

## Restorative practices & relationship-based education

There tend to be two **understandings of a “restorative approach”** &/or “restorative programs” in schools: one is simple, perhaps simplistic, the other is **more complex**.

1. The **simpler version** of restorative practices in schools arose from programs developed since the mid-1990s in Australia and New Zealand, and then North America, Europe, and beyond. It has involved:

- running the occasional **community conference** to **address some specific harmful incident**; & also then in some schools:
- implementing *circle time* – regular structured discussion in a circle format **to build relationships**.

Both of these activities can be highly valuable. However, the label of “**restorative**” conversations has also masked some inept and counterproductive practice. [Kristin Reimer](#) of Monash University has identified a foundational reason for the difference between good and bad practice:<sup>1</sup>

*“Restorative Justice [RJ] is a window into the character of school relationships since it provides a view of those relationships. RJ is used in the service of predominant relational objectives in the school. A school in which relationships are ones of **social control** – based on compliance, rules, behaviour, punishment and seeing students as isolated individuals – will utilize RJ to strengthen that control. A school in which relationships are ones of **social engagement** – based on relationships of equality and mutuality, with a broad focus that encourages the realignment of power – will utilize RJ to strengthen that engagement.”*

In the absence of a coherent and appropriate **philosophy**, and appropriate **skills** development, **STAFF** can find themselves: not confident to conduct a restorative process; speaking for a student; demanding an *apology*; and insisting *they must be correct*. **STUDENTS** can find themselves: disputing claims; *going through the motions*; feeling the process is “stupid and dumb”; becoming heated & oppositional; struggling to empathise.

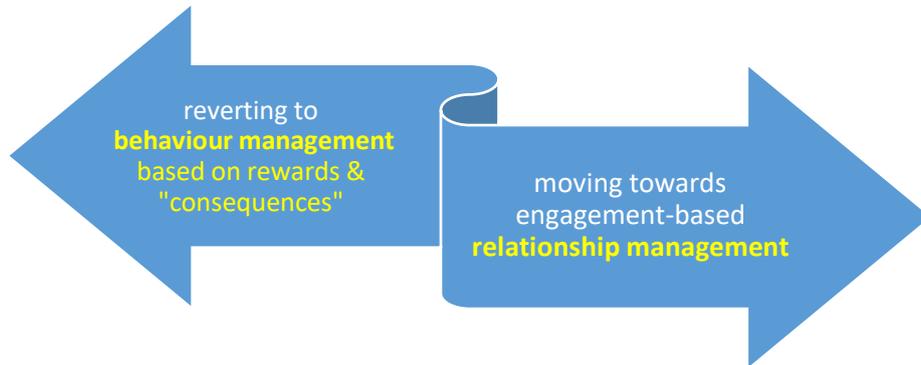
So there is the problem that a restorative approach, if poorly understood and inexpertly applied, can simply compound problems with existing **behaviour management practices**. Fortunately, there is now a growing realisation among educators that the more sophisticated or complex approach to “**restorative practices**” in schools can deliver significant, **sustained improvements in student- and staff wellbeing**.

2. Restorative practices in schools are more usefully understood as part of a **broader approach to effective relationship management**. This more complex, systemic, **school-wide** approach can provide **positive support** for **respectful relationships** by applying a set of teachable / learnable skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Reimer, K. (2018). “The kids do a better job of it than we do”: A Canadian case study of teachers addressing the hypocritical application of restorative justice in their school. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 1-15; (2018). Relationships of control and relationships of engagement: How educator intentions intersect with student experiences of restorative justice. *Journal of Peace Education*, 1-29.

**Coordination** is required to ensure a *common understanding* or **mindset** about relationship management, *and* a *common* set of practices or **skillset** (described with a shared *language*).



