
Restorative practices meet key competencies: Class meetings as pedagogy

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In New Zealand we are going through a major educational shift, reflecting our changing world and the way we perceive knowledge and education. We have just brought in a new curriculum that focuses on students, rather than content, as the centre of learning and while this is happening we seem to be facing more social factors that could stand in the way of students' educational gains. We have an increasingly multi-cultural and diverse population and this is reflected in some of the complexities confronting education. Suspensions and exclusions of young people escalated through the 1990s, prompting the Ministry of Education to put in a concerted effort to reduce these rates. At the same time, we are striving to improve educational outcomes and build our population's capacity to learn and develop together in a peaceful and productive manner. But while we have a progressive and exciting new curriculum, it is questionable whether this can be implemented in what is best described as a traditional, at times punitive, education system. How can we marry the values of this curriculum with the realities of our classrooms?

The study reported here suggests that there may be a place for restorative practice in the teaching of the new curriculum and, in fact, a key role in developing key competencies, which are a cornerstone of the new curriculum.

The New Zealand Curriculum

The introduction of the new national curriculum in New Zealand in 2009 could be seen as one of the largest changes to face education in this country. Originally intended to move the focus from content-based teaching to a more learner-focused, competency-based curriculum, Rutherford (2004) suggests that the underlying aim is essentially about equity. The aim of the New Zealand Government is to improve student achievement by reducing the disparity in outcomes across the country – to 'improv[e] New Zealanders' skills, reducing inequalities in education, strengthening national identity and growing an inclusive, innovative economy for the benefit of all' (Rutherford, 2004:16).

The values of the curriculum aspire to reflect and instil common cultural beliefs including excellence, innovation, inquiry and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability, integrity and respect. These values are central to

citizenship and community education and aim to improve the culture of New Zealand education and, ultimately, the country itself. 'All the values listed above can be expanded into clusters of related values that collectively suggest their fuller meanings. For example, 'community and participation for the common good' is associated with values and notions such as peace, citizenship, and manaakitanga' (Ministry of Education, 2007:10).

The key competencies work to teach each person not only as an individual learner, but also as a valuable member of communities. The five key competencies are seen as the core teaching material of the curriculum that content is hung from. They are: thinking, using language, text and symbols, managing self, relating to others and participating and contributing.

The focus on these competencies aims to allow students to develop their own sense of self and community in their learning.

From the point of view of sociocultural and situated learning theories, interacting with others plays a really important role in cognitive development, because ideas and skills are always embedded in actual contexts that usually involve people and their activities as well as 'things'. So, for example, the competency also has links to 'make connections and establish relationships' from the 'problem solving' essential skills grouping. (Hipkins, 2006:41).

This places learning in the community context that was yet to be acknowledged in such great depth in previous curricula, highlighting the differing ways of learning and living of our diverse student population.

Links to Restorative Practice

Teachers need to encourage continuing participation at a level that matches the students' existing competencies, and students need to see themselves as part of a larger collective while their learning is ongoing. As they know more, they will be able to do more. As they do more, the situation changes. As they put it: 'changing participation in a changing world is equivalent to learning' (Roth and Desautels as cited in Hipkins, 2006:61-62).

Carr (2006) discusses how the development of key competencies can be enabled, noting that learners need opportunities for voicing responsibility and opinion. This directly relates to the work we do within restorative

practice in education. A basic premise behind restorative practices is 'that human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them' (International Institute for Restorative Practice, 2007:1).

To date, our education system has operated in the 'to' and 'for' arena. Students have traditionally been seen as passive receptacles for knowledge and content. The restorative premise argues for systemic change – not only in education but social change – that fits well with the values purported in the New Zealand curriculum. The emphasis on relationship and student development, rather than a 'one-size fits all' system that excludes those who do not fit with its ethos, speaks to the IIRP assertion to 'do things with them, rather than to them or for them'. In New Zealand, we see the context of restorative practice developing away from a focus on the disciplinary aspects of a school and moving into the realms of the classroom – teaching and learning, cultures of care and co-construction. While there may still be wrongdoings occurring within a school, such development tackles greater issues of school culture or 'the way we do things around here'. We hope that restorative practices can improve students' engagement, their empathy and ultimately their competencies.

