

## **SCHOOL ATTACHMENT THEORY AND RESTITUTION PROCESSES: PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS IN MIDDLE YEARS SCHOOLS**

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This paper presents the findings of a case study that examined school attachment and restitution strategies used in a middle years school to determine if the program had provided a viable means of promoting and sustaining positive behaviors among middle years students. Data were gathered by interviewing five teachers who had Restitution I training and five students who had multiple discipline referrals to the office, and by examining school-wide discipline referral documentation. Students and teachers agreed that positive student–teacher relationships and developing a warm, safe, caring classroom and school environment were instrumental in creating the conditions for students to redress their actions and in attaching students to their school community. Involvement in extra-curricular activities, meeting friends, feeder school visits, the availability of food, and having fun were other factors cited as increasing students’ connection and sense of belonging. Collaboration with colleagues, support from administration, speaking the same restitution language, goal setting, parental support, and having a compassionate approach were seen as factors supporting the implementation of restitution, whereas lack of time, not having all staff embrace the philosophies and practices of restitution, teachers who were unwilling to share negative experiences, and students who were hardened from a multitude of poor life experiences and bad choices were seen as hindrances to the restitution process.

### **Background**

The move from an elementary school to a middle years school is a difficult transition which marks an important milestone for the majority of adolescents (Farrell, Sullivan, Esposito, Meyer, & Valois, 2005; Kearney, 2006; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003). Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan (1996), cited in Patton, Glover, Bond, Butler, Godfrey, Di Pietro, and Gowes (2000),

argue that the transition from elementary school to a middle years school brings with it a loss of continuity in relationships and changes in curriculum and teaching styles, as well as adaptation to a new school. In addition, adolescence is a stressful time for many youth as it represents a period of growth and change emotionally, physically, intellectually, and socially (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005). The onset of drug use, aggression, and delinquency often begins in early adolescence which increases the difficulty of this transition (Fagon & Pabon, 1990; Farrell et al., 2005). To make matters more complex, although adolescents in every socio-economic level struggle with antisocial behaviors, researchers have found that adolescents in disadvantaged communities are at a higher risk for delinquent and antisocial behaviors in schools (Gonzales, Dumka, Deardoff, Carter, & McCray, 2004; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2006).

As a result, educators sometimes notice growth in problem behaviors when students enter middle years as struggling adolescents. If student misbehaviors constantly disrupt the learning process, the goal of student learning is thwarted not only for the disruptive students but for other students in the classroom. Therefore, multiple initiatives with various levels of intervention are needed in middle years schools (McCurdy, Kunsch, & Reibstein, 2007) to help educational leaders support these youth in ways which do not pathologize them, but facilitate and enhance positive social skill development and engagement of students in the learning process.

School attachment and restitution are two concepts that provide a positive framework for studying behavior management in middle years schools that avoids the pathologizing tendencies of punishment and consequence forms of school discipline. Students who develop positive relationships with school personnel and who are connected to school feel a sense of belonging within the school community (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001) which helps to decrease poor behavior choices. Restitution is a possible framework for positive change that creates the

conditions and opportunities for students to redress their actions and return them to class strengthened (Chelsom-Gossen, 1996). Further, restitution has the potential to be a pivotal strategy for building positive student–teacher relationships. In this way, restitution provides a positive and affirming approach to dealing with student misbehaviors and fostering student attachment to school. The following section further develops this conceptual framework.

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### *School Attachment*

Zwarych (2004) defines school attachment as the feeling of student ownership, bonding, and connectedness associated with the school and prominent figures in the school. It is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others at school (Johnson et al., 2001; Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, 2007). Research suggests that student attachment is fostered when students' school experiences are characterized by: (a) nurturing relationships with teachers and other school personnel (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006; Cavanagh, 2009; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004; Pfaller & Kiselica, 1996; Stipek, 2006); (b) the development of inclusive classroom environments that allow for differentiated learning (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Matsumura, Slater, & Crosson, 2008; Shochet et al., 2007; Zwarych, 2004); (c) involvement in extra-curricular school activities (Shochet et al., 2007; Zwarych, 2004); and, (d) the development of a positive, safe, and caring school (Heydenberk & Heyenberk, 2007; Shaw, 2007; Shochet et al., 2007; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). However, Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) argue,

If one looks at the structure of a traditional large urban school, one sees that intimate primary relationships have been supplanted by an impersonal bureaucracy. Students and teachers do not relate to one another as whole persons, but in narrow circumscribed roles. Communication is restricted to what one can

and must do in a 50-minute hour where a highly structured setting is a sanction against all but teacher-directed behavior. (p. 13)

It is therefore imperative that educators examine how the structure of schooling itself facilitates or hinders the development of student attachment to school.

Students who are attached to school tend to demonstrate positive behavior (Erwin, 2003; Shochet et al., 2007), improved academic standing (Johnson et al., 2001; Shochet et al., 2007), greater participation and retention in schooling (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Reio, Marcus, & Sanders-Reio, 2009; Shochet et al., 2007), and increased self-esteem (Reddy et al., 2003; Shochet et al., 2007). Ultimately, school attachment has to do with a sense of belonging, membership, and engagement within a school environment (Johnson et al., 2001). School personnel recognize that many of the behavioral problems that require a great deal of time and energy emanate from attachment issues (Parker & Forrest, 1993). Therefore, school personnel can, and should, provide students with many opportunities to develop positive, supportive adult relationships (Ziesemer, Marcoux, & Manvell, 1994) that allow for sustained contact between students and teachers (Stipek, 2006).

