
Classroom meetings as a restorative practice: A study of teachers' responses to an extended professional development innovation

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Introduction: Restorative Practices at Midway High School

Midway High is a school that would like to be able to claim itself 'a restorative school', though its journey is just beginning. It is a mid-decile, urban, co-educational New Zealand secondary school of approximately 970 students. The school draws a wide range of students with approximately 40 per cent NZ European, 27 per cent Pasifika, 26 per cent Maori and 7 per cent Asian and other. Maxwell and Buckley (2006) claim that 'in New Zealand, a new wave of change in education is focusing on the relationships among those who make up the school community' (p1). Midway High School is part of that new wave and through its restorative practices is focussing on building relationships and community. The school embarked on a three year restorative practices development in 2009.

Drewery (2007) argues that 'Restorative practice in schools includes a less confrontational approach to discipline and a focus on relational practices earlier in the chain ... Restorative practices lie across the boundaries between discipline and care' (p207). The restorative practices professional development at Midway High School aims to cross the boundary between discipline and care. It is based on the work of The Restorative Practices Development Team (2004) and is underpinned by the Restorative Justice principles outlined by Harney (2005): awareness of impact on others, effectiveness of interpersonal communication, personal accountability, acceptance of ambiguity, separating deed from doer, learning from conflict, and being inclusive. The hope is that in embracing restorative practice at Midway High School, there will be 'a change in the way we think and act when addressing conflict and difference' (Drewery and Winslade, 2005:30).

There is a range of practices schools can adopt in their quest to be restorative. Common practices in this range include some or all of peer mediation, classroom circles to resolve problems, restorative conferencing, restorative chats, reflection room, student leadership training and parent education (Armstrong, 2007). The focus of these practices is working with people to seek resolution of a conflict or difference that has arisen. In New Zealand, 'the new

restorative practices are as diverse as the schools from which they come' (Buckley and Maxwell, 2007:18). Midway High School is incorporating many of these practices in the 'community of care' it is developing. However, the major focus of our efforts is on respectful (and by implication, disrespectful) ways of speaking. Drewery (2004) points out that 'speaking respectfully does not cost much but is not as easy as it sounds' (p339).

The Restorative Practice Professional Development Programme

The school's restorative project has several different aspects, including professional development for teachers who volunteer into the programme, and a strong programme of classroom meetings for both students and their classroom teachers. Midway High School professional development is conducted jointly by the Head of Guidance and the Deputy Principal, and the programme centres on improving how we, particularly as teachers, speak. These 'ways of speaking' are influenced by the social constructionist idea that

...language is productive; we bring conditions such as depression and dyslexia into being, largely by a long and complex historical process of naming. Just as importantly, we bring identities and relationships into being by the ways we speak. Not only what we say, but how we say it, have consequences for the kind of relationship, and the kind of identity, that is called into being. Thus it is important to look carefully at how teachers speak, in the classroom and elsewhere, not only for the purposes of discipline, but also for the purpose of good teaching and learning. We summarise this point in the phrase,

'What we say matters' (Drewery and Kecskemeti, 2010:110).

Teachers are given release time for eight professional learning periods in the year. Training is given in various questioning techniques to improve understanding in a situation of difference: these techniques include the use of curious questions, de-constructive questions, avoiding totalising language and using externalising language where the issue or problem being addressed is viewed as external to the person (White, 1991). This training is devised by the Head of Guidance, who is trained in narrative therapy, and the Deputy Principal. Many of the skills taught have been developed using a theoretical underpinning that is shared with narrative therapy (see Drewery,

2005). Narrative therapy ideas have also been adapted for the classroom meeting process (Kecskemeti, 2010) to explore the multiple meanings of classroom interactions.

Teachers are encouraged to take a 'not knowing' stance (Anderson and Goolishian, 1992) into their interactions. This conversational mode is widely used in narrative therapy and requires the development of genuine (respectful) curiosity. Respectful curiosity is about finding out what is going on, whilst recognising that our own assumptions may not always be correct (Drewery and Kecskemeti, 2010).