Restorative practice in New Zealand originates from a number of sources, including restorative justice and Maori *huitanga*² (Morris and Maxwell, 2001). In the justice, welfare and education systems we have invested substantial time and effort into the restorative conferencing model for New Zealand young people. It often takes shape as the Family Group Conference (in Child, Youth and Family Services or Youth Courts) (Bazemore and Umbreit, 2001; Maxwell and Morris, 2006; White, 2003) or the restorative conference used regularly in schools (Drewery and Winslade, 2005; Hopkins, 2004; The Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004). These processes were developed first as a means of reducing severe disciplinary action, in the justice system, situations of family distress or discipline infringements within schools (suspensions and exclusions). Drewery (2004) critiques the focus on '...what is wrong with Maori, and boys, and low socio-economic groups that they seem to get into so much more trouble. Equally we could ask, what is it about our schools that brings this situation about?' (p333). Here lies the challenge for education in New Zealand in 2011 – how can we educate better and more respectfully in an increasingly diverse community, particularly taking into account the obligations all New

Zealanders have under the Treaty of Waitangi³? We would argue that building strong, resilient relationships in our schools is one viable way of addressing this social development project.

Drewery (2005) describes relationships as produced both in speech and action – ‘that speech is an action in and on the world’ (p310). In education, through speech we can enhance or take away *mana*⁴ from our young people. Drewery (2004, 2007) argues that the objectives of an inclusive school should be to build a peaceful community where different people can live together, grounded in the belief that respectful dialogue is a means to build peace. Cavanagh’s (2009) research in a rural area school in New Zealand suggested that relationships were the primary reason students attended and strived to do well in school. With the situation as it is, and the research that has developed around student relationships at school (for example, Bishop *et al*, 2004), it is hard to argue against the promotion of practices that would strengthen and enhance students’ relationships with one another and their teachers, as a means to improve both achievement and behaviour.

Aside from the major restorative conference, there are a number of other practices that are more informal that practise respectful, reflective conversations, eg restorative chats, circle times, class meetings and mediations (Hopkins, 2004; International Institute of Restorative Practices, 2007). There has been little study into the effectiveness of these other measures, although feedback from teachers and students is often positive around them (Boulton and Mirsky, 2006; Cavanagh, 2009; Lown, 2002). As each school takes on the practices with varying commitment, focus and desired outcomes, it is difficult to study their effectiveness (Drewery, 2007:212). Yet there is still a belief that these more everyday, informal restorative practices are a means to embed a culture of care within a school. Morrison, Blood and Thorsborne (2005) argue that these more proactive practices can help to manage relationships and resolve conflict in a school culture.

This Project: Restorative Practice and Key Competencies

The project reported on here is one of the products of a professional development initiative to implement restorative practices into a secondary school, with the aim of improving school culture and reducing conflict (see also Kaveney and Drewery, this issue). It was based around incorporating restorative practice into the everyday relationships of staff and students. It is situated

within discursive practice and aims to teach the skills of curious questioning, externalising, deconstructive questions, restorative chats, restorative interviews and class meetings (Kecskemeti, 2010, and forthcoming). The class meeting (an extended version of circle time) has become a way for staff to practise many of these skills in one setting.

In 2009, a class of students was constructed to meet the needs of a group of students who were at risk of disengaging with education due to previous problems with absenteeism, behaviour, ongoing illness, and some individual learning needs. Over the course of a year this Year 11 class (15-16 year olds) took part in seven class meetings. Their teachers were both year level deans and a form teacher, to maintain a strong pastoral component in teaching and learning. These staff had an understanding of each student’s background both in and out of school. The form teacher was also part of the restorative practices professional development.

This present research aims to explore how the class meeting process might teach or provide opportunities for students to develop skills in the key competencies of participating and contributing and relating to others. These competencies are grounded in relationship building and could make improvements to school and class culture.