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To support the move beyond *behaviour* management based on "consequences" and rewards, and towards *relationship* management, requires a **virtuous circle** of reform – where each element of reform supports other elements. A **virtuous circle of mutually reinforcing effective practice** in schools will likely involve the following elements:



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It is important to understand that *restorative* practices, as part of comprehensive-relationship-management, are not yet *another program*. Rather, they provide important techniques – the “*how to*” - for **implementing, reviewing, fine-tuning and aligning programs** such as:

- School Wide **Positive Behaviour Support**;
- Respectful Relationships;
- Protective Schools;  
and more general social movements such as:
- Positive Education.

The full set of techniques – from effective coaching through facilitating large meetings - can support each element of this **virtuous circle** in a school community:

<b>Communication mode</b>	<b>responding</b> ↔ <b>preventing</b> ↔ <b>promoting</b>
One-way	correcting ↔ coaching ↔ mentoring
Two-way	Structured <b>conversations</b>
Mediated	Third-party <b>assisted negotiations</b>
Facilitated	<b>Group meetings</b> in various formats

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Key applications for these **facilitated restorative group meetings** – with a format for each application – are as follows:

<b>Group meeting applications &amp; formats</b>			
<b>A legacy of PAST trauma</b>	<b>Undisputed harm in the PRESENT</b>	<b>A sequence of unresolved incidents &amp;/or issues</b>	<b>Issue(s) of common concern</b>
<b>Restorative engagement:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▫ narrative</li> <li>▫ response</li> <li>▫ dialogue</li> <li>▫ further action</li> </ul>	<b>Community conference</b> <i>focussed on an incident to enable recognition, reasons, responsibility &amp; regret for harm THEN redress to <b>repair</b> harm, with planning to <b>prevent</b> further harm, &amp; to <b>promote</b> well-being</i>	<b>Community conference</b> with a <i>chronological narrative to enable recognition, reasons, responsibility &amp; regret for harm THEN redress to <b>repair</b> harm with planning to <b>prevent</b> further harm, &amp; to <b>promote</b> well-being</i>	Making sense of <i>complexity</i> through a collective narrative & <b>coordinated action</b>

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The philosophy and techniques of restorative practices have important parallels with what we now know about [effective methods of teaching and learning more generally](#). These evidence-based techniques can support members of a school community to improve the way they *establish, maintain and repair relationships*.

The results of a **randomised control trial of this approach**, conducted over three years in state schools in the south of England, were published in November 2018 in [the Lancet](#). The authors concluded that this approach is **likely to achieve “significant impacts” in improving child health and mental wellbeing**. Fortunately, we are now achieving *and* measuring similar outcomes closer to home.

For example, this state government's timely [Navigator](#) program has been successful in returning **seriously disengaged young people** back to a school that they'd drifted away from, to a different school, or to some other vocational and training pathway. As the [DET website indicates, Navigator](#) is expanding in 2020.

In the initial pilot, Navigator seems to have run particularly well in Hume-Moreland, where Jesuit Social Services ([JSS have been the \(sole\) service provider](#)). Their capacity to achieve good outcomes is clearly associated with their experience as facilitators in other programs, including youth justice group conferencing. Some schools involved in the Hume Moreland Navigator project realised that JSS convenors were bringing a **particular skill set to facilitated meetings**, including the skill of **negotiating robust and workable action plans** - and that these skills could be highly valuable **in schools** (i.e. not just in getting young people *back into school*).

The resultant "**Engage**" program represents the expansion of restorative practices into broader *relationship-based* educational **applications**. Reassuringly, but not surprisingly, a yet-to-be-released evaluation of **Engage**, by Phillips KPA, shows **improvements in student and staff wellbeing**. During the course of this project, the regional [School Wide Positive Behaviour Support](#) coach observed that the skills being imparted to school staff indeed provide some important how to for SWPBS – which might more accurately be understood, even rebranded - as **School-Wide Support for Relationship-based Education**.

DET oversees the state-wide pool of **coaches** who help schools implement [School Wide Positive Behaviour Support](#), and the Department is now aware of and interested in this development, i.e.:

- **restorative practices**, as a practical element in:
- **relationship-based education**, can *enhance*:
- **School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support, Respectful Relationships** and related programs.

Supporting this link could align neatly with the overt focus on relationship-based education for which Parents Victoria are advocating.