### *Restitution*

The philosophy of restitution was developed by Diane Chelsom Gossen (1996) who argues that the discipline model used by most schools focuses on the misdemeanor and punishment rather than on helping the child learn a better way to be (Cavanagh, 2009; Hopkins, 2002). As Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) state,

The saga of discipline in Western civilization is a litany of futile attempts to compel the young person to obedient behavior. The consistent strategy has been to control all deviations by punishing or excluding those who violate the rules. For centuries, schools have used elaborate codes of regulations to attempt to instill

compliant behavior. However, students have been highly resourceful in circumventing these rigid rules. (p. 30)

Cavanagh (2009) argues that traditional discipline systems fail to teach students how to resolve conflicts nonviolently and to repair the harm to relationships resulting from wrongdoing. In this way, schools have typically been reactive rather than proactive in dealing with student misbehaviors and strategies are often ineffective (Hemphill, McMorris, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, Catalano, & Mathers, 2007; Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007).

The philosophy underpinning restitution can be found within Aboriginal teachings (Brendtro et al., 1990; Ross, 1996) and western Reality Therapy (Erwin, 2003). Both complementary sets of ideas value independent thinking and self-discipline, encourage a focus on internal motivation rather than external motivation, and focus on solutions rather than problems.

Restitution is a three step process which includes: 1) stabilizing students' identity, 2) validating the need behind the behavior, and 3) seeking the belief that needs to be upheld (Gossen, 2004). In the first step, letting students know that it is okay to make a mistake and that they are not the only ones who make mistakes helps move them from a failure identity where they choose between fight or flight (acting out or withdrawal), to a success identity where they feel empowered to move ahead and redress their actions (Erwin, 2003; Gossen, 2004). This validation helps move students into a positive frame of mind where they are receptive to finding solutions to fix their mistakes. Students must learn that it is acceptable to make a mistake while sorting out their relationships with others.

In the second step, students are encouraged to find the need behind their behavior. A tenet of Reality Therapy is that all behavior is purposeful to meet one or more of one's basic needs: 1) survival, 2) love and belonging, 3) personal power and worth, 4) freedom of choice and

movement, and 5) fun, creativity, and laughter (Gossen, 2005). The idea is to validate the need that is driving the misbehavior, then to help the student find a positive way to have that need met.

In the third step, educators help students understand beliefs behind the rules/expectations. For example, a teacher might say, “We don’t call each other names because we as a class believe in respect,” or, “We don’t run in the hallways because we believe in safety.” For this to be effective students need to be full participants in establishing classroom expectations and beliefs at the beginning of every school year. According to Gossen (2004), people have more energy and enthusiasm for living by beliefs rather than following rules because beliefs are more internally motivating.

The restitution process holds students accountable for their chosen behavior and encourages them to learn from the experience and make a better choice next time (DeVore & Gentilcore, 1999). When behavior problems are solved for them, students are robbed of the opportunity to learn valuable skills for living in peaceful relationships (Cavanagh, 2009). Instead, restitution is a collaborative process which teaches students to seek solutions to problems, helps them think about what kind of person they want to be, and how they should treat others (Chelsom Gossen, 1996).

Although this move from rules to beliefs is central to the restitution process, it is important to note that schools still need to establish “bottom lines” and uphold them consistently and publicly so that people feel safe (Gossen, 2004). The violation of bottom lines requires administrative attention in order to create a safe learning environment for all. As with any discipline strategy, not all students are ready for restitution, and “if a student has the mind-set not to comply, nothing you do will make them” (Erwin, 2003, p. 20). Students will not always be in

a frame of mind where they will be solution focused, and restitution cannot be coerced. In order to address this concern, Gossen (2004) developed a concept called weaving where teachers move back and forth between being a monitor of behavior and a manager of behavior. In the monitor position one enforces rules and uses consequences, whereas in the manager position the focus is on beliefs and addressing the problem. Educators often have to weave back and forth between these two positions to affect change.

Many schools that have implemented restitution programs report that they have been successful (Minogue, 2006). In addition to noting a decrease in discipline problems (Gossen, 2004), other indicators of success include an increase in attendance, improvement in attitude, learning, and performance (Erwin, 2003), and an increase in high school graduation rate (Minogue, 2006). Educators also benefit from the restitution process; they have reported that they can concentrate on their teaching, they are not working as hard, they are not as exhausted at the end of the day, they feel healthier, and they have greater job satisfaction (Gossen, 2004).

A vision of schools in which the purpose is promoting positive social behaviors and engaging students requires warm, caring school and classroom environments within which students can flourish. Preparing today's students for tomorrow's world requires that educators take a serious look at how discipline is handled with a focus on keeping students in school and preparing them with the skills and knowledge necessary to become positive, contributing members of society.

### **Context: Lakeview Middle Years School**

Lakeview Middle Years School (pseudonym) is a large urban school in a western Canadian city with a multicultural population including youth who are newcomers to Canada.

Approximately fifty percent of the students attending Lakeview Middle Years School live below the poverty line, and approximately half of the students live in single parent families, mostly led by single mothers. Lakeview Middle Years School has a high mobility rate with students arriving and departing throughout the year. The prevalence of gangs, violence, crime, drugs, and alcohol in the community has serious implications for students' life choices. Many middle years students arrive at the school with physical, cognitive, and behavioral disabilities. Despite the fact that programs have been established to meet the needs of a wide diversity of learners, discipline and behavior management continues to be a major concern.

