

What is the Receptivity of Teachers and Parents to the Implementation of Restorative Action Practices in the Early Primary Years

By Ann-Rylynn M. Amsing, Phillis Giovani, and Joanne Rempel

It is impossible to ignore the increasing violent and anti-social behaviour among students in modern societies in general. During the 1990's in New Zealand, schools experienced double the rate of suspensions and expulsions (Drewery, 2004). In 1999, The National Crime Prevention of Australia (as cited in Morrison, 2002) identified bullying as a major problem in schools and factor associated with criminal behaviour. In the late 1980's, one elementary school in Chicago reported that fights and put-downs were common among students (Lickona, 1997).

In their attempts to make schools places where all students can learn in safe and caring environments, many educators have supported the implementation of a variety of initiatives. Teachers are frequently asked to effect programs that target classroom discipline and behavioural issues. Some Canadian and American school districts, for example, have adopted zero tolerance discipline policies, which require the suspension or expulsion of students who violate school rules, no matter how minor (Richart, Brooks & Soler, 2003). Others have implemented anti-bullying programs.

The Langley School District, like many others, is looking for creative ways to make schools safe. Believing that the retributive approach to discipline is not the best way to help students deal with conflict, a program known as Restorative Action has been introduced in some intermediate and secondary classrooms. This program incorporates the principles and philosophy of Restorative Justice. At present, however, Restorative Action has not been introduced into the primary grades as a means of teaching younger students social skills such as respect, honesty, and accountability.

We understand that the movement to the use of restorative practices with early primary students may require a philosophical shift by parents, teachers, and school communities. Long standing notions of retributive justice may influence the acceptance and understanding of Restorative Action practices. Moreover, different cultures and religions may address harm and restore relationships in different ways. It is important, therefore, to examine what factors would allow for the successful implementation of Restorative Action. The purpose of this study was to first see what the literature says about early intervention programs and parent and teacher involvement in educational reform. It then examined the receptivity of Langley teachers and parents to the implementation of Restorative Action in the early primary years.

The literature review on early intervention programs provides an understanding of how these programs affect student behaviour. The literature shows that early intervention in elementary school can have greater effect on both educational outcomes and risk behaviours than delayed intervention.¹ Earlier and continued intervention in the

¹ Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin, Hustedt (2005); Flannery, Liao, Powell, Vesterdal, Vazsonyi, Guo, Atha and Embry (2003).

elementary grades can help put children on a positive developmental course. Furthermore, since children spend most of their time with parents, siblings, teachers, and peers, an intervention program has to target the modification of these relationships. “The most convenient way to access a child’s universe of teacher and peer relationships is to work directly in the school and home settings with all children” (Reid & Eddy, 2002, p. 223).

We conclude that intervention programs improve student behaviour and work more effectively when they are implemented in the early primary years with the support of both parents and teachers.

Districts may consider using Restorative Action in various ways such as:

- Explore ways to introduce and support the use of the principles of Restorative Action in the early primary grades
- Consider ways to imbed Restorative Action initiatives into pre-existing early childhood programs such as PALS (Parents as Literacy Supporters) and Ready Set Learn

Our study was guided by three questions:

- **What factors affect parental involvement and participation in early intervention programs?**
- **What factors affect teacher willingness to implement a new program?**
- **Does receptivity to Restorative Action inform its implementation?**

Research Methods

This paper is based on research completed for a graduating paper by the authors (Amsing, Giovani & Rempel, 2006). We conducted our study with parents and teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 2 students at two elementary schools in the Langley School District. A mixed methods approach using quantitative and qualitative data was used to obtain information, as shown in Table 1. Quantitative data, collected through parent and teacher surveys, allowed the authors to gather a lot of information in a short amount of time. Since quantitative research methods would not fully capture the richness and complexity of their research and guiding questions (Hittleman & Simon, 2002) the authors of this study also conducted follow-up interviews with willing parents and teachers. These interviews enabled us to identify whether the participants fully understood and supported the implementation and use of Restorative Action in schools.