Participants in the professional development programme are expected to make use of deconstructive questioning in the restorative conversations they have at Midway High School. These conversations can occur at various levels throughout the school: in the classroom, by teachers in one to one chats, by Deans and senior leadership in mini-chats and small groups, or the full restorative conference when/ if required. Participants are reminded that 'meaning is always contestable' (Burr, 1995:41) and that restorative practice requires a commitment to dialogue and respect for difference (Drewery, 2004). Participants in the professional development are encouraged to see the relevance of the skills being taught for respectful dialogue, accepting diversity of opinion/views, voicing issues, and finding collaborative (re-)solutions.

The High School chose to focus specifically on classroom meetings as the most potentially far-reaching restorative practice for staff and students to become competent in these 'ways of speaking'. Moss and Wilson (1998) found class meetings useful in trying to solve problems in relationships between pupils in classes but in this study we wanted to learn whether teachers found them useful in solving problems in the teacher-student relationship, and whether they can help build and/or enhance this relationship.

The Midway High School Class Meeting Process

The process developed at Midway has many characteristics common to other types of circle use, but it has a discursive element which we believe is unique (Kecskemeti, forthcoming). The involvement of the deputy principal has enabled the class meeting process to be further developed to include a disciplinary element based around the key

competencies that are a basis for the New Zealand Curriculum. This process is evolving with feedback from students, teachers, and the professional development groups. One universal characteristic is that the class meeting setting is a circle. The circle has both practical and philosophical applications. It is symbolic of unity, healing and power (Tew, 1998), and it is an ancient form used by many indigenous cultures (Bazemore, 2001). Practically a circle allows all participants to see and hear each other, though Edwards and Mullis (2003) also point out that 'positioning of students and teacher in a circle makes a statement about the power dynamics in a classroom, it signifies equality' (p25). All participants in the circle are part of the process.

In an adaptation of M_ori meeting protocol, the Midway class meeting begins with a reflection or karakia (prayer), and this is followed by a starter activity to build relationships, which is a common component of many circle time examples. The starter activity is designed to get students/ teachers speaking to each other and learning more about the classroom community. Activities to get students mixing their seating arrangements are also encouraged. Nikolite and Doll (2008) suggest that 'strategies that promote highly effective peer interactions can be instrumental in creating a soothing and supportive social environment that makes it possible for students to stay engaged in academic learning' (p103). A soothing and supportive environment can also help facilitate a more reflective class meeting.

The meeting continues with an explanation and examples of what would constitute competence in the five key competencies, namely, participating and contributing, relating to others, thinking, use of language, text and symbols and self management. The curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007) describes these as 'more complex than skills, the competencies draw also on knowledge, attitudes, and values in ways that lead to action. They are not separate or stand-alone. They are the key to learning in every learning area.' The importance of body language and speaking respectfully is highlighted to students. Frey and Davis Doyle (2001) underline the importance of children understanding their body language and Marshall (2001) also points out the importance of students learning to read non-verbal cues. At Midway High School addressing body language and explaining the messages consciously and unconsciously sent with the body has been an important component of the meetings.

Teachers present introduce themselves and explain their role in the process. As rehearsed in the professional development groups, teacher-participants are encouraged to ask curious or deconstructive questions, use externalising language (centre the issue outside the person) and avoid totalising language as appropriate throughout the meeting. Major roles are facilitator, reflector, contributor, observer and participant. The facilitator and reflector roles are pivotal. The facilitator is responsible for setting behavioural expectations, maintaining the structure and flow of the meeting and asking appropriate curious questions throughout. The reflector provides the discursive element of the meeting. This role requires competence in discursive reflection, to unpack the (un-)helpful ideas that are affecting relationships in the classroom.

The body of the meeting consists of four rounds. Each meeting takes one timetabled 55 minute period, and seldom are more than 2 rounds completed in the first meeting. Meetings follow the basic form of a restorative conversation as suggested by The Restorative Practices Development Team (2004):

- Round One: What are the issues affecting teaching/ learning in the classroom?
- Round Two: The effects of the issue are explored.
- Round Three: Examples of when the issue is not a problem are sought (alternative story).
- Round Four: Commitments participants are prepared to make to address the problem.

The meeting should end with feedback; all participants are invited to acknowledge individuals they thought showed competence in any areas of the key competencies (see also Gray and Drewery, this issue).