In 2005, Lakeview Middle Years School started implementation of a restitution program, and made school attachment strategies a focus. Implementation of a restitution program started with all staff taking part in Restitution I training. In subsequent years new teachers to the school were given the opportunity to attend Restitution I training as well. Every year following initial implementation, teachers were given the opportunity to share restitution strategies in team and grade meetings, and restitution workshops were organized for school-based professional development days. Students were introduced to restitution strategies at grade assemblies, and parents/guardians were invited to attend an evening meeting where they were introduced to the concepts of restitution. The initial and primary goal of implementing a restitution program at the school was to decrease the number of out-of-school suspensions and to help students make better behavioral choices.

This paper presents the findings of a case study that examined school attachment and restitution strategies used in Lakeview Middle Years School to determine if the five-year old program had provided a viable means of promoting and sustaining positive behaviors among middle years students from the perspectives of teachers and students. Also examined were



factors (organizational, logistical, or personal) that either supported or hindered the implementation and/or use of restitution and/or school attachment strategies in the middle years school environment.

## **Methods**

This study utilized a qualitative methodology based upon a case study method during the 2010/2011 school year. Purposive sampling was used in order to access participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers who had received Restitution I training and who had attempted to implement restitution and school attachment strategies in their classrooms. Also interviewed were five students who had learned about restitution strategies upon their arrival at Lakeview Middle Years School and who had ten or more discipline referrals to the office by the end of the 2008/2009 school year. Though the study itself began in the 2009/2010 school year, the data collected spanned a little over the school year given the time to complete university and school division ethics procedures. During the interview process both students and teachers were asked their perceptions of the effectiveness of the restitution program and school attachment strategies in reducing classroom discipline and student misbehaviors. A document analysis was also conducted of discipline referral documents from 2004–2009 in order to determine the rates of referrals, out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, students sent home for the day, detentions, and mediations over time.

Constant comparison of interview data was used to discover emerging themes from the students' and teachers' perspectives. After the data were coded and themes were identified, patterns were drawn between codes. Discipline referral documentation were analyzed using frequencies to compare the number of discipline referrals in a school year (2005–2009), out-of-

school suspensions (2004–2009), in-school suspensions (2005–2009), students sent home for the day (2005–2009), detentions (2005–2009), and mediations (2005–2009) in each successive school year at Lakeview Middle Years School. These data were examined for patterns of development in each of the categories after implementation of the restitution program and making school attachment strategies a focus. The data obtained from document analysis were then scrutinized to see if they verified or supported the data collected from the student and teacher interviews.

## **Findings**

The themes that were generated from the data analysis are detailed in the subsequent sections and organized according to the concepts of student attachment, restitution, and factors that support or hinder both.

### *Student Attachment*

All students and teachers were in agreement that positive student–teacher relationships are crucial in connecting students to their school. This aligns with Ziesemer et al. (1994) who found that schools are places where students should have opportunities to develop positive, supportive adult relationships. Both students and teachers identified caring as an important teacher quality which increased students’ sense of belonging. Getting along with teachers and sensing that teachers liked them were important to the student participants. For example, one student stated that school attendance increased because of “the teachers that I like, the classes that I like going to, like I love going to them. . . . I love going to school.” This student went on to say that teachers at school really care and that “they are just very welcoming.” Another student

commented, “it seems like a lot of teachers like me there . . . and want me to stay in school.” A third student responded that the “teacher says that I belong in the class...that she likes me in the class.” Teachers who genuinely cared for them helped increase their connection to the school community.

All teachers agreed that taking the time to build relationships with students helped students feel that they belonged to the school community. One teacher argued, “I think you have to be intentional about building relationships. I don’t think it happens because you’re in the same room with kids. I think it has to be intentional.” A second teacher said that, in order to build those relationships, “show students that you are willing to give up your time to be there for them and they’ll in a snap of a finger open up to you in a second.” A third teacher stated simply, “kids are smart. They know if you care.” Strong student–teacher relationships were seen as a crucial component in making students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the classroom and school community.

Students and teachers were unanimous in their responses regarding the crucial role extra-curricular activities play in attaching students to their school community. This points to the importance of providing students with a variety of extra-curricular options in order to be inclusive and to actively engage all students. Some of the activities that the students mentioned included: sports teams, band, art (claymation), school plays, women empowerment groups and sharing circles, the weight room, language classes (Cree, Ojibway, and Tagalog), Aboriginal community groups coming into the school, field trips, and a chess club. One student mentioned the importance of offering a variety of activities where many different students could fit in. This student stated that extra-curricular activities “made people feel welcome because they had somewhere to go because some groups they don’t fit in.” A second student thought that the

school could do better by “putting you into a sport or something like that.” Fagan and Pabon (1990) argue that “the interaction between school-based and nonacademic factors in contributing to school dropout suggests that schools should broaden their role in the lives of students outside the classroom” (p. 340). One of the teachers suggested that “being part of a sport is wearing the uniform . . . and gives them a sense of belonging, and showing them that they are proud to be a part of the school.” Another teacher added, “once kids get involved then you know there is a sense of belonging. Then they are with people getting hooked up with kids with similar interests and getting their peer groups established.” In their view, getting involved in extra-curricular activities helps build student–teacher relationships and gives students a niche where they feel included and feel that they belong.

