

Restorative Practices in Schools

Canberra Restorative Communities Network February 2016 Workshop



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March 23, 2016

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents and analyses findings obtained at the Restorative Communities Network’s February 2016 workshop, *Restorative Practices in Schools.* The report also draws on academic research to assess how restorative practices can be used by schools to respond to discrimination, stigmatizing speech about Islam and other religions, male violence and bullying (including cyber bullying). The report addresses the questions of how restorative practices can be used by schools to build relationships and safety in the classroom, to build a participative school community, and as an alternative to more punitive disciplinary measures used on students such as suspensions.

This report is informed by discussions held with 70 Canberrans representing a variety of sectors across the local community. It is representative of a widespread commitment to and interest in the use of restorative practices. There was balanced representation from the public and private school sectors participating on the day.

Discussions held at the workshop identified widespread support for the use of restorative practices in schools. Attendees overwhelmingly supported the use of restorative practices as an opportunity for schools seeking to reinvent their culture. A number of discussion groups highlighted the importance of schools engaging more effectively with parents and the local community of the child in question. This was seen as an opportunity for schools to develop and continue to build up a relationship of trust which would allow a restorative culture to flourish. Concerns were raised that schools could not use restorative practices to respond to all incidences of student misbehavior in the classroom. These concerns are recognized as valid, with the Network noting that even in a restorative school, some behaviours will necessitate more formal responses.

During the workshop, all discussion groups were asked to respond to a series of questions relating to common issues in schools and how restorative practices might assist creative responses. Attendees identified that there are a number of barriers which would limit a school’s ability to implement restorative practices. These were seen to relate to the school’s environment, culture and values, a need for broader community engagement and a requirement for additional resourcing. A common concern across all discussion groups was that teachers are considered time poor and lower socio-economic schools may not have the resources to allocate to restorative processes. This concern has been acknowledged in the suggested approaches made by this report.

Throughout the workshop, attendees were asked to identify key performance indicators which could be used by schools to identify that their organization had become more restorative. The performance indicators identified have been categorized in accordance to whether or not they are readily measurable by regular data sources appropriate for government use as opposed to if they require further development to be suitable for this purpose. Where possible, data sources have been identified which could be used to track and supply this information. Discussion groups consistently identified that a drop in suspensions and a rise in student attendance could indicate the development of a more restorative school.

Attendees then identified areas which could support schools in the implementation of restorative practices, noting the time poor nature of teachers and the fact that schools may require additional resourcing to successfully become restorative. These strategies were identified as either policy based, relating to the need for schools to pursue enhanced community engagement or the need for additional resources. Attendees supported a community wide adoption of restorative practices in schools, in order to ensure that Canberra’s children and young people are not negatively impacted by a changing school culture as they transition throughout their academic careers.

The report notes the following suggested approaches proposed by the RCN working groups:

1. All schools within the ACT consider how they may best implement restorative practices;
2. All schools should explore how they can introduce, implement and maintain circle times as an ongoing feature of the pastoral care curriculum;
3. All schools should consider how they can further develop a relationship with and engage with their broader community (e.g. the parents of their students)
	1. It is further suggested that schools consider hosting parenting support classes, explore options to provide free access to healthy food choices for vulnerable students and consider providing referrals to community support agencies where required;
4. All schools should explore professional development opportunities which can be provided to staff relating to the best practice models of restorative practice in a school setting.
	1. Once staff receive such training, schools should explore how resources can be allocated to ensure that restorative practices can be easily and effectively incorporated in a classroom setting;
5. All schools should consider how they may engage with students to become leaders in a restorative process.
	1. Schools should consider opportunities to empower young people to engage with and lead a restorative process;
6. The Education and Training Directorate and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate should explore appropriate ways to measure the social return on investment in a restorative school;
7. All schools should consider opportunities to share knowledge and participate in a professional learning community in order to develop the capacity of students and staff as restorative practitioners.

Further discussion and analysis of these suggested approaches is detailed throughout this report. Not all of the suggested actions can occur in the immediate term and the successful implementation of restorative practices across all Canberra schools is a long term goal.

# BACKGROUND

The Canberra Restorative Communities Network (the Network) is a community of restorative practice advocates and leaders that, as part of an international learning community, reinforces Canberra’s status as a global leader in restorative practice development. The Network unites existing and emerging restorative practice leaders who have the enthusiasm and capacity to create a shared community of practice in the Greater Canberra Region.