Data collection method

The professional development was taken up enthusiastically by teachers, and there was very little drop out. In the first year (2009) of professional development 75 class meetings were held. These involved 41 members of the teaching staff and 10 others including teacher aides, relieving teachers, and sometimes, interested visitors. In the second year (2010) 98 class meetings were held. Meetings could be called by students or teachers. At the end of the first year the views of participant teachers were sought on

whether their commitment was seen as beneficial. One on one semi-structured interviews explored teachers' perceptions of the class meetings, including reflections on the process.

Teachers were approached who had participated in more than 4 class meetings with the same class. This criterion reflects our growing understanding that the effects of the meetings may not become apparent until after a significant number of meetings with the same class. There were 41 teachers who had participated in a class meeting in 2009 and of these nine met the criterion of having participated in more than four class meetings. Three of these had not had the meetings with the same class so were excluded and two teachers were unable to participate in the interviews due to end of year pressures. Four teachers agreed to be interviewed for this research. Ethical approval was sought and commitments discussed, including maintaining the anonymity of the teachers, individual students and the school, although all interested parties were advised that identification of the school was possible before their permission was given. Another recognised issue was that the interviewer was in a position of authority in relation to the interviewees. Teachers' views were sought on the process and effectiveness of the class meetings they participated in. Interviews were structured around four questions: the effect of class meetings on the climate of the classroom and the learning climate specifically; the effects of the class meetings on student- teacher relationships; and any effects they had noticed on individual students.

Teachers' perceptions

Overall effects: well-being, skills, reflection

Overall the feedback was extremely positive. A major effect for the teachers was being free to 'have their say'.

I think it was positive because I could stick my hand up and be involved in that process, like as a teacher I could say that teachers prepare and organise the resources, and students could be aware that teaching isn't just the 55 minutes you spend in the classroom; it's a lot wider than that.

I considered my role as much as anything to be a listening role because I needed to know where they were coming from because there was such a huge gap in what I thought a class should be like and how they thought a class should look.

Having other teachers there was very helpful and you could get feedback from what they knew too about certain students or the class, they could be more honest about the whole class.

I'm much more positive, I feel like I am achieving something with them. I found it quite a support, as a first year teacher. I felt perhaps it is just me having problems and it was really good to hear that more experienced teachers were having similar problems and that they also wanted to resolve them.

It helps us cope better with difficult situations. It means we have the means and the support to deal with those situations and you are not just struggling on your own. Teaching in secondary schools, most schools is very isolating.

Participating teachers reported an improved sense of wellbeing, with all four teachers stating that class meetings had made the job of teaching the class easier for them in some way. They reported feeling more positive about their class and that the meetings had made them easier to manage. And they had better relationships with their students:

I think it made the class easier for me to manage, I was incredibly stressed, I felt bullied at the beginning of the year as a new teacher and the meetings helped address this. I guess my confidence grew as well and I felt much more capable and able to be me and to teach.

It was good when I admitted that I was feeling bullied and disappointed in their behaviour, they kind of saw me as a real person. I was actually someone who had feelings and I was real to them.

I found the whole process to be positive. The change in the feeling and the class and everything from the start of the year to now is just a complete shift. It certainly became a much more positive, pleasant place to be, I didn't like going to that class prior to having the meetings.

There were a range of skills/learning that participating teachers felt were necessary to make the most of class meetings, including the ability to listen, to be reflective and clear about the issue. Teachers commented on the importance of honesty for teachers and students, and there was an acknowledgement that a bit of bravery was required and a preparedness to hear the negatives and take them on board. Knowing what to say was an issue for the teachers involved:

Teachers need to be able to be clear about what it is that is bothering them; they need to be able to use the right language.

You need to learn to be able to use 'I' statements better and talk initially about the issue and not the people.

I liked the fact that it makes me reflect too, and really, really think.

The meeting process

Teachers indicated that frequency of meetings was beneficial and continued follow up was important.

The other thing I think is good is that as we've had more meetings you've actually asked them about their learning and that's become more of a focus once we got past the initial behavioural stuff, that thinking is good.

The roles in the meeting appear to be significant, particularly the role of the facilitator, who takes charge of the meeting and setting out expectations, including making everyone aware of their space, of the rules and what's going to happen. The reflector role requires making notes and the ability to use de-constructive questions to unpack the often unhelpful ideas highlighted in the meeting.

The use of clarifying questions ... I think are really good because they make the kids think about what they say; when they say but it's boring and you ask them to clarify, to get to the nub of what it's about.