The availability of food was another school attachment strategy mentioned by both students and teachers. Students and teachers talked about the breakfast and lunch program at the school, as well as the availability of snacks in the classroom. Robertson (1999) found that children born into poverty are less likely to have access to nutritious food, and the Canadian School Board Association (1997) states that food deprivation influences daily concentration and learning. Many students at Lakeview Middle Years School live below the poverty line which makes access to nutrition a large concern. As one teacher commented, “we know when you’re hungry or you’re tired, learning is the last thing you’re going to worry about. Not only that, your brain is not developing properly and that’s compromising your ability to learn along with everything else.” Teachers strongly believed that the breakfast and lunch program, as well as the availability of snacks were a factor in attaching students to school and decreasing behavior problems.

Students and teachers noted having fun as an important school attachment strategy. Students enjoyed going to classes where teachers made learning fun. Nicholas Hobbs, cited in Brendtro et al. (1990), put forth the principle that “each child should know some joy each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow” (p. 84). One of the teachers argued that “. . . kids respond to having fun with people who have the potential to be significant.” This teacher added that “having fun, having a sense of humor I think is bigger than we ever know.” Teachers agreed that laughing together with students and providing activities that were fun was bonding and increased a student’s desire to come to school.

According to all the students, meeting friends at school was a key factor in connecting them to school. When students were asked what made them want to come to school, the first response for all of them was to see their friends and to socialize: “to see my friends,” “my friends make me want to go to school,” “mostly to socialize,” and “my friends . . . I usually walk around with my friends.” These comments speak to the importance of friends in early adolescence for developing a sense of belonging. When asked what more the school could do to make students feel that they belonged, one student commented that it would be nice to have more places in the school where students could “chill” with friends.

Teachers thought that feeder school visits were essential in helping transition students to Lakeview Middle Years School. One teacher talked about the feeder school visits as “. . . an outreach to get more of the younger kids feeling safe coming here” and for them to “. . . meet some of the staff.” Going to feeder schools and showcasing the many programs available at Lakeview Middle Years School was viewed as a way to spark student interest and begin the attachment process.

### *Restitution*

According to students and teachers, restitution was viewed as an effective tool to help students “fix their mistakes” and to help them make better behavioral choices. Students were grateful to be given a second chance, and pointed to mediation as an effective strategy in dealing with conflict situations. For example, one student commented that teachers “. . . give us a second chance, and they’ll help us through it and like talk us through everything.” Another student said, “I felt better because I got a second chance to do something.” One student proudly stated that after having fixed a mistake with a teacher, the teacher “. . . now wants me in class.” Giving students a second chance helped students feel better about themselves and made them want to try to make better choices the next time they were confronted with a similar issue. Fights over boyfriends and a fight in dodgeball were two examples that were cited where mediation had taken place. Two students indicated that after the mediation process they had become friends with the person with whom they had the conflict, suggesting, “we’re really good friends now.”

Teachers agreed that the restitution process was most successful with clearly delineated bottom lines about school beliefs. Bottom lines that were mentioned included “weapons,” “verbally assaulting a student or staff member,” “physical altercations,” “drugs,” “theft,” “vandalism,” and “bullying.” One teacher stated that bottom lines are “those things that you need to send a very clear message that you’re not going to tolerate it whether it’s respect for people’s safety, weapons, or those kinds of things.” They also agreed that restitution posters posted on bulletin boards in all middle years classrooms were a help to teachers in using consistent restitution questions when dealing with students, and promoted the use of a common restitution language. These lines of questioning underscore the importance of helping students reflect on their behavior, guide students in the problem solving process, and figure out the underlying

reasons for their misbehavior. One teacher talked about the importance of coaching students through the restitution process, stating that teachers need to “coach [students] through the first or second experience that they have with it [restitution] to show them how it works . . . because it’s new to them.” All teachers stressed the importance of taking time to talk to students to try to find out what was happening in their lives. One teacher emphasized the importance of “just talking with students and trying to get to the root of the problem, trying to get them to make good decisions.” Another teacher succinctly stated that students “. . . could have no food, they could have been yelled at in the morning, or their friend could be teasing them on Facebook. Anything can make a child act up. You have to figure out what it is.” By understanding the underlying reasons why students misbehave, teachers could often help students “. . . deal with negative situations in their life and to help them work through a problem.”

This study found that developing respectful, trusting student–teacher relationships was a condition that needed to be in place for students to redress their actions. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) state that “trust is an essential ingredient in building effective relationships” (p. 79). Building positive relationships with students lays the foundation upon which students are empowered to take responsibility for their behaviors, knowing that their teachers will still care for them even if they do make mistakes. One teacher commented that if teachers take time to build relationships with students, “you’re going to find tons of other behavior diminished because they start to trust you and they start to realize that this person is there for them rather than always sending them off to somebody else. . . . If they’re going to fix their mistakes and open up to you and say this is the way I can do it, then they need to trust that you are willing to listen.” Another teacher stated that in order for students to feel comfortable about redressing their misbehavior, they have to trust that “. . . the world is not going to end . . .

and that they are not going to be thrown out as a person.” Other factors that helped teachers work with students included being conscious of their tone of voice, having patience and a calm demeanor, ensuring that students were in a calm frame of mind before being spoken to, and the creation of a safe environment.

Teachers stated that more professional development opportunities and resources were needed to keep restitution alive in their school. One teacher said that, “by sharing a little bit about what’s going well we get reaffirmed and it gives us new energy to keep trying . . . and hearing from other people can tell us that they have their ups and downs as well. It doesn’t always have to be their success. It could be something that didn’t work well.” Overall, teachers felt that a small group setting was more conducive to asking questions and sharing both positive and negative experiences with restitution.

