# Chapter 7 Writing the wrong: Using restorative practices to address student behaviour

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## Key points

- Students' perspectives are vital to understanding their opinions on matters that affect them.
- According to students, restorative practices increased their reflective thinking and pro-social behaviour.
- Students perceived that communication throughout the school community was more effective because of restorative practices.
- Sustaining restorative practices in schools requires a whole-school approach.

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the use of restorative practices (RP) as an effective means to address student misbehaviour. It draws on the findings of a Victorian research study that examined teachers and students' perspectives on the use of RP. The findings suggested that RP increases effective communication in the school and increases students' pro-social skills.

This chapter further presents the need for teachers, school leadership and practitioners to acknowledge and promote the value of ongoing training and professional development. Despite positive findings in this study, the chapter concludes that we need to continue to challenge current thinking and practices to create sustainable change.

#### School-based RP

School-based RP are holistic methods used to build healthy relationships in the school environment. The RP approach seeks to address student behaviour as it occurs, as well as building pro-social skills in students (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, et al., 2008). The RP approach has an underlying philosophy that suggests that when a wrongdoing has occurred, the relationship between those parties involved is damaged. School-based RP developed from restorative justice. Restorative justice is a philosophy and collection of practices used at different stages of the justice system, such as meetings with victims, not just as an alternative to retributive or punitive actions but something done in tandem with traditional processes (Daly, 2002; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, et al., 2008). The history and origins of restorative justice practices has been widely discussed and can be reviewed in various academic papers and books (Daly, 2002; Daly & Immarigeon, 1998; Morrison & Ahmed, 2006; Wachtel, 2012). The aim of RP emphasises a relational approach that seeks to repair the damage caused to the relationship by supporting both the victim and the perpetrator to allow all those involved to heal and move forward (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Zehr & Mika, 1998). In schools, RP require a student to reflect on their behaviour and acknowledge any wrongdoing, and offer them the opportunity to agree on an outcome (Morrison et al., 2005). In addition, the RP approach promotes personal accountability and allows the students an opportunity to have a voice in issues that affect them (Shaw, 2007).

## The current study

The current research, on which this chapter is based, sought to explore the use and perceived impact of RP from the perspectives of students and teachers. Six schools, in Melbourne, Victoria, participated in the research study during October and November 2012. There were three

primary and three secondary schools, including state, Catholic and independent schools. The participants were teachers (one-on-one interviews) and Year 6 and Year 9 students (focus groups). The main purpose of the research was to establish the current use of RP in schools and the perceived impact of using the technique on the school environment, teachers' attitudes and student behaviour. Both teachers and students involved in the research project reported the use of many practices associated with RP, such as restorative circles, affective questions, written reflections, a consistent school policy, and conferencing to manage incidents as they occurred. The various ways of using RP can be considered as being on a continuum (see Figure 7.1).

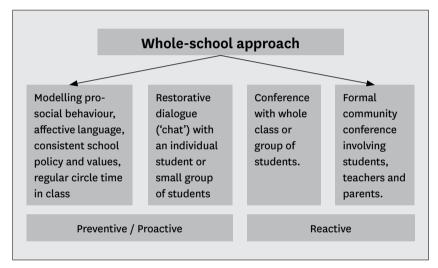


Figure 7.1: The RP Continuum

Source: adapted from Armstrong, 2007; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; and Wachtel, 2012.

The continuum shows both preventive/proactive and reactive approaches to managing student behaviour. In schools that use the various approaches outlined, the approach is described as a "whole-school" approach to RP (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). The whole-school RP approach engages students in formal and informal ways to promote pro-social skills and embraces RP as a philosophy throughout the school environment. The main purpose of the whole-school approach is to prevent future misbehaviour and potential exclusion from the school community.

The preventive/proactive approach to RP (as shown in Figure 7.1)

entails the direct teaching of prosocial skills, modelling those skills to students, the use of affective language, and regular communication, in particular through the use of regular classroom circle time to enhance students' social skills. For the school administration it involves ensuring consistent school policy and procedure that reflect the RP philosophy and values (Armstrong 2007; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Wachtel, 2012).

