

Some advice for school communities beginning their RP journey...

It's probably true that professional advice is worth **what you pay for it...** so, with that caveat, I'm offering some **free** advice to schools considering beginning their journey with Restorative Practices!

What follows is just based upon my own experience of leading the implementation of RP across a school, as well as some experience acting as advisor and critical friend to a number of other school communities who have sought assistance and collaboration at various parts of their own journey.

While I recognise that all school communities are unique, I suspect that there are sufficient commonalities to make at least some of the following advice useful to others.

If you find any of this valuable, you would suggest some other advice, you would like to challenge any point, or you would like to explore any topic in more detail, please feel free to email me at graeme@rpforschools.net

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- **Determine how open your school is to the possibilities RP can provide.**

I have found that the statement "We're implementing RP in our school" can mean a multitude of things. At one end of the spectrum it means that a couple of people are allowed to do some conference work. At the other end of the spectrum it can mean that the whole behaviour management regime, the teachers' pedagogy and all policies and procedures are in alignment with a restorative approach. Restorative practices can transform school cultures in positive ways, but it depends on how committed the school is to seek that sort of change. In some schools, the counselor or a member of the pastoral care team is keen on RP, but they don't really have the school's administration "on board." This can be frustrating to the RP advocate. It's important from the outset to be clear on how far the school is prepared to go with RP. It sets the boundaries - and keeps the expectations realistic.

Don't be discouraged if the boundaries are set fairly tightly initially... it's quite likely that as people learn more about RP and appreciate its transformative power more fully, these boundaries might end up expanding!

- **Decisions need to be made 'at the top.' Education of those 'at the top' of the school is critical.**

The principal and other leaders in the school need to be on-board. If you have a governing board or council of trustees etc, they need to be on-board, too. If these key people aren't behind the implementation of RP in the school, there will inevitably be clashes between them and the practitioners on the ground - probably when the first serious behaviour issue raises its head, and they will want to address it using traditional means instead of using more restorative processes.

Principals and Board members need to be educated about RP - before you ask them for their commitment. Include these people in the very initial training. Have them learn more about RP than they might strictly need in their roles. As soon as possible, give them an experience of RP in action - either directly or, if that's not possible, through stories shared with them. It's one thing to understand RP processes in the school. It's easy to attach to it theoretically or cognitively. It's an entirely different thing to *experience* its power - much more convincing.

One great example of this cross-level education was evident at the recent RPI conference in Wellington where one school district in Canada had sent as delegates teachers, principals and School Board Trustees from their district so that people at all levels of responsibility could be on the same page when it came to implementation. A powerful commitment to doing it right!

- **View it as a long-term process.**

In most cases, the implementation of RP across a school is seeking to effect cultural change by *changing teachers' practice*. Changing teachers' practice (especially if the culture of the school is one that does not include a tradition of overtly talking about and reflecting on practice) is not something that can be achieved overnight. It takes time and patience and perseverance. Beware anyone who suggests that RP can be fully implemented in a week! We have all attended PD workshops that were exciting and interesting and promised the world, only to then return to our classrooms and be unable to remember even the gist of the PD a month later.

In the schools where I have been involved, the greatest success has been achieved slowly, and respectfully of the need for teachers to learn new ways of doing things. If you need to put a time-frame around it, I'd suggest something like ten years. If you achieve your aims before that, then that's great. If you set too short a time frame, and don't achieve your aims, it will only lead to frustration and disillusionment.

In our school, it really took six years of steady work to start feeling like RP was "embedded" in our practice. While we achieved a lot of successes before that stage, this was when it really became just "the way we do things around here." During that time, it also became obvious that the changes that were occurring in the culture of the school were enabling us to expand our original aims - so the project became more extensive as we saw that we could benefit from deliberate, coordinated social/emotional learning programs across the school, for example.

I would encourage not putting a time frame on it at all, if you can avoid it. This way, the implementation can be constructed as a continual process of learning new and better ways of being in the school.

- **Examine your school's values - tie RP into these values, into the dominant pedagogy, etc - look for synergy.**

All schools operate under some specific set of values that are strongly held by the community, even if these are not regularly identified and celebrated. Tying the practice of RP into these values helps people get on-board. Schools which have a religious foundation will find it easy to align the principles of RP with the school's values. But even the most secular schools operate within a surprisingly similar set of values - as one example, take the *value of learning*. The fact that RP is an educative process - it encourages offenders to learn about the consequences of their actions and how they can change their behaviour - makes it "fit" with any school that *values learning*. A commonly-held Australian value is that of the "*fair go*." Once again, RP can be linked to this basic value.