#### *Effectiveness of Restitution and School Attachment Practices*

This study found that restitution and school attachment practices provide a strong base upon which students are empowered to make better behavioral choices. According to the students and teachers in this study, restitution and school attachment practices are instrumental in decreasing student misbehaviors. Data collected from discipline referral documents (Table 1 and Table 2) support this finding.



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Table 1

*Suspension Data*

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	<u>04–05</u>	<u>05–06</u>	<u>06–07</u>	<u>07–08</u>	<u>08–09</u>
Out-of-school suspensions	266	201	129	124	92
Days suspended	775	592	378	362	264

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Table 2

*Discipline Referral Data*

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	<u>05–06</u>	<u>06–07</u>	<u>07–08</u>	<u>08–09</u>
Discipline referrals	2096	1912	2074	1653
In-school suspensions	463	578	390	323
Sent home for the day	287	209	204	201
Detentions	232	45	21	12
Mediations	127	163	138	48

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The data in the tables demonstrate that after implementing a restitution program and making school attachment strategies a focus, Lakeview Middle Years School saw a 65% decrease in the number of out-of-school suspensions in four years, and a decrease in the number of students sent home for the day, in-school suspensions, and detentions. This shows a trend away from punishment-based discipline methods.

Data show an initial increase in the number of mediations, suggesting that an effort was made to deal with conflict situations in a respectful way thereby repairing the harm done to relationships. Students talked about having taken part in the mediation process and how that had helped them resolve conflicts with other students. As the number of out-of-school suspensions and in-school-suspensions decreased, the number of mediations decreased as well. These data may support the notion that after a few years of restitution, students started making better behavioral choices thereby decreasing the number of mediations that had to be done.

A note of interest is that, despite a decrease in the number of out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, students sent home for the day, and detentions, the rate of discipline referrals to the office did not decrease until the fourth year of implementation. One possible reason for this could be that there was more teacher engagement as the years progressed with teachers starting to implement restitution in their classrooms. Another possible reason is that teachers who were implementing restitution in their classrooms started feeling more comfortable with the process, thereby increasing the effectiveness of restitution strategies. A final possibility is that students had developed positive relationships with administration and were referred to the office prior to making poor choices.

Students and teachers felt that restitution and school attachment practices were effective in decreasing student misbehaviors because the focus of both is relationship building. Developing positive relationships with students was seen as an important component in connecting students to school as well as being a pre-requisite in dealing with behavior management issues in the classroom and in the school. Teachers felt that with every student relationship that was developed there was an increase in investment on the part of the student. One teacher commented that, throughout the course of the year, “. . . with the use of restitution

the number of offenses will go down because I truly do believe that a large number of kids do buy in to that process. . . . Students are used to just being yelled at and not given a voice so in a restitution setting they are allowed to first of all explore their thought processes and their emotions, and then they are also given the opportunity to fix it.” A second teacher mentioned, “we see effectiveness at times where kids are getting it. They are learning. Their incidence of repeat offending goes down. It is effective, and for some the effectiveness is fairly immediate . . . and for others, you may see it a few years later as kids start to mature.”

According to both teachers and students in this study, restitution is effective in promoting student growth. Teachers and students agreed that restitution practices encouraged students to take responsibility for their actions and helped them come up with a plan to redress them. Students talked about learning from their mistakes and not wanting to repeat the same behavior. One student argued, “it makes you think that you have to make better choices or else you’re doing it a second time and it’s not going to be good . . . it’s trying to make you be better.” Another student who was very positive about the effectiveness of restitution stated, “everyone should have the need to learn from their mistakes. They need to know that they did wrong and learn from it.” This student also stated that restitution was a more effective way of dealing with misbehaviors than punishment, “because I got to realize what I was doing wrong.” Finally, a fourth student, when speaking about the effectiveness of restitution, commented that “sometimes it worked well and sometimes it didn’t.” This same student went on to say that restitution “helped me make better choices.” These comments imply that the restitution process is a learning experience for many students. They may not understand the process the first time around, but over time they begin to understand the connections between their behavior and the need for restitution, and truly want to make better choices. Teacher comments aligned with this idea, as

one suggested, “many students don’t have boundaries. . . . They don’t have social skills. They are completely devoid of a lot of life skills and I think restitution, consequence, accountability, responsibility are maybe the most important life lessons to learn. . . . So I think restitution is a wonderful life skill.” Another commented that using restitution to deal with misbehaviors was effective because “. . . through a bad thing you can teach two to three good lessons and help the kid grow. . . . You are taking negative things in their lives and teaching them positive lessons.” By building relationships and connecting with students, students feel free to take risks in dealing with their misbehaviors without the fear of rejection from significant adults in their lives.

Students and teachers stated that the restitution process was effective because it helped students stay in school. Working with students to help them come up with a plan to redress their actions was seen as more effective than suspending them or sending them home. One student stated that she liked restitution “because you’re still in school instead of staying out of school for quite awhile.” Another student suggested that “for the kids who do care about their education and everything, they want to make up for their mistakes. They don’t want to just get kicked out of school.” Giving students a second chance gave them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, and keeping students in school increased opportunities for making connections and instilled hope for their future.