Methodology

The class meeting process

The class meeting process used at the school was developed by the deputy principal and head of guidance, using a discursive theoretical approach and a process that incorporates elements of both the class conference and circle time (Kaveney and Drewery, 2011; Kecskemeti and Kaveney, in preparation). Desks are moved back and chairs arranged in a circle. The class meeting requires at least two outside adult participants – a facilitator and a reflector. The facilitator poses questions, sets the scene and manages the circle. The reflector notes down responses, feeds these back at the end of rounds and comments on discourses present in the discussion. They often challenge or unpack these discourses further. The meeting usually consists of four rounds, each beginning with the posing of a question. Students contribute their answers to the questions as they go around the circle in successive rounds.

A meeting often occurs because of problems evident in the class – for instance, the learning environment is difficult, there are put downs in the class, or a lack of

respect for others (teacher included). Over the course of the year, the class took part in seven meetings that took place every four to six weeks. They generally discussed the learning environment of the class and how they might improve class culture. Not all students attended all class meetings so there is variation in the make-up of the class over the course of the project. In many cases the teacher concerned and other members of staff also attended. The teacher could speak as a member of the class community. Often the other staff members present might include a dean, deputy principal, teachers of the class or a head of department. All staff members could say that they had an interest in the class community and had a part to play in improving it.

The meeting proper begins with the facilitator posing the first question – ‘What do you think the problem is? What would you call it?’ Students volunteer to begin speaking. From that student the speaking follows around the circle. Each student speaks and must speak for themselves. It is not acceptable to say – ‘yes, the same’. If a student struggles to express their opinion, the facilitator, reflector, in fact any member of the meeting, can pose questions that unpack what they say.

Ethical considerations

Class meetings and recordings of them began before the research project itself came into being. Meetings were originally recorded as part of the school’s restorative development project so that students and teachers could reflect on the class meeting process and how they managed that. When this research was proposed, ethical approval was sought from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee to use the video data for research purposes, and permission was subsequently sought from both students and their parents.

The students entered into the meetings as individuals in a classroom community and, at times, gave quite personal responses. Because this forum encourages these responses, students needed to have their privacy and stories respected. No behaviour or contribution has been attributed to any individual and there was no judgement made on an individual’s progress. All changes have been attributed to the community as a whole.

Analysis

Video data of two class meetings, the first, and the last, were analysed. To analyse the changes in students’ skills in the key competencies – relating to others and participating and contributing – certain behaviours or

events within the meetings were named as indicators of improvement. Two key competencies were operationalised and from there, improvements, or lack of them, were quantified by the presence of specific behaviours.

Relating to others

Key elements of this competency include listening actively, recognising different points of view and negotiating and sharing ideas. A number of ways were identified to analyse or quantify these behaviours. Active listening is evident when the class is still and silent while others are speaking. This was measured by noting the number of distractions and interruptions to the meeting flow. It can also be measured through the number of times students needed to be told what they were talking about if they lost track of the meeting. Instances of negotiating and sharing ideas were noted by the number of different ideas that came up in each round.

Contributing and participating

Key elements in this competency include contributing appropriately, connecting with others, creating opportunities for others and having confidence to participate. Appropriate contribution was measured by how many off-topic insertions were made to the meeting. Appropriate contribution was measured by how students answered questions without prompts. These prompting questions were used to unpack or clarify student contributions. These were counted across both meetings. Confidence in participation was measured by the improved depth of responses. Depth was assessed by the length of student responses.

Findings

Relating to others

It was clear from the collection of data that students were actively listening to other students’ contributions much more by the last meeting. This was evidenced by two elements: the number of interruptions to the meeting flow and the number of times students lost track of the meeting and needed to be told what the subject or question was to be answered (see Table 1).

In the first meeting there were sixteen incidents of inappropriate behaviour or comments that interrupted the meeting. On these occasions the meeting had to be stopped and the behaviour or comment addressed. These included talking while others were speaking, making inappropriate comments about someone’s

contribution or distracting other members of the group while someone else was speaking. These behaviours worked against the meeting process and required teachers to step back into an authoritarian mode of operating.