Similarly, look at the beliefs underpinning the dominant pedagogy in the school. No matter what the style of pedagogy, either explicitly or implicitly, promoted within the school, there will be a tie in with some aspect of RP.

The more you can tie in RP to existing and enduring aspects of the school culture, the more success you'll have - and the more that will become possible in time. It's a matter of *alignment* - i.e. having different aspects of the school culture all pulling in the same direction.

- **Get the best initial training you can afford for as many as possible.**

There is no substitute for good initial education and training - and from someone who *knows* and *can do*. There are a number of great facilitators available for this initial training (see www.rpforschools.net for links to some of these). Schools beginning on their RP journey should engage one of these trainers and involve as many key people as they can afford, in as much training as they can afford. Draw on the experience of the trainer and, if possible, engage them in the process of strategically rolling out RP across the school.

The first hurdle in implementing RP is to upskill enough people to create a 'critical mass' and to provide the in-house experience that can then encourage others within the school to come on board.

- **Target your initial PD strategically - for most benefit.**

In the early days, people will not all be equally receptive to training and professional development in RP. It is likely that each school will have some staff who are keen and already convinced, and may already be working largely restoratively. We can call these the *early adopters*. There will likely be others (maybe the largest group) who can be convinced, but aren't there yet. Let's call these the *fence sitters*. There may also be some who are just philosophically opposed to RP - some who are so attached to a punitive system that they can't construct their image of 'justice' any other way. We'll call these *resisters*.

In my experience, it's best to start with the *early adopters*. Make sure they know what they're doing, so that they can act authentically and hopefully get others on-board, without going off ill-advisedly doing things that might go wrong and derail the whole effort. Next, work on the *fence sitters*. Enlist the *early adopters* to assist with this task of convincing and up-skilling the larger group. My advice with the *resisters* is don't go overboard with them, unless they are a large or influential group within the school. If they only constitute a small group, focus your attention elsewhere - where you can get more "bang for your buck!" Once RP becomes 'the way we do things around here' the *resisters* will be challenged to adjust their philosophy to come on-board. Some may choose not to - and look instead for another school. Not all schools are going to suit all teachers.

With most teachers, I've found that it's easy to sell the idea of RP. It's a lot more work to help them actually develop the skills they will need to implement this approach successfully. As soon as possible, move the professional development onto enhancing these skills.

- **Engage the trainer as a 'critical friend' to help with the implementation.**

As mentioned above, it's best to be *strategic* in the early stages of implementation. Sometimes, you can be too close to the school organisation and 'politics' to be really strategic in your planning. In my experience, the collaboration of people inside the school with a trusted advisor outside the community can provide great insights into how the best outcomes can be achieved. Having the 'critical friend' available for a quick query or consultation when those unanticipated or challenging situations arise is also a good idea.

- **Study the literature - as widely and as deeply as you can.**

While RP was originally a practitioner-led movement, there now exists an extensive literature that has emerged out of practice, out of psychology departments, and out of criminology departments. I firmly believe that RP is best implemented within a sound theory base or framework. It is important to understand *what* it is you are trying to achieve, and *why* and *how* the restorative processes work towards achieving it. Having a strong theoretical understanding of the nature of people and their interactions in RP not only enables practitioners to use their processes more intelligently, but also to evaluate and refine their processes, and maybe even generate new ways of doing things.

It's best to spread this learning around as widely as possible among staff. If possible, encourage this learning by including pieces in staff meetings, trainings, and wherever you can. Develop libraries of articles and books that can readily be accessed by teachers - perhaps on the school's intranet, so they are accessible anywhere. Create in-house learning opportunities as described below (for access to the RP resources, see e.g. www.rpforschools.net).

- **Take over the training yourself at some point. Develop an ongoing PD program for staff - engage others in doing the study for this.**

While it's essential to have the outside expert conduct as much training as possible in the early days, I firmly believe that the ongoing professional development of staff, and the induction of new staff, needs to be undertaken by people inside the school. When this happens - when a leader in the school takes on the task of conducting PD sessions for staff on RP - then you have a real chance of making RP *belong to the school*. I believe that as long as a school relies on an outside expert for all training, RP will never truly be *theirs*.

This is connected with the promotion of ongoing learning about RP as mentioned in the previous point. The literature and resources are available for personnel in schools to take on this internal training role. And, it helps them better understand the theory and practice as well. I would encourage establishing a small group of teachers who are keen to make a serious study of both the theory and practice of RP (e.g. see www.rpforschools.net) and who can then plan and lead in-house professional development sessions targeted specifically to the changing needs of staff as the implementation of RP proceeds.