Restitution was also seen as effective in promoting teacher growth. With restitution, teachers indicated that they learned a better way of dealing with student misbehaviors, thereby decreasing the number of behavior incidents in their classrooms. Teachers believed that the move away from punishment oriented discipline to self discipline was a paradigm shift resulting in teacher learning. One teacher commented that with restitution, “. . . as teachers started to use the language, things were dealt with in a different way. The teacher’s tone and language were

different, the response of the child would be different, and that's one factor I think that might have made fewer kids wind up in the office which is ultimately what you want." Another teacher stated that restitution was effective ". . . because we saw a change in how teachers handled students. We saw a change in teachers' mode of operating. Not for all but for some. And I would say for all to some degree because that's where the accountability came in. We were moving towards a target so if you weren't totally converted you were in the ball game. We are all at different places." Although teachers may be at different places on a continuum of implementation, teachers who actively use restitution saw it as an effective way in decreasing student misbehaviors because teachers were learning a more humane way to work with students which kept their dignity intact. With time, experience, and increased knowledge, teachers indicated that this shift proved to be a better way to engage students in the discipline process.

In this study, students and teachers agreed that restitution and school attachment practices were effective in improving school climate. Building positive student–teacher relationships, engaging students in the discipline process, getting involved in extra-curricular activities, and the availability of food all contributed to creating a warm, welcoming school climate where students felt a tremendous sense of belonging. All these factors helped improve student behavior because school was where they wanted to be. As one teacher commented, "there was a different tone in the building . . . a healthier tone."

According to students and teachers, restitution is not effective with all students. Teachers commented that restitution was ineffective with students who do not take responsibility for their actions. Students echoed that sentiment, stating that restitution was ineffective with "gangsters" and students who do not care about their education. It was clear on the part of both students and teachers that for students who were not ready for the restitution process there had to be a return

to consequences. This is congruent with Gossen's (2004) concept of weaving where teachers constantly weave between monitoring and managing behavior. Teachers felt that they needed to persevere with these students and continue to try to develop relationships with them in the hope that they would eventually be empowered to own their behavior and be willing to redress their actions.

Teachers acknowledged the effectiveness of restitution strategies but indicated that it was often teachers themselves who hindered its efforts. A lack of knowledge, a lack of willingness to give restitution strategies a try, and a lack of willingness to learn from their own mistakes were seen as detrimental to the implementation of restitution in the school. Teachers commented that this kind of attitude made restitution ineffective in individual classrooms.

#### *Factors that Support and Hinder School Attachment and Restitution Practices*

*School attachment.* In this study, teachers identified appropriate programming for students, and staff willingness to participate in extra-curricular activities as factors that supported school attachment strategies. One teacher talked about engaging students in the classroom by saying, "it is how the classroom operates. Are the kids engaged? Are the classrooms a place of hands on? Are they excited about being in the room? Are they doing group things? Are they sitting in rows? Are they sitting, opening up a booklet, working, no interaction, a bit of mass teaching at the front and then that's it? That's when behaviors tend to start." Teachers thought that providing relevant programming and increasing opportunities for extra-curricular involvement helped increase students' desire to come to (and stay in) school, and to make better behavioral choices.

Factors that were seen as hindering school attachment practices included lack of time, low staff morale, and out-of-school suspensions. As with restitution, all teachers agreed that lack of time hindered their participation in school attachment strategies. With increased demands on teacher time related to directives from the government, school initiatives, and differentiating instruction for all students in the classroom, teachers felt that they often lacked time to participate in the various school initiated attachment strategies, or to initiate school attachment practices on their own.

Low staff morale was also seen as a hindrance to school attachment strategies. Staff who did not feel supported by administration felt discouraged about their work. This decreased the time and effort that they put into school attachment practices. When asked what hindered school attachment practices, one teacher responded, “the morale of staff. . . . Staff may feel burnt out just from day to day experiences within the classroom setting, or they may not feel that they are supported by administration. . . . This makes it important to make sure that staff are always at their best. Sometimes that may not be the case, and that truly affects the level of attachment that the kids are going to feel.” Dealing with challenging behaviors day in and day out can be stressful, tiring, and energy draining. Creating a warm, caring, supportive environment within which staff feel free to take risks was seen as a positive way to promote more use of school attachment strategies.

Lastly, teachers indicated that out-of-school suspensions decreased opportunities to connect with students. Although teachers recognized the importance of upholding bottom lines, they agreed that there were situations where keeping students in school with in-school suspensions was a far greater learning experience than having them go home for a few days where they were often left unsupervised. Keeping the connection to school helped to build

student–teacher relationships, and provided opportunities for teachers to continue to dialogue with students about their ways of relating and being with others.

*Restitution.* Collaboration with colleagues, support from administration, speaking the same restitution language, setting goals with students, having parental support, and demonstrating a compassionate, caring approach towards students were all cited by teachers as supporting the implementation of restitution. Teachers were unanimous about the importance of collaborating with colleagues in order to move the restitution agenda forward. One teacher described the need for collegial collaboration as a set of concentric circles, stating, “if you think about concentric circles where the two person team is one circle, the grade team is another circle, and the school team is the third circle, that debriefing and touching up happens in all of those circles at some point so that those connections stay.” Teachers acknowledged that meeting with teaching partners, in grade teams, or student services teams greatly supported the implementation and success of restitution strategies.

Support from administration was another factor in support of the restitution process. One teacher commented that restitution works “. . . best if it comes through the administration, to the leaders, to the team, to the class. . . . It will be most successful if it is coming from the administration. . . . That’s where you’ll find that it has the most impact.” In general, teachers wanted to know that something would be done when students were sent to the office for violating bottom line expectations, and that administration would support teachers when teachers attempted to implement restitution strategies.

