysis. After collection and analysis, the results will be downloaded and stored on a password protected computer and the original survey results deleted. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the original data collected. Data will be deleted at the end of the project, approximately Dec 31st, 2017. Please note the following in regards to the Survey Monkey server:

- Survey Monkey stores its information on US servers and as such is subject to the USA Patriot Act and other applicable US legislation. For more information on how the US Patriot Act affects Canadians using Survey Monkey, please see https://www.surveymonkey.com/blog/2011/05/10/patriot-act/

- Once the project data is deleted from the Survey Monkey server, it may remain as a residual copy on offsite backup media for up to approximately 12 months

- For more information on Survey Monkey’s privacy policy, please see https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/policy/privacy-policy/

Your participation is completely voluntary; please note that completing the survey implies consent to have your responses included in the research data. However, you may withdraw from the study at any time where practicable, for any reason, and without explanation after completing the survey by contacting me using the above contact information. As the survey is anonymous, this will require you providing your survey responses so that your survey can be correctly identified for the purposes of withdrawal. If you choose to withdraw, all information you provided would be withdrawn from the study and destroyed.

The results of this study will be published in my Masters thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals. Once the thesis is published, all recipients of this letter will receive notification of the publication and how to access it.

I, Mark Theobald, promise to adhere to the procedures described in this consent form.

Principal Investigator Signature __________________________ Date _______________

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca
Appendix B

Survey Tool

<table>
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<th>Consent Information</th>
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1. Please carefully read through the consent information below. You must answer “Yes” to participate in the survey. By answering yes below:

- I acknowledge that I have fully read and understand the information provided in the recruitment letter
- I acknowledge that due to the qualitative nature of the information being collected, it is possible that I may be identified by my responses if they are quoted in the research paper
- I acknowledge that Survey Monkey stores its information on US servers, and as such is subject to the USA Patriot Act and other applicable US legislation.
- I understand that answering yes and completing the survey implies consent to my survey responses being included in the research data

Should you consent to participation, the survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

- [ ] Yes, I acknowledge the above and give my consent to participate in the survey.
- [ ] No, I do not wish to participate in the survey.
### Voice, Needs, Empathy and Accountability: Creating New Foundations For Student Discipline

**Start of Survey**

1. Please indicate if you are a(n):
   - [ ] administrator
   - [ ] certified teacher
   - [ ] member of support staff

2. How well do you understand restorative practices?

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<tr>
<td>I do not understand restorative practices at all</td>
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<td>I fully understand restorative practices</td>
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3. In your opinion, how fully has Golden Secondary School implemented restorative practices?

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<tr>
<td>Restorative practices are not used to deal with any negative student behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td>A mix of restorative practices/traditional discipline used to deal with negative student behaviour</td>
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<td>Restorative practices are used to deal with virtually all negative student behaviour</td>
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4. How fully have you personally implemented restorative practices in your job position at Golden Secondary School?

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<tr>
<td>I do not use restorative practices to deal with any negative student behaviour</td>
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<td>I use a mix of restorative practices/traditional discipline to deal with negative student behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td>I use restorative practices to deal with virtually all negative student behaviour</td>
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5. If you use both restorative practices and traditional disciplinary practices to deal with negative student behaviour, how do you decide which method to use?

   [ ]

[2]
6. Have you had any formal training/certification in restorative practices?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

7. If you answered “Yes” to question 6:

What formal training/certification have you received?

Who provided the training?

Did the training/certification help you in your own implementation of restorative practices?

8. Other than formal training, what resources or supports have helped you to learn about, understand, and implement restorative practices?

9. Are there other opportunities, resources, or supports you wish you had been given?

10. Do you believe that restorative practices results in an overall reduction of negative student behaviours in comparison with traditional disciplinary methods?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Why?

11. How have restorative practices influenced your own work environment?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. How have restorative practices influenced the overall school climate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. What do you believe are the key benefits (if any) of using restorative practices?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. What do you believe are the key deficits (if any) of using restorative practices?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Do you believe that the use of restorative practices effects how students view you personally? Explain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Do you believe that the use of restorative practices effects how students view the staff at Golden Secondary School in general? Explain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. Did you work at Golden Secondary or any other school prior to the implementation of restorative practices - in other words, have you worked in an environment where restorative practices were not used?</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ Yes, I have worked in a school environment where restorative practices were not used</td>
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<td>○ No, I have always worked in a school environment where restorative practices have been used</td>
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I previously worked in a school environment where restorative practices were not used.

1. When you first experienced restorative practices, what was your opinion of them?


2. Has your opinion of restorative practices changed since you first experienced them? Explain.


3. How did you handle negative student behaviour prior to the introduction of restorative practices?


4. Has the implementation of restorative practices since affected how you handle negative student behaviour? Explain.


5. Prior to the introduction of restorative practices, how effective did you see yourself in terms of your ability to deal with negative student behaviour as it occurred?

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<tr>
<td>I was not very effective in dealing with negative student behaviour</td>
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6. After the introduction of restorative practices, how effective do you now see yourself in terms of your ability to deal with negative student behaviour as it occurs?

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<td>I am not very effective in dealing with negative student behaviour</td>
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7. If you are a classroom teacher, prior to the introduction of restorative practices, how effective did you see yourself in terms of overall classroom management?

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<tr>
<th>I did not have good classroom management</th>
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<td>I had excellent classroom management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not applicable - I am not a classroom teacher</td>
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8. If you are a classroom teacher, after the introduction of restorative practices, how effective do you now see yourself in terms of overall classroom management?

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<tr>
<td>I have excellent classroom management</td>
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<td>Not applicable - I am not a classroom teacher</td>
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9. Prior to the introduction of restorative practices, how effective did you see yourself in terms of your ability to help students change their negative behaviours?

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<th>I was not very effective in helping students change their negative behaviours</th>
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10. After the introduction of restorative practices, how effective do you now see yourself in terms of your ability to help students change their negative behaviours?

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11. The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that contribute to a successful and sustainable implementation of restorative practices in a school environment. Is there any other information that you have not provided that you think would be beneficial in answering this question?
Voice, Needs, Empathy and Accountability: Creating New Foundations For Student Discipline

I have always worked in a school environment where restorative practices have been used.

1. What is your current opinion of restorative practices?

2. How do you typically handle negative student behaviour?

3. How effective do you see yourself in terms of your ability to deal with negative student behaviour as it occurs?

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4. If you are a classroom teacher, how effective do you see yourself in terms of overall classroom management?

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5. How effective do you see yourself in terms of your ability to help students change their negative behaviours?

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