The reactive approach involves addressing issues as they occur, whether this involves an individual student, a small group of students or a whole class. Similar to the proactive/preventive approach, when reacting to a situation the use of communication and language is an important aspect, used to listen to and understand the student's issues. Any consequence for misbehaviour is dealt with in a restorative manner and is consistent with school policy (Armstrong 2007; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Wachtel, 2012). As described, an important feature of the whole-school approach to RP is the use of effective communication to address issues. not only as they occur (reactively) but as a preventive, proactive measure.

### Preventive/proactive uses of RP

#### Communication

Communication is an important aspect of the RP approach when dealing with student behaviour (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; McCluskey, Lloyd, Stead et al., 2008; Wachtel, 2012). Communication can be used in a reactive manner, such as the use of a verbal conversation or a written letter by the student to reflect on their behaviour; or in a proactive manner, such as through demonstrating or modelling appropriate behaviour or language (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005). Schools in the current research study emphasised the importance of communication to establish expectations, engage students, and build positive relationships. One form of communication in achieving these expectations was verbal communication.

Verbal communication and restorative dialogue in an RP school are achieved through the use of affective language. Affective language involves the teacher and student addressing each other with statements such as, "When you disrupt the classroom I feel disappointed"

(Wachtel, 2012). The consistent use of such language is designed to empower the individual student into reflecting on their behaviour or actions and the impact they have on other students and staff. Similarly, teachers use affective questions when reacting to situations. Questions include (Wachtel, 2012):

- Can you explain what happened?
- How did it happen?
- How did you act in this situation?
- Who do you think has been affected by this?
- How were they affected?
- How were you affected?
- What needs to happen to make things right?
- If the same situation happens again, what could you do differently?

Teachers in the current study reported that they used restorative dialogue to build clear expectations for students in their classrooms and to explain the consequences of not adhering to those expectations. As one female primary school teacher said:

to have our circle and to calm down and say, okay well here, this is the group you're with now and this is the expectations and blah blah blah, was good for them to have that at the beginning of the day so we could set the tone for the day.

The teacher went on to say, "They know the rules, they know what's going to happen".

#### Circle time

Another key component of RP is the use of 'circles' or 'circle time' and formal conferences. These can take either a reactive or a proactive approach. Circle time can involve a small group of students or a whole class of students. When used in a reactive manner, the purpose of circle time is to bring students together with their teacher in a circle to discuss issues, conflicts or problems, or as a means to communicate in a supportive environment (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). When used in a proactive way, this method allows the teacher to establish expectations for the classroom and offers students the opportunity to speak and listen in turn, thereby increasing pro-social skills (Wachtel, 2012). At the

commencement of the school year, individual classroom teachers use a proactive approach by establishing acceptable behaviour with their students. Teachers use this as a way to encourage acceptable behaviour and co-operation. One primary school girl explained: "We have like school norms and then as classes we make—every year at the start of the year we make a list of our classroom norms, of what is important to our class". She continued, "I think it's good because it suits the people that are there, like it's not just a general thing". Another benefit of circle time was that it offers students and their teacher the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas from their own perspective and in their own words.

Circle time and restorative circles were a regular key aspect used by the schools in the current research. Both students and teachers identified several benefits of this approach. Students felt that when teachers used proactive measures such as regular circle time, it built healthy relationships with their peers and allowed issues to be dealt with in a respectful, non-judgemental way.

Yeah, and we'll all go around [in a circle] and talk and then sometimes it was like your feelings and then you go around and say what you're feeling and ... nothing can leave the circle, no one can judge. (Female primary student)

In addition, students identified the importance of circle time to promote self-reflection and empathy for others: "You need to just remember—you need to be considerate of everyone ... you need to be aware everyone has different feelings" (Female secondary student).

Teachers in the current study also identified similar benefits, such as taking turns, listening, sharing, and building empathy, trust and harmony within the safety of the classroom environment. As one female primary school teacher explained:

By the teachers doing regular circle times, I believe it's going to give the children an opportunity to have a voice in their classroom with their teacher listening to them, building trust as well with their teachers. (Female primary teacher)

When restorative circles were used to address issues as they occurred, teachers felt that, on occasions, the students found this confronting. One female secondary teacher described her experience with a student:

I remember having a conversation with her and it was one of many that we'd had—many restorative conversations that we'd had ... I'd pulled her out of the classroom and I started to ask the questions and she just goes, 'Oh, can you please just give me a detention and stop asking me these questions?' She was just like, 'Oh, you're draining my life away!' It was hard work, because she had [to] stop and think about what she was doing and she just sort of thought she'd actually rather just be on detention.