- **Share early success stories - encourage one another.**

Provide opportunities for teachers to share little vignettes of good practice - things that worked well. This could be on a noticeboard (physical or electronic), staff intranet, etc. It helps others to see that the approaches can work, but it can also serve as a professional development tool - in spreading and encouraging good practice. Some teachers might need encouragement to share what they've been doing and how it went - they will probably tell *you*, but they might be reluctant to post something publicly. Maybe put up a couple of your own from members of the implementation team to break the ice.

- **Recognise the need for upskilling. This takes time.**

Changing teachers' practice takes time. Teachers who are a little less confident than others will need more care in helping them to develop the relational skills they need. Even some confident, experienced teachers may not have much experience of developing strong, caring relationships with students. For some, their punitive behaviour management skills have been reinforced over many years - re-training can be challenging. The key requirement here is patience. Give people the time and the encouragement to build their skills and to gain more confidence with the methods of RP.

An American teacher once hit it right 'on the head' when he said "We're all restorative on a good day. We're just trying to have more good days!" In the early stages, be forgiving with people as well as patient. Really, any improvement is moving in the right direction. If you have expectations that are too high, no-one will be able to meet them and everyone will be frustrated.

- **Don't immediately remove other behaviour management supports.**

As outlined above, change takes time. While you're working on that process, I would recommend keeping in place whatever other procedures or systems the school has had for dealing with behavioural issues - as a backup for teachers. Encourage them to work restoratively by all means, but keep the old system in place for those cases where *it's all just too hard* in the initial stage. Encourage people to have "more good days" and, eventually, you will be able to remove the old supports. But only do this when they are no longer needed.

If you're moving towards a fully restorative approach, just keep in mind along the way that it is a journey, and a few steps backward from time to time don't wipe out dozens of forward steps.

- **Resource the change adequately.**

One of the main initial objections teachers raise to RP is that they "don't have the time" to do all this talking! That's true, but once RP becomes what we do around here, and once the students are used to the process, the time required in normal day-to-day interactions diminishes greatly. In the initial phase at least, resource the key pastoral care people with time so that they can best support the classroom teacher. RP does require a little more resourcing than more traditional approaches. Of course, the return on that investment is vastly superior, but it does require that investment - at least initially, and probably always - to get the return.

- **Eventually, rewrite policy and procedures.**

When RP gets fairly embedded in practice, examine the school's written Behaviour Management Policies and supporting documents. Leaving this until later makes sense when one recognises that doing it earlier serves no purpose. You can't effectively dictate the relational approach to behaviour management through a written policy, so this may as well wait until everyone can see that it needs to change to reflect the new reality.

- **Include teachers in your restorative interventions.**

In the early days, when you're trying to get people on-board, invite a teacher to be part of a process you facilitate in response to some issue. While it's relatively easy to convince people cognitively that RP is the way to go, sometimes it's only by witnessing *how* it works that people make a real commitment to learning more about it. When they see the power of the process, it can be illuminating for them. Suddenly, what they've only heard *about* to this point now becomes very real.

- **Brand RP at your school.**

By “brand” I mean make posters and signs of the Restorative Questions, or the Social Discipline Window, etc for classrooms and corridors with your own school’s logo or crest prominent. Nothing says “We’re taking this seriously” like a laminated poster with the school crest! Do likewise with documents that you use within RP. We used the term RP@V for ours, and made up a little logo - it just made it seem like it was now *our* program.

- **Don’t sweat the small stuff - keep your focus on the big picture, don’t be discouraged at initial failures.**

Initially, not everything will go to plan. Some teachers will have poor experiences of trying the new approach. As a general rule, share the positives, and console the negatives. Believe in the big picture and keep working towards it. Gradually, more and more people will have more positive (and some truly powerful) experiences and the weight of people’s experience will eventually confirm that RP is the best way to do things.

Don’t sweat the small stuff - don’t worry if minor breaches of behaviour, rules, etc, are treated in a way that’s not consistent with RP. Sometimes it can be these little challenges that teachers find the hardest to address using a restorative approach. This can be because dealing with these little issues in a restorative way requires a pre-existing respectful relationship between teacher and students on which to base the intervention, and developing the emotional capital implicit in this might take some time. Other times, it’s just because people can’t think how to deal with these low level irritations in a restorative way - they don’t see a ‘victim’ and don’t know what to do. With time, people will have responses and the confidence to use them.

- **Don’t forget support staff in your training schedule.**

While your first focus might be on training and professional development for the teaching staff, don’t forget that there are a lot of people in the school who aren’t teachers, but who still work with students and who can make a big impact on their experience of schooling. You might like to think carefully about what training would be best for members of the support staff - and it’s likely to be different from what you offer the teachers.