There was acknowledgement of the importance of the pre meeting and debrief so that the issue to be discussed was identified and participating teachers could identify what they were going to practise and what role they would take. There was advice for other teachers: to be reflective, practise reflecting as it was considered important, as was getting feedback for yourself:

If you are going to go to a class meeting, especially if it requires you having to give up some of your free time or it requires someone having to relieve for you then you need to have thought about those things, why am I there and what am I contributing, what do I hope to get out of it.

Outcomes for students

All four teachers noticed an improvement in student awareness of their own behaviour and the impact and effect they have on themselves and on other people.

Students were more considerate, there was a more caring nature displayed towards other students and towards myself, as the teacher.

There are always the kids that push the boundaries a bit, but I think overall they started to think a bit more.

The meetings made them think about what it is to be at school, about learning.

Teachers commented variously on improvements, in the quality of work produced, greater output of work, more students asking questions and students that hadn't really performed well starting to revise properly, some doing their homework:

Students started producing a lot more work than what they had been at the start. It was hard to get them to do a page of writing, even if they weren't writing for the whole lesson, it was just really hard.

If I say that I need a sentence they will actually give me a sentence and I think that the class meetings have really helped that because it has meant that they have had to think about and formulate a sentence.

I think that the kids who wanted to learn really appreciated the affirmation and the fact that they were going to be allowed to learn. It became much easier to engage them, to get and maintain their attention, to be able to talk about what they're learning and why, (for some poor learning behaviours are so embedded it would take a long time to change).

Students can vocalise more as they become more comfortable with the meeting structure. When I think about the first meeting we had with the students a bit uncomfortable, compared to the last meeting where students were very comfortable, they volunteered and one student even had quite sophisticated language.

Improved learning environment

The respondents all noted that the learning environment had improved in some way in their classroom with comments that it was more relaxing to teach in and students came to class a bit more relaxed following a meeting. Class meetings were attributed

with attitude enhancement and calming students down:

There was a better attitude shown to the lesson, for most students not necessarily for all, students were getting on with work.

They [students] have definitely improved and there have been less issues arising and if there has been something that has come up then we've been able to talk about it much better.

You know to me that was one of the most positive things to come out of it, the kids in general were more polite and so I could be more polite. They still had their bad days because they're teenagers and you know we still did have some difficult times but the improvement could be seen.

Individual student improvements

All teachers noted individuals who had been affected by the class meetings and commented on the increased awareness of the impact of their actions, body language and inappropriate behaviour. Marshall (2001) believes that there are increasing numbers of students without a sense of cause and effect and consequences of their actions. Feedback from these teachers highlights the class meeting as effective in encouraging young people to think of the consequences of their actions.

X: in his awareness of himself, at the beginning of the year he was right in my face but at the end of the year he has that respectful distance, he's not arms and legs everywhere, he's even very helpful (not something that entered his head early in the year).

Y: I had quite a few issues with him and he has calmed down in the class. We still have the odd sort of run in but it's not as often. He is starting to take on more of a leading role and will help me and others. It is such a change and he is starting to think about the effect of his behaviour. He will go to do something, will stop, all I have to do is look at him. His comments to other students have slowed.

Z: his behaviour and our relationship underwent a huge change. He was suddenly focussed, interested, quiet, and he took some responsibility for things and separated himself from the people who he knew annoyed him and so on. Via a third person I heard that telling how I felt had impacted him, he thought 'oh, I've been part of that.'

Conflicting ideas of discipline and care

Teachers perceived that some students had an ambiguity towards class meetings and some students did not/ would not engage:

The whole restorative process for the students, they see it as a kind of, not a punishment but they know it's a disciplinary sort of thing for them; it is 'Oh no not another restorative meeting', when they see the teachers come, the amount of teachers increases the seriousness for them, they have to take it as quite a serious thing, we want the class to get better and we want it to improve.

Even though if you mentioned class meetings they might groan and get all upset that they were having a class meeting because I think you put them on the spot; I think they would begrudgingly say they have been good for them too.

The kids found it threatening and that's been some of the interesting feedback that I have got in some of the evaluations, a lot of them didn't like the class meetings, and I asked them to tell me why and that it would be really interesting to know... [a teacher said] 'I think deep down it was because I was forced to really think about my behaviours, my attitudes, my learning and that was tough'.