This type of scenario was used by teachers in the current study to address student behaviour by offering the student the opportunity to reflect on behaviour and allowing the student the opportunity to consider how he/she could do things differently. Addressing behaviour using verbal communication was one aspect identified by schools in the current research. Another aspect was through the use of written communication.

# Teachers using affective language to 'write the wrong'

All of the schools in the research study used a consistent and structured method to deal with issues as they occurred. The purpose of this was to build student understanding of what behaviour was expected of them and give teachers confidence in the approach they were using. The methods used were consistent with the RP philosophy and approach and involved using restorative dialogue to address issues. Teachers, particularly in the initial stages of implementation, used "prompting cards" to remind them of the affective questions (described previously). The cards were attached to a lanyard and worn around the teacher's neck. Many teachers saw this as beneficial: "We have all these lanyards also on our duty bags outside. so it's a gentle reminder all the time".

The use of this process had a two-fold benefit, since not only were the teachers using the same language to address the issues as they occurred, but the students also became familiar with the expectations and the need to consider and reflect upon the incident or behaviour at the time of the incident: "I think all teachers should learn restoratives and ... they should have a book, like Mrs 'P' does at the office where she writes everything down" (Female primary student).

When dealing with specific incidents, teachers described how they

wrote down the conversation: "I always write it down, they see me writing it down, I read it and get verbal recognition that that's okay" (Female secondary teacher). Students reported that when their teacher took time to listen to their side of the story and write this down, it gave them confidence that their issues were being understood and dealt with in a positive way:

I could actually trust and tell them and that is Mrs B because I had to talk to her sometimes and she would understand what I was saying. (Male primary student)

I just spoke to Miss T and it just felt like it was just me and her. I could say whatever I wanted to because I knew that she would help. (Female primary student)

The schools in the current study identified the importance of listening and using affective language in various situations, both reactively and proactively. As mentioned, the proactive approach provided students with the skills and language to consider their actions and their impact upon others. When used in a reactive manner, affective questions are used in a dialogue to remind students of the restorative philosophy and values.

#### Students writing the wrong

Another method schools in the current study used was written communication, known as 'reflections', to remind students of the restorative philosophy and values. As one male secondary student explained, "We had to write out what had happened and what we should have done ... A reflection, behaviour reflection." Many of the schools who participated in the research study used written reflections to promote pro-social skills. A reflection was a written version of the affective questions (described previously), which encouraged students to think about their actions and the ways in which they could change their behaviour. Students were required to write down what they could do better and what needs to happen to restore relationships in order for the parties to move forward.

The use of reflection sheets by schools tended to occur following misbehaviour. In secondary school, reflections were used by teachers to gather "both sides of the story" from the students, prior to conducting a restorative conference or "chat". A restorative chat was an informal conversation using the same series of affective questions as described previously. Using the RP approach, students took time to reflect on the issues and write these down so that they could be discussed and then work out an appropriate way to resolve the issues with their teachers.

The students in the current study were able to identify the benefits of writing down their thoughts and reflections. As one male primary school student said, "It's good to make kids reflect on what they did". Both teachers and students did not consider that this was in any way an "easy" option since it challenged thinking:

They do have to reflect more deeply on their behaviour and the consequences of it. (Female secondary teacher)

You just do one before or one right after you do it and then the one the next day, and then you get to see how your attitude's changed a bit. Well, that's what I did ... I just realised that I was in the wrong. (Male secondary student)

In primary school the teachers initially had a restorative conversation or chat with students. They would then send the student home to complete a reflection sheet, which is signed by their parents. As one female primary school teacher explained,

... we also have behaviour sheets which we give to children, if they need to have that, but it's the same sort of restorative thing, so the questions on them are what you would ask them anyway, but it's just, I think, it's a bit more formal because it's written down and their parents have to sign it.

Teachers in the current study felt that it was an important aspect of the RP approach to keep parents informed about their child regarding social and emotional issues as well as academic achievements.