Speaking the same restitution language was viewed as supporting the restitution process. One teacher stated, “as we’re learning a new language, if we’re not practicing it, if people aren’t correcting us, if we’re not correcting ourselves we won’t learn that language well. . . . So that’s



how it becomes most effective . . . speaking a common language at all levels.” Teachers agreed that using a common restitution language was essential for providing consistency in their approach to working with students.

Goal setting, either long term goals or short term goals, was seen as a great aid to the implementation of restitution. Having students think about what it was they wanted to achieve either academically or behaviorally, then writing those goals down on paper helped students focus on making better choices. In addition, teachers indicated that parental support was instrumental in helping students redress their actions and supporting them in making better behavioral choices. Hampton, Mumford, and Bond (1998) argue that “of the many problems that plague urban schools, an apparent inability to reap the benefits of parent participation is among the most crucial” (p. 411). Parental involvement and support was seen as having a large impact on improving student behavior.

Finally, restitution strategies were more effective when teachers used a compassionate, caring approach. Neufeld and Mate (2004) suggest that “children learn best when they like their teacher and they think their teacher likes them. The way to children’s minds has always been through their hearts” (p. 173). Ensuring that students know that they will not be rejected even if they make mistakes, empowers them to take responsibility for their behavior and to take risks in coming up with ways to fix those mistakes.

Factors that were seen as hindering the restitution process included lack of time for debriefing, not having all staff embrace restitution practices, teachers’ egos, and getting through to students who were hardened by life experiences. All teachers agreed that lack of time was a great hindrance with the implementation of restitution. As one teacher stated, “I hear teachers talk a lot about time. Having time to debrief . . . and it doesn’t happen without time being

planned for it. It's not incidental." Teachers acknowledged that they often did not have enough time to talk to students about misbehaviors that occurred in the classroom and to help students come up with successful plans for fixing their mistakes.

Teachers agreed that not having all staff make the paradigm shift from punishment to restitution was a great hindrance to restitution implementation, and made it difficult to discipline students with consistency, especially if one's teaching partner was not embracing this philosophy. One teacher reflected that "if you're in a situation where you are doing it as a team and it's not filtering down through the school, you feel the dead weight of that. You feel how hard that is to maintain and continue because the other presses against you. You're always pressing back instead of having everybody being on the same page. . . . It doesn't make it less worth it, but it's harder." Teachers indicated that for school-wide implementation of restitution to be most successful, all staff needed to embrace the philosophies and practices of restitution.

Teachers' lack of confidence in sharing both positive and negative experiences with restitution was seen as hindering the restitution process. Teachers thought that, in order for restitution to be successful, teachers needed to "check their egos at the door" and be willing to talk about strategies that did not work and ask other teachers for input with regards to what he/she could have done differently. This kind of informal sharing in a small group format was seen as being greatly beneficial in helping teachers learn and grow in their use of restitution strategies.

Finally, teachers commented that it was often difficult to reach students who have been hardened by life experiences. One teacher suggested, "chronic offenders seem to be in a place where they've given up hope . . . in life in general. You can tell right away when that student is sitting in the classroom and they just don't care." Another teacher stated, "some kids get it and

some kids don't. . . . If a student is never going to take responsibility for what they did you can retribute them until the cows come home and it's not going to do anything." This teacher added that the effectiveness of restitution was "a matter of readiness, not a matter that restitution does not work." Teachers understood that for students who were not ready for restitution there had to be a return to the use of consequences as a means of ensuring safety for all students in the building.

### **Conclusions**

Teachers are constantly in search of behavior management strategies that are effective in the classroom. Administrators play a crucial role in structuring school discipline within their schools and supporting teachers in the classroom. Implementing a collaborative approach towards discipline amongst educators, along with the implementation of a strong shared vision regarding the importance of restitution, can do much to bring about positive behavior change in students. The results of this study suggest that school attachment strategies and restitution programs have the potential to reduce negative behaviors and bring about long term changes in student behavior.

A school's administrative team can do much to control factors affecting a school's learning and social environment. A few of these factors include meeting students' basic needs (Raine, McIntyre, & Dayle, 2003; Ziesemer et al., 1994), hiring quality staff (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004), continually striving to improve school–community relations (Ahnee-Benham, 2003; Dantley, 2005; Sefa Dei, 2002), providing relevant programming (Ziesemer et al., 1994), and creating a school culture grounded in collaboration and teamwork. These same

factors undergird effective restitution programs and help to foster student attachment which provides a springboard for students to experience positive academic and behavioral outcomes.

Out of the results of this study flow recommendations for teachers and administrators. Firstly, teachers must make relationship building a priority. Connecting with students and letting them know that teachers care about them is pivotal in helping students want to make better behavioral choices and attaching them to the school community. Dooner, Mandzuk, Obendoerfer, Babiuk, Cerqueira-Vassallo, Force, Vermette, and Roy (2010) state, “teachers must foster individualized connections with students as an essential part of establishing and maintaining learning relationships; we all need to feel understood and appreciated” (p. 30). The core finding of this study is reiterated by Cavanagh (2009) who contends, “. . . at the core of what schools are about is relationships . . . you can get the curriculum right, but if the relationships are not right, the school will not succeed” (p. 71).

Secondly, teachers need to create safe, fun, engaging learning environments within their classrooms. Caring about students and making learning relevant are instrumental in engaging students in the learning process. To successfully engage students in the learning process, teachers need to know individual students as learners, then modify teaching practices to address their individual learning needs (Dooner et al., 2010). Along with social and pedagogical authority, teachers need to establish structure and routine, and clearly articulate classroom expectations. Students will flourish within these boundaries knowing that they are free to take risks and that they won't be rejected when mistakes are made. A positive classroom climate is one that promotes emotional safety for all students (Matsumura et al., 2008).