In the last meeting, there were only seven incidents of behaviour or comments that interrupted the meeting process. These were undertaken by only two or three students. The recording clearly showed that students were actively listening by focussing on contributions by others but also that there was a much more attentive community operating in the class – students were less eager to undermine the process or each other. They also required less authoritarian teacher time and were less willing to accept distraction from each other.

Occasions when students lost track of the meeting, and the subject of a particular round, show how focused students are on others' contributions and of the community itself. It can directly show the level of listening with which students were engaged in the discussion and task at hand. During the first meeting there were seven instances when students lost track of the meeting and needed to be reminded what was being discussed. This would indicate that during this meeting some students were not actively engaged in the meeting and discussion at least once during the hour long meeting. During the last meeting this only occurred once during the hour long meeting, suggesting a much greater level of engagement and listening. This also indicates the growing familiarity with the meeting process and the need for students to focus as their turn came around.

Table One: Interruptions and students losing track of the meeting

	1st meeting	Last meeting
Interruptions	16	7
Student losing track of the meeting	7	1

Students can often find it difficult to share their ideas in a class discussion setting. This is particularly difficult when there isn't a right answer – only your experience or opinion. This can be a very difficult thing to ask students to do, particularly as there has been a traditional school culture of students being quiet and compliant to be successful. Students' competence in sharing their ideas improved somewhat although this was much less evident

than other indicators (see Table Two). In the first meeting there were many repeated ideas and, because students mainly spoke only fragments of sentences, there were very few elaborations on their answers. In the second round, six of the ten responses were repeated on the themes of distraction and punctuality impacting on their achievement. During the third round, nine of the ten responses were the repetitions of goals about reducing distraction in the class. These responses were very short, showing limited reflection on how students could improve their learning behaviour or the impact this had on others.

During the last meeting there were some repeated ideas but many of the responses were elaborated on, showing substantially more independent reflection on the class community. Round one had a number of repeated responses around two key positive outcomes of the year – credits gained and improved attendance. In round two there were some repeated ideas but all contributions had their own reasoning and elaborations. During round three there were three key ideas repeated – preparing for tests, staying focused and being on time. Individuals elaborated on their own impressions and understandings of the problem much more, again showing a significant development in the quality of student reflection and awareness of how they could actively change their community. This elaboration shows that there was substantial improvement in students' understanding of the issues that their class faced.

Table Two: New and repetitions of ideas

Meeting One

Round	New ideas	Repetitions of ideas
1	5	5
2	4	6
3	3	9

Final Meeting

Round	New ideas	Repetitions of ideas
1	5	10
2	6	8
3	6	9

Contributing and participating

Students' learning to contribute appropriately to a situation can be measured by how many prompts are needed to answer the given questions. During the first meeting, students found it more difficult to contribute appropriately and needed many prompts and extra questions to ascertain meaningful responses. Students needed over thirty prompts or additional questions to get an appropriate response to the question posed. In the last meeting students needed substantially less prompting to make appropriate contributions. Students seemed more aware of what an appropriate answer would sound like. Students were prompted seventeen times over the course of the meeting. Often their answers – when prompted – were elaborated on in much more depth.

Overall the greatest evidence of improvement in contribution to the class community was in the length and depth of student responses. In the first meeting, few students contributed a whole sentence at any stage. A number of students could elaborate in small phrases when they were asked prompting questions and some students struggled to do this. In the final meeting students contributed mainly short answers in the first round but in the second and third, many students used full sentences, a number using up to four to elaborate on their point further. A number of these contributions showed a level of depth and reflection that is certainly not evident in the first meeting's responses (see Table Three). It should be noted that the second and third rounds directly address the problem at hand. The fact that students could discuss in so much more depth the issues that face their class, and their own part in them, shows substantial development in their ability to reflect on their own and others' interactions.

Further Observations and Impressions

In comparing the first and last meetings there are immediate differences in both the tone and atmosphere of the class meeting. There appeared to be significant improvement on a whole class level but also individuals that had been at most of the meetings had made the most improvement in their contributions to the meeting. While observing the meetings as a whole, the class was generally more settled and still. There was much less fidgeting, whispering and lack of awareness of others evident in the last meeting. Students' answers were much clearer, more honest, thoughtful and more reflection is evident. Notably, more students were speaking in sentences and elaborating more on their responses. Overall, in the meeting context the class is more

comfortable in speaking and shared humour is more evident. One could say a sense of community was apparent. Teachers were very much part of this by the final meeting and they shared in this same ease with the students. Although there were still a number of instances when students did not relate well to others or contribute or participate appropriately, the dramatic decrease in these behaviours evidence substantial improvement in these competencies for a number of students.