# RP beyond the classroom

Schools in the current study believed that an important aspect of the whole-school approach to RP was engaging parents through written communication about their child and the school community's values. This communication involved the use of notes, emails, letters, newsletters, or students' written reflections that were sent home to parents. As one male secondary student said, "if it happens more than once in a row ... you get a note home".

School staff members in the study who had adopted a whole-school RP approach believed that the most effective way to address student misbehaviour was to involve the broader school community, in particular parents. One male secondary student explained: "Yeah, they can generally call your parents and have a meeting and stuff and work out what you can do to improve". Many teachers felt that involving the parents ensured there was transparency and the students were accountable for their actions.

I think it's good that kids just can't try to get the easy way out of it ... and just not tell anyone else and just cop it from one person, but they have to own up to, and tell their parents that it's happened too, and they've got to show them the facts because their parents have to sign it [the behaviour reflection sheet]. (Female secondary teacher)

In addition to written communication with parents, schools that had a whole-school approach to RP used policies, procedures and guidelines to reflect the restorative philosophy and practice. This maintained a consistent approach across the school community, including students, teachers, school administration, parents and the wider community (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005). The use of a whole-school RP philosophy and approach ensured the whole school community had clear expectations and guidelines to manage behaviour and encourage healthy relationships. One female primary school teacher described how, post-implementation, "We started doing a project to, like, rewrite the school's discipline policy and rein everything right in". The comment made by this teacher highlighted the value of planning and acknowledging the importance of school policies and procedures prior to implementation of RP in order to manage expectations.

# Reactive uses of RP

#### A restorative chat

In addition to the proactive, preventive and planning aspects of RP, reactive approaches were also used to address behaviour and incidents as they occurred. These reactive measures were used in both formal and informal ways. When used in an informal manner, teachers and students in the current study described this as a "restorative chat' or simply a "chat". The idea was for students and teachers to engage in an

informal conversation about a particular situation or misbehaviour as it occurred. Many of the teachers identified that the use of a restorative chat meant that students felt "out of their comfort zone". At times, it appeared that students preferred their teachers to adopt a punitive approach as a consequence. The students' comments suggested that they found the punitive approach less confronting rather than working through the restorative questions, reflecting on their behaviour, and working out what they could do differently.

Despite the challenges identified by teachers and students in addressing issues through restorative conversations, one primary school student saw this as positive: "I think it's a good way to resolve them because it just works". Another student felt regular circle time was "kind of fun ... you sit there and it makes you happy." Teachers felt as long as they followed the "script" using the affective questions when responding to issues, and wrote down what they saw and heard, then the outcome was "really powerful".

#### Restorative conferences

A similar method was used for conferences, either informal (with just the students and teachers) or formal (involving parents or members of the broader school community). The use of conferences by schools was usually in response to a wrongdoing or misbehaviour. In a restorative conference, those involved were brought together in a circle, allowing each person to discuss in turn what had happened and how they had been affected. The culmination of the conference occurs when all parties have agreed on a way forward in order to heal the harm created by the wrongdoing (Wachtel, 2012). In the current study no teacher identified an incident occurring which was severe enough to warrant a formal community conference. This was consistent with prior reports that have found that the use of formal community conferencing in schools tends to be used for a small percentage (between 1 and 5 percent) of the population (Morrison et al., 2005). These findings suggest that the schools in the current study were successfully using preventive/ proactive RP approaches along with restorative dialogue and/or circle time to reduce or minimise escalation of behaviour.

#### Challenges to using the RP approach

The current research study found many positive aspects and benefits of the use of RP in schools. However, there were also challenges. The two main challenges teachers described were a lack of time and resistance from other staff. A lack of time to use RP due to an overcrowded curriculum was the greatest concern expressed by teachers. A female primary school teacher explained:

if you're doing a little bit of restorative and the language then you've lost 30/45 minutes every day and that's a lot when you've only got 25 hours in the week and the Government says you have to do your five hours of maths and your five hours of language and your five ... you know, it doesn't add up. (Female primary teacher)

In contrast, other teachers felt that RP was a way of managing relationships and it was important to spend time to build those relationships and pro-social skills. A male secondary teacher advised:

work on the concept of getting a rapport with students so that you have a working platform to deal with issues ... spending time on friendship issues and issues where relationships had broken .... building resilience and taking responsibility. (Male secondary teacher)