Table 1: Breakdown of Data Sources

Study Participants	Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
Parents	Surveys (34 in total)	Interviews (8 in total)
Teachers	Surveys (7 in total)	Interviews (3 in total)

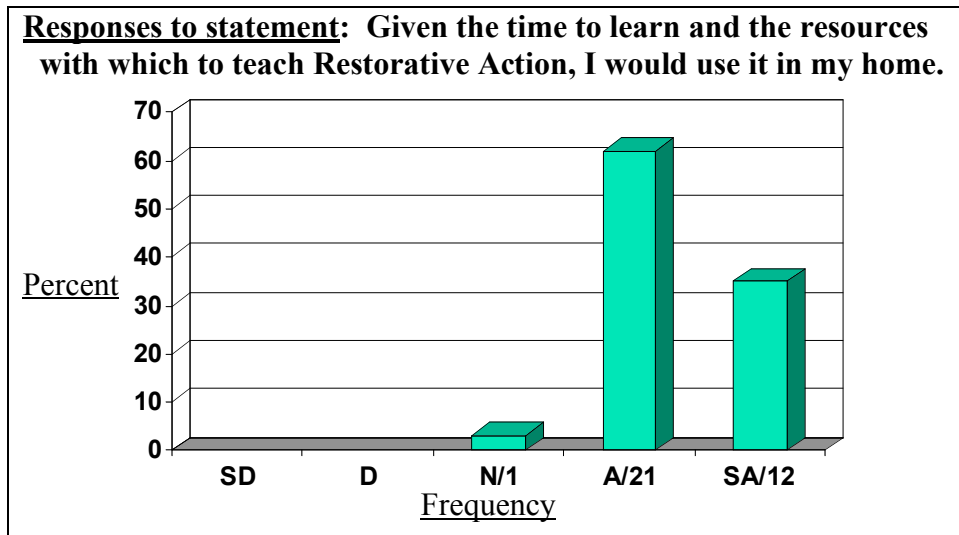
Results, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Although the findings in this study indicate that parent and teacher receptivity to the implementation of Restorative Action in the early primary years is high, factors were identified which we believe must be addressed by the Langley School District to ensure successful implementation.

1. What factors affect parental involvement and participation in early intervention programs?

All parents we surveyed and interviewed overwhelmingly supported their child's school using Restorative Action. Furthermore, a full 97% of them believed that teaching early primary students restorative principles would improve children's behaviour. Moreover, the parents and authors in the literature² and parents participants in this study, identified the need for training in discipline techniques, close communication between home and school, and opportunities to establish parent networks to encourage dialogue in order for parents to support what their children are being taught in school. As shown in Figure 1, 33 out of 34 (97%) of the parents surveyed agreed or agreed strongly that they would use Restorative Action principles in their homes if given the time to learn and the resources with which to teach their children. There were no respondents who said otherwise.

Figure 1: Parental Home Support for Restorative Action



SD: Strongly Disagree D: Disagree N: Neutral A: Agree SA: Strongly Agree

Parent participants also identified conflicting schedules with work and family and a lack of interest on the parts of some parents in the use of restorative principles as barriers to supporting the implementation of Restorative Action. Six of the thirty-four parents (18%) who returned surveys said they would not be interested in attending workshops. Parent interview suggestions to increase involvement in the implementation of a

² Reid & Eddy (2002); Perry, Massey and Armstrong (2002).

Restorative Action program included, “there could be discussions during parent-interviews,” and “a short seminar should be added to PAC meetings.”

We concluded that parents want more detailed information, readily available resources, and the opportunity to dialogue about and be trained in the use of the principles of Restorative Action. The data gathered from the surveys and the comments made during the interviews, however, led us to believe that for some parents having the time to attend workshops may be difficult. Taking into consideration that the literature and the parents interviewed during this study identified that using the principles of Restorative Action may require a philosophical shift that individuals may be reluctant to or cannot make, we understand that some parents may not support the use of Restorative Action in the early primary years.