Discussion

It is clear that practising this meeting process has allowed a number of students to develop greater skills in relating to others and participating and contributing. The key areas where they have shown improvement have been in actively listening and contributing appropriately and confidently. Above all, it is clear from the meeting process that students became much more able to discuss and manage some of the problems that presented themselves in their classroom community.

Through the year the class improved substantially in their ability to manage the meeting process. The evidence suggests that students were better able to cope with reflection and individual responsibility in a community context. There is much less need for teacher intervention in the meeting and this is reflected in the changing relationship between teachers and students in the class. Students' increased competence in relating to others is particularly noticeable in the improved active listening in the community context. The marked decrease in interruptions and improved student awareness during the meeting indicates how the students became more able to interact effectively in this community context.

Students' competence in participating and contributing also showed substantial improvement through the greater reflection in their responses. While the responses in the meetings were short in the final meeting during the first round, in the second – reflecting on what could be improved and the effects this has had – the answers were substantially more thoughtful. This shows the kind of progress that has been made through the year for these students when they reflect on the impact they have on their community. Although this study did not focus on the key competency of using language, symbols and text, there is also clear improvement in this area for many students in the way they express their contributions.

It appears that the use of the meeting process regularly with this class allowed for a more reflective community

Table Three: Longest ten responses from both meetings

1st meeting longest responses	Last meeting longest responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- I'm listening to teachers so I know what to do.- Bringing the right stationery and sitting close to the board.- My uniform, getting to class and doing my work – making sure I'm here, not going out for a drink.- My focus – I get sidetracked when people are talking and I don't do my work.- My moods – I do it everyday – First I'm happy and then I'm angry.- I don't know what's wrong with me, sometimes I want to work and sometimes I don't.- Getting distracted or distracting people – both – being distracted is worst.- Try not to get distracted. Focus on my work, not other people.- Yes same. Try not to get distracted – Listening to the teacher.- Try to focus more and try to get some sleep – listen more to the teacher.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- I think we need to work together more – There's a lot of drama and it's distracted us a lot from our education – it would have been better if we'd handled it in a different way.- Just being consistent with my work. I know I've been getting the work done but I just need to be more consistent with the work – sometimes I get work done and sometimes I slack off a bit. If I be consistent, I'll get in the habit of it – Relievers, I kind of get off track. Yes and I get off track with M.- Lack of concentration like I'm not paying enough attention – it's like boring work, it's not interesting – That will benefit me and that I'll use in the future.- Losing focus and not [trying]. I think I can't do it and I just stop doing it. Not trying the work, not trying it, just leaving it if it looks hard – my attendance – just has – I have to catch up on a lot of work and stuff.- Lack of commitment – to my work, I wasn't committed to get credits – just boring stuff all the time – most of the time it was boring.- Coming to school because I always take it off for golf and I miss out on my credits.- I just want to give advice on people taking tests. If you stay in class and do your work, you'll fly through it straight away. Then Ms won't have to worry about giving you 2nd chances.- Get over 30 credits or you'll be repeating year 11. – It would suck if you repeated Year 11 again. You get more fun time after you've finished. If you're under 30 credits you'll just have to work harder and harder and it'll get really boring.- If you do all of your work you can pass. Be responsible for your actions. – Think about it before you wag. Because then you'll just wag the next period too.- Go to all of your classes. Work to achieve your goals. Make sure nothing prevents you – getting distracted in class (holds you back) – Heaps of other things – wagging, coming to class late and getting sent to ...

of care to develop amongst students in this class. An innate respect for the process is evident. This encapsulates and performs the values of equity, diversity, community and participation, inquiry and respect. The respectfulness of the process – linked with the values underpinning Maori hui – allows for the community to build and to create a class culture. There was also a breakdown of the authoritarian teacher role, from being in charge of what happens in the class, and what is said and discussed, to a more equitable class community.