Supported by the ACT Government and the Australian National University’s Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet), the Network meets regularly to share knowledge, ideas and insights in order to support Network members to solve problems restoratively across a diverse range of areas across the Canberra community. Experience in the use of restorative practices is not required to participate in Network events. Network members are characterised by their passion for the philosophy underpinning restorative practice and their strong interest in supporting Canberra’s future as a Restorative City.

In 2016, the Network is supporting a ministerial priority of ACT Attorney General, Simon Corbell MLA, the proposed declaration of Canberra as a Restorative City. The Network understands that in order for such a declaration to be made, ‘persons and organizations within the community will need to commit to practices which promote, build and enable respectful and inclusive relationships where individuals are aware of and understand the principles of restorative justice’ in their professional and personal endeavours.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To support the proposed declaration, the Network will host a series of three community-based workshops throughout the first half of 2016. These workshops are designed to identify strategies which have been effective, as well as opportunities for improvement, in the successful implementation of restorative practices across Canberra’s education, health and disability sectors. Workshop discussion questions will be developed through consultation with members of the Canberra community with experience and insights from working in or being involved with each of the relevant sectors. After each workshop has been completed, a report will be circulated to stakeholders of the Network.

# WORKSHOP 1: RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

The Network’s first workshop of the year, *Restorative Practices in Schools,* was held at the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre on Thursday 18 February 2016. The workshop commenced with presentations made by three guest speakers. Mr. Charles Morrice (Principal of the Namadgi School) drew upon his 20 years of experience with restorative practice in the education sector, and discussed the successes and challenges he had faced whilst seeking to implement restorative practices in a mainstream schooling environment. Ms Deirdre Brown (Principal of the Galilee School) discussed the experience of Galilee School which utilises restorative practices as a way of supporting young people with high and complex needs. Ms Rhian Williams (Restorative Practitioner) was the final speaker engaged by the Network to present at the workshop. Ms Williams drew upon her experiences working with young people to discuss the challenges she had faced while seeking to empower young people to act as youth mediators in the community sector. The presentations provided valuable insights to support members of the Network with varying levels of involvement in the education sector to participate in discussion groups throughout the workshop.

Of the 70 people who attended the workshop, six were Champions of the Network. Network champions are ambassadors for restorative practice in the Canberra community. There was balanced representation from the public and private school sectors, as representatives of schools accounted for 21% of the workshop’s total attendees. 43% of attendees identified as employees of the ACT Government who were not directly based in a school. The majority of ACT Government employees in attendance were from the Justice and Community Safety Directorate (JACSD) and the Education and Training Directorate (ETD). The remaining attendees at the workshop were community members external to the government sector.

To ensure that a diversity of perspectives, opinions and experiences were raised, attendees were placed in discussion groups which were separate from their immediate colleagues. The discussion groups were facilitated by Champions of the Network, the three guest speakers and representatives of the ACT Government’s Restorative Justice Unit. Each discussion group was asked to respond to a series of four questions. Three of the questions were consistent across the ten discussion groups.

The individual topics posed to the discussion groups were:

1. How can restorative practice help boys to lead the way in reducing violence in our community? (Tables 1 and 5)
2. How can restorative practice be used to respond effectively to incidences of bullying in schools (including cyber bullying)? (Tables 4 and 9)
3. How can schools use restorative practices to build relationships and safety in the classroom? Furthermore, how can schools and teachers maintain the use of restorative practices while under pressure? (Tables 6 and 10)
4. How can schools use restorative practice to build participative school communities? (Table 3)
5. How can restorative practices be used to counter discrimination, sexism, class and body image pressures as well as stigmatizing speech about Islam and other religions within a school environment? (Tables 2 and 8)
6. How can schools effectively use restorative practices as an alternative to suspension? (Table 7)

The shared topics for discussion groups were:

1. What barriers were there to restorative practices working effectively in response to their individual topics?
2. What are measurable indicators which will tell us that the shared vision for success (e.g. that our schools are becoming more restorative) has been achieved?
3. How can restorative practices be best implemented, maintained and supported into everyday behaviors in schools to ensure that they (restorative practices) are not felt as an imposition on a teacher’s limited time and resources?