Thirdly, getting involved in extra-curricular activities helps teachers connect with students and build on existing relationships outside the classroom context. Although lack of time

may be a hindrance to getting involved, making the effort to participate in some form of extra-curricular activity has the potential to pay huge dividends down the road in terms of decreasing negative student behaviors.

This research study did not interview administrators and therefore some of our implications and/or recommendations need to be considered with that caveat. However, we believe that the data gathered from students and teachers bring to light implications for administrators which would be helpful in implementing restitution and school attachment practices within school systems. For administrators, it is recommended that a systems-based preventative approach to school discipline be designed. Meeting regularly with administrators in feeder schools, and discussing how behavior management strategies could be consistent between all schools would do much to encourage positive behaviors starting in nursery school. The transition to a middle years school would be made easier if feeder schools used common restitution language, and practices. Encouraging parents/guardians to use restitution strategies at home would provide consistency with regards to how misbehaviors are dealt with at home and at school.

At the school level, administrators should include all stakeholders in professional development opportunities as they relate to school discipline. Implementation of a restitution program will be most successful if all stakeholders have a working knowledge of restitution philosophies and strategies, and are consistent in the ways with which student misbehaviors are dealt. Student services teams need to meet regularly to maintain fluidity and continuity in programming for individual student needs. Restitution programs should be linked to other programs and initiatives within the school. Regular (and critical) analysis of discipline data can

also help improve safety within schools, inform student programming, and inform interventions when needed.

Secondly, administrators must ensure that ongoing professional development opportunities are available and that time is set aside within the school setting to discuss both the pros and cons of restitution strategies in small group settings. In addition, students must be provided with meaningful engagement and learning experiences. Administrators must ensure that programs are relevant not only in the classroom but for extra-curricular activities as well. Engaging students in the learning process is a protection against antisocial behavior (Morrison et al., 2002). Lopez (2003) states that we need educational leaders who have the courage to envision different possibilities for schooling, especially for our most disenfranchised youth and communities.

Thirdly, it is essential for school administrators to hire quality staff who will create a warm, caring, loving environment within which proactive discipline initiatives can have a positive impact on both students and teachers. High quality teachers and staff are key determinants of students' opportunities to be successful (Skrla et al., 2004). Gregory (1995) suggests that young adolescents need guidance and caring adults in their lives. Hiring high quality staff will help ease the transition for students to a middle school environment and help engage students in the educational process including discipline.

In tandem to hiring quality staff comes the need to build strong staff morale which requires educational leaders to value and appreciate all staff members. Teachers are the core resource of any restitution program as they are front and center in the classroom with students when misbehaviors occur. Administrators need to support those teachers and ensure that they build in time for collaborative decision making, team building activities, and developing trusting

relationships. Murphy (2005) argues that educational leaders must learn to lead not from the apex of the organizational pyramid but from a web of interpersonal relationships. High staff morale is key in developing and maintaining a caring, engaging school atmosphere.

Fifthly, all students come to school with basic needs. Administrators must remain cognizant of the fact that some students come to school without their basic needs being met. Ensuring that our schools help meet the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, safety, love, and belonging is not only a message of care, but also a determinant in helping these students succeed at school academically and behaviorally.

Sixthly, administrators should make an effort to connect with students, staff, and parents/guardians in order to increase learning opportunities for students. Strong connections with students, families, and communities can help enhance positive behavioral choices and academic achievement (AhNee-Benham, 2003; Dantley, 2005). Sefa Dei (2002) argues that “parents, communities, and schools have to work in concert to bring about desired changes” (p. 177). By connecting with students and parents/guardians, and by encouraging staff to make these same connections, administrators are building capacity within the school community and the community at large. These connections are crucial in helping students make positive behavioral choices and foster academic achievement.

Finally, patience is a critical leadership characteristic. Positive behavioral change takes considerable time for individuals and a whole school culture. As with all individuals, students are appreciative of being given a second chance. Educational leaders need to let students and teachers know that they will never give up on them. Patience is more than a requirement or a supporting attribute. It is a prerequisite to real change.

Along with the practice-oriented suggestions also stem interesting future research possibilities. Further research on restitution and school attachment practices should include: (a) differential contexts (elementary and high schools; rural, urban, northern, or suburban communities; contexts amenable, or resistant, to change); (b) the relationship between restitution/school attachment and academic achievement; (c) potential differential impacts of these concepts by sex, ethnicity, disability, etc.; and (d) differences in the perceptions of effectiveness by career stage (beginning and/or novice teachers, level of administration, etc.).

In conclusion, the focus that Lakeview Middle Years School has placed on restitution and school attachment strategies has resulted in significant decreases in student misbehaviors. This focus has made Lakeview Middle Years School an increasingly effective school undergoing positive transformational change. If restitution and school attachment practices have been effective in promoting positive behaviors at Lakeview Middle Years School, it is possible that these strategies could work in other school contexts as well.

Teachers and administrators can do much to foster resilience and hope among students, and to increase opportunities to develop academically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). This study found restitution and school attachment practices to be effective in promoting positive behaviors in middle years students. Restructuring school discipline to be proactive rather than reactive in ways that maintain the dignity of youth and foster positive relationships is instrumental in building schools that are institutions of hope and social change.



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