Recommendations for Langley and Other Districts Regarding Restorative Action and Parents

- In partnership with DPAC and elementary PAC’s, plan and sponsor information meetings and workshops in order to provide parents with opportunities to learn and receive training in Restorative Action
- Hire personnel trained in Restorative Action to develop readily available and easily accessible resources for parents
- Explore ways to enhance communication about Restorative Action initiatives
- Plan training and workshop sessions to fit parent work schedules. To reach those parent who prefer not to attend workshops at their children’s school due to schedule conflicts, expand the present Langley District Internet link to Restorative Action
- Allow time for those trained in Restorative Action to explore ways to reach those stakeholders whose philosophical beliefs about justice may differ

2. What factors affect teacher willingness to implement a new Restorative Action program?

Like parents, teachers were receptive to the implementation of a Restorative Action program with early primary students. All teachers surveyed and interviewed believed that it was important to teach young children the principles of Restorative Action, that restorative practices suit their teaching styles, and that such a program would improve student behaviour. Teacher participants identified several factors that may prevent the implementation of a new program like Restorative Action. These included: lack of time required to learn, plan, implement, and reflect on the reform, teacher buy-in, and resources with which to teach.

Five of the seven teachers surveyed agreed that if given the time to learn and the resources with which to teach Restorative Action, they would implement it into their program. “Ready-made programs,” “visuals for the classroom,” and “teacher manuals” were specific resources mentioned by teacher interviewees. All teacher participants also wanted release time to work in grade groups to plan and implement the principles of

Restorative Action. As the literature review stated, teachers need to be given time to learn, plan, and implement a new initiative (Lee, 2000; Waugh & Godfrey, 1993).

During the interviews, teachers were apprehensive about fitting yet another program into the existing curriculum. They expressed concerns that a Restorative Action program would become another “extra” thing that would take them away from their teaching. We found interview comments to support Ableser’s view (2003) that teachers feel pressured and overwhelmed when new programs are added to already overcrowded schedules.

We conclude that having ready-made resources and release time to learn and to collaborate are required in order for teachers to implement a Restorative Action program. Analysis of the data collected from teacher surveys and interviews led the authors to suggest, however, that asking some teachers to implement another new program, no matter how valuable, would be difficult, given they already feel overwhelmed with curriculum demands. We further believe that teachers may be less receptive to the implementation of Restorative Action in the early primary years if it is perceived to be a top-down decision.

Recommendations for Langley and Other Districts Regarding Restorative Action and Teachers

- Find innovative ways to provide teachers time to learn about Restorative Action and time to collaborate and plan with colleagues for its implementation
- Hire personnel trained in Restorative Action to create lesson plans and visual aides for teachers
- Continue and expand partnership with Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) to help support teachers with implementation of Restorative Action
- Consider embedding Restorative Action initiatives within already existing programs and initiatives (e.g., Social Responsibility Goals)
- Explore ways to introduce and educate Langley teachers and support staff about Restorative Action

3. Does receptivity to Restorative Action inform its implementation?

Waugh and Godfrey (1993) state that studying receptivity to system-wide changes enables educational decision makers to better plan for effective implementation. In this study, parent and teacher survey respondents and interviewees overwhelmingly supported their schools starting to use Restorative Action. Despite their feelings that it was important for early primary children be taught the principles of Restorative Action and that such a program could improve student behaviour, they identified factors that could hinder its successful implementation in school and at home. We conclude that testing the receptivity of Restorative Action practices in the early primary years is a valuable process that gives parents and teachers the opportunity to ask questions and share their knowledge and thoughts on the subject. The information gained during receptivity testing may guide implementation.

Recommendation for Langley and Other School Districts Regarding Receptivity Testing to the Implementation of Restorative Action

- Following District sponsored workshops and seminars, distribute surveys to check the receptivity of parents and teachers to the use and implementation of Restorative Action
- Conduct interviews with willing participants, who complete surveys, to gather greater insight regarding the implementation of Restorative Action

Capstone

As researchers, we believe that, despite its limitations, the implementation of Restorative Action in the early primary years is important as it is one way for students to: feel safe, respected, and cared for in school. As Principal David Piperato states (as cited in Mirsky, 2003), “When students feel good and safe and have solid relationships with teachers, their academic performance improves.” Restorative Action can foster a strong sense of community as well as a strong sense of safety. With parents, teachers and the community working together students may learn life long social skills that will help them respectfully resolve future conflicts with others. Restorative Action, implemented early and over time, may help to make a better society, which is why it is important to persevere with a new “mind set”.

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