Discussion

Although it is clear that the project has not been uniformly successful in all its aspects, and in spite of the fact that the evidence of four teachers from a staff of seventy is not a huge sample, we believe that there is enough evidence offered here to suggest that the project is achieving many of the goals of what might be termed a 'restorative classroom practice'.

The participating teachers felt that class meeting participation had improved their relationships with their students and felt that the atmosphere in the classroom was calmer, more relaxed/ relaxing. Cavanagh (2010) claims that 'students want a safe, well-managed learning environment' (p56) and these teachers certainly found that the class meetings could help them provide this as the class meetings seemed to make classroom management easier. There is some evidence of respectful relationships developing with one teacher reporting that 'I can still get grumpy but they're ok about it.' Students want to have positive relationships with teachers and this was a feeling shared by the teachers interviewed for this study.

Enhanced collegiality appears to be a major benefit for teachers participating in the class meetings. Respondents commented on the positives of collegial support, having a number of teachers at the meetings, sharing experiences. Lew (2002) points out that 'knowing that we are not alone in life and being in connection with other human beings are vital to emotional wellbeing' (p136). Both new and experienced teachers appreciated being supported by their colleagues and benefitted from the realisation they are not alone. This study highlights the importance of supporting first year teachers who often do not know how to deal with the behavioural/relational issues they are confronted with in their classes. Both first year teachers in the study attributed their reduced stress levels to their acknowledging how they felt in their class meetings.

The teachers also perceived that the class meetings had a beneficial effect on the quality and output of students' work, noticing more student participation in asking questions, revising properly and homework completion. Class meetings seemed to have a calming effect within the class. This effect appears to be generalised throughout the school, but at the time of writing we do not have data to check this impression. Roffey (2007) suggests that 'respect appears to thrive throughout systems when it is demonstrated within interactions that empower people to participate and enable them to feel more positive about themselves and about others' (p10). The Midway class meetings seem to empower and encourage positive participation.

The relationship between discipline and care is brought into focus by the meeting process. One teacher noted that some students viewed the meetings solely as a disciplinary process, leading to reluctant participation. Buckley and Maxwell (2007) point out that 'if approached solely as a behaviour management tool then restorative practices... not only runs the risk of being identified as another form of punishment, but also of having its greater impact and implications being ignored' (p18). On the other hand, for the teachers, behaviour management may have been an initial motivator but it did not remain the sole focus. One respondent noted that a focus on learning rather than behaviour has developed as the process has been refined.

The combined facilitation by the guidance counsellor, who is responsible for the personal well-being of students, and the deputy principal, who is in charge of

discipline in the school, is a powerful one. Each brings with them the depth of professional maturity required to achieve their position in the school. Each also has a strong understanding of the underlying theory of de-construction, and constructionist theory. Teacher respondents felt the ability to listen, to be reflective and clear about the issue were vital for a successful class meeting. They also recognised the need for more teachers to be up-skilled enough to take on facilitation and reflecting roles. There was an acknowledgement that some of the learning, particularly discursive reflection and de-constructive questioning, were not easily acquired, and that this capacity needs to be developed for both students and staff.

Nevertheless, we believe there is enough in these results to suggest that the possibilities of this approach warrant further study. '**... human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make changes to their behaviour when those in positions of authority do things with them rather than to them**' (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2007:1). The teachers in this research all chose to work 'with' their classes rather than 'to' them in addressing the issues affecting teaching and learning. The result was that students were more cooperative and productive (long term for some), and their teachers were happier and more empowered in the classroom. Certainly there is work to be done to develop the process of the meetings so that they can be better understood and sustained over time. We recognise the courage and support of the school leadership, students, and teachers whose willingness to participate in and contribute to developing and refining the distinctive Midway High School class meeting process demonstrates their faith in the restorative philosophy, which aims to give every student a chance to learn.

The professional development project at Midway High School represents a considerable commitment in time, resources, and energy from a significant proportion of the staff. It could not have happened without the support of the Principal and senior management. It was initiated by 'Innovations' funding from the Ministry of Education, though this funding was discontinued after the first year. Features that would count as innovative in the project include the expectation of reflection on the part of both staff and students, in the presence of one another. We believe the process is unique in its explicit mix of discipline and therapeutic or group processes, combined with the use of de-constructive questioning and reflection.

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