We believe that the meeting process exemplifies a process for communities to discuss and solve problems, reflect on successes, share ideas, opinions and experiences, to learn from and with others, to breed understanding and ways of managing difference and conflict. The layout of the meeting requires participants to sit face-to-face with no obstacles. For some students this is very difficult when others speak of how their or others' behaviour impacts on them. The circle represents an enclosed community, encouraging students to be an active part of this 'equal' community. The act of the circle also provides support for all members of the group. Even those who have caused problems outside of the circle are encircled in their community. Those students' problems become the community's problems and together the class can work through them. The rounds and their content allow students to express and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, the effects of their actions and what they can do to improve their community for the better. This is crucial to the deeper reflection students made about how their actions impacted on their community. Such work must encourage opportunities for voicing responsibility and opinion (Carr, 2006). The process can match students at their competency levels, offering models, support and high expectations that these competencies will develop further. To reflect back on Hipkins (2006), 'changing participation in a changing world is equivalent to learning' (p61). There is little doubt that the meeting process allowed students to change the quality of their participation.

While much of the literature as well as the practice has focused on the disciplinary or behaviour management aspects of restorative practices, this study explores another facet of the practices and their impacts, namely, restorative practice as pedagogy. When we link the key competencies with this meeting practice we can see that the outcomes lie not only in the competencies of individual students, but that these have effects in the realms of community and relationships. The classroom meetings have worked as an opportunity for the 'performance' of the key competencies, allowing students

to 'do' or 'practise' competency in new and meaningful ways (Gilbert, 2007:5). This suggests they have gained relevant, real-life learning that can potentially be taken and applied in other settings. This is one of the most important attributes that practices underpinned by restorative values can offer schools: the opportunity to perform social responsibility and cohesiveness together. We believe that this study suggests that restorative practice can be a tool for teaching and learning of key competencies while also improving relationships and the learning environment in the classroom.

The findings of this study demonstrate that students had learned or developed substantially in the areas of the key competencies. We believe there is sufficient in the results of this small study to suggest that further investigation is warranted. Obviously, the measures used here leave room for debate on whether participation is well reflected in the behaviours measured. And although it indicates an improvement in class culture and community, this study does not measure the transferability of these skills to everyday interactions of these students and their community outside of the meeting. It is also true that some students would have matured over the year in any case, and some improvements can probably be accounted for by this process. Nevertheless, the students' competencies seemed to improve with each meeting, and those who attended fewer meetings were clearly less competent than those who had been in the meetings each time.

Restorative practices – particularly the class meeting – could help bridge the gap between curriculum and community currently faced by schools. Although many schools have incorporated restorative conferencing into their discipline systems, there is much less consistent implementation of the practices in everyday classrooms. High level conferencing may in fact have little measurable impact on many students' lives as they only concern a small proportion of the school population. The implementation of class meetings in a school could, conversely, impact greatly on students' opportunities to perform, practice and develop particularly the key competencies of participation and contribution and relating to others. The apparently heavy investment of time and professional resources is not only worth the effort: it could become a normal and expected classroom practice. If students have increased competency in relating to others and contributing and participating, the values of the new curriculum will become more of a reality. To achieve this we must provide forums that will allow students to think, practise, develop opinions and, above all, care about these values themselves. Of course

the class meeting is not the only forum where this can occur. Nevertheless, this study has shown that it is possible to create the conditions where such social learning can occur through the use of intentionally shaped and focused class meetings.

Notes

- 1 Care or hospitality for others. This is a fundamental value in Maori culture.
- 2 A practice of 'doing' meetings. Hui is a generic Maori word for meetings which observe values and protocols fundamental to Maori culture.
- 3 The Treaty of Waitangi is widely acknowledged as the founding document of New Zealand as a nation. It is effectively an agreement that Maori, the indigenous people, and the British Crown would become partners in government. This interpretation and the practice is the subject of ongoing debates.
- 4 Mana is another fundamental Maori value, roughly translated as strength, dignity or agency.

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