One key purpose of RP is to educate students so that they communicate more effectively and develop the skills to reflect on their own behaviour (Blood, 2005). When RP are adopted as a philosophy within the school environment, they offer students the opportunity to change and create a greater sense of community (Blood, 2005). When change occurs within the school environment, teachers no longer consider time is a barrier. One female secondary teacher described how RP is a philosophy the school has adopted:

Just time and just realising it is an ongoing thing, otherwise it just sort of, yeah, in such a way as another idea, and sort of making it not just a project or a thing but just the way we do things. (Female secondary teacher)

The other major concern expressed was a lack of consistency in how RP was implemented and used. In the current study, the inconsistency was evident within the same school and across different schools due to different approaches adopted by teachers. Teachers identified

a struggle between those who embraced the RP approach at a whole-school level and those who were unable to effectively implement RP in some situations. Those teachers who struggled with the use of RP would tend to resort to punitive discipline approaches. A secondary teacher explained:

When you come across teachers who are resistant to restorative practices, because, you just have a conversation [and] it's all right. They don't understand about sitting there, having eye contact with the person, having that conversation ... It is so much easier to sit in a room for an hour and have a detention. (Secondary teacher)

Teachers suggested that, at times, they struggled to find an appropriate way to use restorative practices, especially regarding school uniform breaches. The teachers spoke of how it appeared pointless or meaningless for the student to 'reflect' on their behaviour when it was only a question of wearing the correct uniform. The comments suggested a lack of understanding of the underlying philosophy of RP, in that the focus should be on building effective, respectful relationships and not just as a means of behaviour management. One secondary school teacher explained:

I don't think we've explored restorative practices in those issues properly as a system, not just a school. Every restorative school would have similar issues like lateness and uniform, and I don't think any of us have really got into depth in how to use restoratives appropriately for those issues.

However, consistent with an RP approach, encouraging students to reflect on why schools may need to have rules requiring that students wear a school uniform may assist students to understand the rationale behind what may seem to them to be trivial rules, and could result in a change in students' behaviour.

# Punitive discipline and the restorative school

Some teachers felt it was important to use a restorative conversation prior to taking any disciplinary action. A female primary school teacher explained:

They're [the detentions] sort of for uniform infringements and—they still exist. They exist within the context of there's always a

conversation first and so on. So we've sort of had to reconcile it—that—you know, element of our practice.

Overall, teachers explained that in the event punitive discipline was necessary, such as a detention or suspension, then it occurred within a restorative context. Teachers used a restorative conference both prior to and/or following the detention or suspension, so that the student was able both to reflect on behaviour and to calm down. Students were offered the opportunity to agree to a "consequence" and then "have a restorative conversation" so they could "think about what they had done". Although teachers acknowledged the use of punitive discipline occurred when "all else fails", they firmly believed that RP was "more confronting than the punitive stuff". All schools mentioned that they used expulsions from school rarely; for example, "I can't think when our last expulsion was".

The use of punitive discipline, even in the restorative school, was still used and some of the schools in the current study suggested that this could, at times, have a place. However, a restorative school ensured the use of any form of punitive discipline was preceded or followed by a restorative conversation. Despite these findings, one interesting comment was made by a secondary teacher, who said, "I got one of the secretaries to bring up all the detention data ... the kids that turn up to detention are repeat offenders. So it's not working".

Her solution to this issue was to change the detention to regular restorative circle time. This teacher recognised that the punitive approach was not working and the solution was an RP approach. For schools adopting a whole-school approach to RP it was vital that their use of sanctions such as detentions and suspension reflected a relational approach. One female secondary teacher described such an approach: "Yeah detention on a Thursday night for things such as lateness and uniform again, but they changed it and called it community service."

Although teachers in restorative schools reacted to situations as they occurred, these situations were used as learning opportunities. Such opportunities enabled students to understand, reflect on and learn from their mistakes, giving them the opportunity to address their behaviour and change. Hence, despite the use of either preventive or reactive approaches, the overall aim was a whole-school philosophy for dealing with issues in a consistent manner in order to increase pro-social skills.