Remember that non-teachers are coming from very different perspectives and backgrounds, and they also interact with students in ways that differ from the way teachers do. They make a vital contribution to the culture and climate of the school, though.

Another reason for support staff to be well-informed about RP is that some of them are likely to be involved in restorative processes at some time or other - when things inevitably go wrong, and student misbehaviour has affected them - and it’s best to get them on-side right from the start, so they know what it is you’re trying to achieve and how.

- **Explain what you’re trying to do with staff, with parents, with students.**

One of the real benefits of RP is that there is a coherent, rational theoretical framework that enables our understanding of our practice to be explicit. We can therefore explain it to others as a coherent approach. In my experience, this not only enables us to explain it to staff, but also to get both the principles and practice across to parents. When explained to parents, RP resonates with most as simply good parenting.

I firmly believe also in the benefits of teaching students about RP - both theory and practice. In our school, we have introduced curricular units into the academic program at Year Five and Year Eight - since these are the major intake years for us. Right from their first entry to the school, then, students are introduced to RP as a means of understanding themselves and their peers, and so that they have an understanding of how we are trying to work with them.

While I have found that some teachers are initially sceptical, and suggest that teaching the students about RP will only empower them to give ‘glib’ answers to the questions, and therefore thwart the practice of RP, in reality I have found exactly the opposite to be true. After a while, the students’ familiarity with the questions and the processes of RP encourages, enables and empowers them to sometimes sort out their conflicts and difficulties before we actually have a chance to intervene. Instead of students just “giving us the answers we expect” - as some teachers had feared - we sometimes find that they have in fact taken it upon themselves to step through the questions and work out a solution before a teacher has the chance to do it with them.

A number of schools have taken a slightly different line in actually training some students as peer-mediators or facilitators. While I don’t have any direct experience of this, it sounds like a great idea.

- **Take baseline data if possible, engage academic researchers if available in your area.**

While the relational interactions that are at the heart of RP are fairly resistant to quantitative data collection, more traditional, punitive responses to behaviour problems lend themselves to effective data collection. Collecting this baseline data enables a school to track the diminishing reliance on these traditional methods as RP is implemented.

One other great way of understanding how the implementation of RP is going is to engage in some formal research on student well-being in your school. We have been fortunate to be able to participate in a longitudinal study conducted by the psychiatry department of a local university - all for the cost of photocopying survey instruments and conducting the surveys with the students. From my experience, this provides great data which not only enables some evaluation of how the culture might be changing, but also helps us work out what future focusses might best serve the school’s aims in the development of its students. If you can ‘hook up’ with researchers at a local university, work of this kind can be very helpful.

- **Establish your own internal protocols for proceeding with the more formal restorative responses.**

The more formal processes - such as the Community Conference - are extremely powerful tools for working with students and their families. Because of the enormous power of these processes, the potential for harm if they were to go 'pear-shaped,' and because of the practical requirements of the conference, I believe that it's important to put some limits around when - and by whom, and under what conditions - these conferences can be conducted.

Most conferencing manuals have sections on just this topic - that can relatively easily be adjusted and adapted for local conditions. I believe it's a valuable exercise to develop such a local 'protocol' - not only to generate the document itself, but also as a great professional development exercise for a small team as well.

- **Look for ways to work on the pro-active as well as the reactive interventions.**

When schools first start out with RP - and for some time thereafter - the focus is usually on the *reactive* processes, i.e. how to effectively deal with wrongdoing or conflict when it arises. This is only reasonable.

After some period of success with these reactive processes however, it becomes possible, now that stronger relationships have been built and nurtured, to look at more pro-active ways of encouraging pro-social behaviour. This is the implementation of a "primary" level of inoculation or immunisation that is outlined in Brenda Morrison's model of Responsive Regulation (see www.rpforschools.net). These pro-active 'primary' measures involve all students and aim, over time, to reduce the need for the 'secondary' and 'tertiary' (i.e. reactive) responses.

- **Join an organisation such as *Restorative Practices International* - to network with others doing the same work. Go to conferences and workshops. Share your work.**

There is an extensive network of restorative practitioners out there across the world that can offer you support, advice and information. Tapping into this network can be as simple as joining an organisation such as the RPI (see link on www.rpforschools.net) and/or signing up for e-newsletters from a number of other organisations, also listed on the website. There is really no substitute for learning from one another and keeping abreast of what others are doing in schools just like yours - and sharing your work and achievements with them also.