While each group was presented with an individual discussion topic, most discussion groups also raised comments which could be applied as responses to questions other than their own. Where appropriate, these comments have been incorporated into the report summary.

A summary of results is presented overleaf.

# SUMMARY OF RESULTS

## Topic 1: How can restorative practices help boys to lead the way in reducing violence in our communities?

As a primary site of socialization for children and young people, schools play an important role in developing social norms. Research explains that social interactions ‘occur in a context in which certain expectations are conveyed by participants towards the other’.[[2]](#footnote-2) These expectations are framed by social and cultural expectations of gender behaviors – namely, what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. For many boys and male adolescents, this construction of their masculine identity is at least partly rooted in concepts of violence – whether threatening others with violence, basing their social worth on their capacity for violence or even as the only means by which they can guarantee the attention of their peers, parents and teachers.

During adolescence, ‘as young people face new challenges, learn new skills and lead more independent lives’, they are more likely to demonstrate ‘risk taking behavior’ ‘as part of this development’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Research further identifies that when exposed to violence in the home, ‘boys learn to be violent and girls learn to be passive victims’; a learning which teaches boys to see violence as ‘the pure exercise of power’, power being something which counts in all aspects of life.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Network recognizes an essential role for restorative practices in teaching boys the importance of valuing interpersonal relationships and emotional empowerment as they transition through this developmental phase. Attendees identified the importance of using restorative practices, such as peer mediation and circle times, for this purpose throughout both primary and high schools. These practices were seen as ways to raise student’s ability to effectively manage conflict and promote peaceful relations. Recognizing the tendency for adolescents to undertake risky behaviors, a continuation of restorative classrooms through to high school ensures that students are not ‘shocked into reality/survival mode’ once they enter high school and are away from the support networks built by a restorative primary school.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The use of circle times in the classroom provide an opportunity for the school to set its culture, creating an inclusive environment and reinforcing the message to boys that violence is not a key facet of what it means to be a man. Attendees also identified that a restorative classroom with a climate of free and open communication could, in turn, provide the scope for discussions about where violence comes from and how students can act to address it. If boys were provided the opportunity to lead circle time discussions on this topic, it may give power to the child’s voice to change community attitudes, helping to empower a generation of young men able to express themselves confidently through words, not violence, and who are able to build stronger connections within their community.

Attendees also identified the need to engage boys to mentor other students in non-academic areas such as music, sports and ICT. This was suggested as an approach which was simple to implement, yet effective in empowering boys to be leaders and to build strong relationships. Mentoring programs of this nature provide the opportunity for boys to learn that their intrinsic value is not limited to their ability to express themselves through violence and dominance, and that they, like all members of the community have so much more they can contribute.

By ensuring that restorative classrooms continue into high school, and implementing mentoring programs for boys, schools can play a major role in supporting boys to reduce violence in our community. As boys are empowered to believe in themselves and see that they have much to offer to the school and wider community – they can take a constructive leadership role in reducing violence. This is important to note in the current political climate where Australia is working to reduce violence against women in all areas of the community. If schools prioritize restorative classrooms which focus on empowerment and developing positive relationships, boys and girls can reframe society’s expectations of how they may relate to one another.

## Topic 2: How can restorative practices be used to respond effectively to incidents of bullying in schools (including cyber bullying)?

Bullying in schools is not a new phenomenon. Research identifies it as a ‘systematic abuse of power’ which ‘hinders positive youth development’ as children demonstrate the ‘willful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him or her under stress’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Many children and young people will experience or witness incidents of physical, psychological and cyber bullying in Australian schools.[[7]](#footnote-7) Without an appropriate response by schools, bullying can lead to victims becoming disengaged with the education system, experiencing low self esteem and a continuation of the cycle of violence.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There are numerous international examples of schools implementing ‘a restorative whole-school approach’ to combat bullying. Schools in Hong Kong found that a tailored restorative approach ‘involving such components as peace education, mediation of conflict and the reintegrative shaming of bullies’ led to a significant decrease of reports of school-based bullying and an increase in student’s self-esteem in comparison to their counterparts in schools which did not utilize restorative practices.[[9]](#footnote-9) Recognising the important role for schools in supporting ‘positive youth development’ the Network identifies value in ACT schools using restorative practices to respond to incidences of physical, psychological and cyber bullying within their student cohorts.