#### Implications for schools adopting RP

Using a whole-school restorative philosophy and practices had obvious benefits for student learning, a key aspect of entry into adult society. The results of this study indicate that students embraced the concept of restorative practices, and although they also found it challenging to reflect on their own behaviour, they recognised that this could have a long-term benefit for them in the future: "like this you can use in your whole life, every life situation, like restorative practices is [a] really helpful thing to use" (Female secondary student).

The comments made by both students and teachers from this study offer a valuable insight into the broad perceived impact of RP; in particular, the ability to reflect on one's own behaviour and consider the long-term benefits of developing pro-social skills. Perhaps as a community we need to support schools by acknowledging that they are educating the next generation of adult citizens, and therefore making time for restorative practices is important to ensure we have responsible, well-adjusted adults in future years. As a result, this may then place pressure on education systems to adjust their own expectations, thereby allowing schools the resources and time they need to adopt the use of restorative practices.

For school leadership teams, despite the initial challenges of addressing difficult behaviour, there was also a need to address and challenge the perceptions, and concerns, of teachers when implementing a whole-school philosophy and approach such as RP. It would appear that despite growing recognition of the value of using social and emotional learning approaches such as RP, there is still work to be done to ensure the education system can support schools adopting such approaches. The current issues identified, such as a lack of time and an overcrowded curriculum, highlighted teacher concerns when adopting the restorative philosophy and practices approach. Yet it seemed that with adequate professional development other teachers can overcome these challenges. In order for schools to successfully implement and sustain such programmes, policy makers need to be aware of the demands placed on teachers. There needs to be support provided to teachers through additional training and professional development days.

Finally, one female primary school teacher summed up the value of using the restorative philosophy and practices approach:

you know, parents drop their children here and six hours later they pick them up. They need to know in that timeframe you're doing the best job and that doesn't just mean educating them, it means making them a well-rounded child.

#### Conclusion

The use of RP has shown positive results in managing student misbehaviour and reducing punitive disciplinary measure in schools in New Zealand, Scotland and Australia (Drewery, 2007; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; McCluskey, Lloyd, Stead et al., 2008; Shaw, 2007). This research indicates that the use of RP allowed students to become more aware of their own behaviour and the impact their behaviour had on others. It has further been suggested that this reduces the need for the student to be removed from the classroom since the classroom environment is calmer (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane et al., 2008). In addition, students tend to feel they are being listened to, which improves the student—teacher relationship, thereby reducing the need for teachers to control and discipline students (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane et al., 2008). However, the implementation and successful use of restorative practices is still dependent upon the individual schools and local authorities to support the approach.

The findings of the current study described here suggest that the use of RP was not only perceived as an effective means of managing student behaviour, but is also a philosophy and approach that builds healthy relationships and increases pro-social skills in students. However, both students and teachers acknowledged that punitive discipline can, at times, be considered the easier option. Despite this, the current study found the use of punitive discipline did not deter or alter student behaviour. As a result, many of the teachers were questioning and reflecting on this situation. That is, how do they address the challenges they face that can hinder broader change within the school environment? It would seem that school leadership and policy makers seeking to implement RP need to consider their use of punitive measures such as detention and suspension in the broader sense. If they choose to continue using punitive discipline approaches, they need to ask, "How will these approaches integrate into the RP framework within their school?" Schools need to consider how they can adapt their current approach to reflect one that is relational and incorporates the use of restorative practices as a part of this process, in a meaningful and problem-solving way.

There is no doubt the schools using RP in the current study reported a perceived positive impact on student thinking and behaviour. The extent to which RP had an effect on teachers is mixed. Similar to students, teachers acknowledged the positive outcomes that RP had on student thinking, behaviour and relationships. However, the main issues teachers described were competing demands for their time and inconsistency in the application of RP.

The issues raised by the teachers in the current study suggest there is a need for policy makers and governments to re-examine the importance of prevention, building pro-social skills, social and emotional learning, and community values. Without the implementation of a broader holistic approach, such as a whole-school RP approach to manage student behaviour, individual teachers, students, school administrators and parents will continue to face challenges. One female primary school teacher summarised the importance of effective behaviour management as follows:

I think it's a no brainer ... I watch the news and I think for goodness' sake, what we need here is a restorative process, they [people] need consequences that are meaningful and ... [consequences that] teach somebody and not put them in prison so they'll come out criminals. (Female primary teacher)

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