Attendees suggested that a restorative approach to bullying would bring bullies and their victims together in a safe environment to ‘flatten the power relationship’ between the individuals. While attendees understood that only a small number of suspensions in ACT public schools relate to cyber bullying, a restorative approach was seen to facilitate open face-to-face conversations to ensure that communications did not remain hidden in the online world. It was understood that responding to cyber bullying was a complex task for schools, as to do so could involve schools seeking to regulate a student’s behavior outside of the school’s operational hours.

In order for restorative practices to be used to effectively respond to bullying, attendees identified that significant work could be required on the part of schools. It was understood that school practices had to be seen to be actionable on a continuum, and designed to target the specific nature of the conflict or the harm experienced from the bullying. Schools would therefore need additional training to ensure teachers could facilitate informal restorative practices, such as corridor conversations, restorative chats, mediations and conferences, to more serious formal processes involving school executives and external agencies (such as the ACT’s Restorative Justice Unit).

Attendees suggested that restorative practices could be an important tool for schools when responding to incidences of cyber bullying. It was observed that children and young people have an increased ability to communicate online which can lead to a diminished capacity to communicate in a face-to-face environment. By using restorative practices to support students to build relationships and their interpersonal skills, schools will steadily contribute to increased healthy communication within the student body.

The Network noted that it is important for schools to receive appropriate support when implementing restorative practices to respond to bullying. Attendees explained that in order for restorative practice to flourish in schools, it would require a network of school restorative practitioners who can support an ongoing community of practice. This was seen to be most effective if restorative practices were guided and led by the School’s executive staff members. Executive support for a whole-school restorative approach would be required in order for teachers to be able to allocate time to enable restorative conferencing to occur outside of the timetabled classroom period. This would contribute to what one attendee proposed as the ‘reset of the mindset of teachers’, to ensure that student wellbeing was prioritized no matter what time of the school day or week.

## Topic 3: How can schools use restorative practices to build relationships and safety in the classroom?

The Network understands that a sense of safety is a pre-requisite for young people being able to express their authentic selves and for effective learning. Teachers who are confident restorative practitioners can model respectful, fair and just relations. They can articulate and help their students to articulate the principles of restorative justice which include the importance of distinguishing behaviour from the person, engaging with explanations and clarification of expectations and focusing on repairing harms and relationships when conflict arises. In this way young people are helped to develop empathy through reflection and insight, enhancing capacities for responsibility and accountability and promoting positive behaviours in the classroom and school environment.

Restorative practices require practitioners to ‘do with’ and not ‘do to’ or ‘for’ when working with individuals, moving away from a punitive or paternalistic approach and towards the redress of harm. Restorative practices promote inclusiveness and participation while promoting understanding of ‘other’ perspectives. By supporting children and young people to balance listening and talking, restorative practices facilitate a relationship of equality which resists domination by any stakeholders in a restorative process. Attendees proposed that a restorative classroom would support students to repair relationships and move on from a harm that has occurred. This process could, in turn, contribute to a reduction in violence or bullying within the school community.

In order to effectively support safety in the classroom, attendees identified the importance of sourcing training for teachers in the use of restorative practices. Through this training, attendees believed, teachers would gain the skills to impart the language of restoration (e.g. acting with and not to or for an individual) to their students in an informal fashion which could form part of their daily life in the classroom and be integrated into the student’s relationships with each other. A key facet of this training, according to attendees, was to ensure that teachers and students were aware that restorative interventions have the potential to transform conflict as they are part of a process which calmly acknowledges the validity of feelings while helping affected parties to express their feelings in a constructive and safe manner.

Attendees supported schools providing support for teachers to ensure that they are able to provide a restorative meeting for students upon request. It was suggested that having the opportunity to express the impact of harm and how it had affected an individual would be a powerful and healing process for all parties involved, which in some cases could be more important and more valuable for a healing process than if the school was to utilise punitive disciplinary measures.

Further to this, attendees proposed that schools ensure that all incident reports be restructured to ensure a primary focus on the effect of the incident on others and how it could be restored. This would highlight the fact that the school was committed to restorative practices. Attendees further explained that by enabling this restructure and ensuring that teachers were readily able to access a structured conferencing script, schools would present themselves as passionate about becoming a restorative community.

Ensuring schools are able to use restorative practices to build relationships and safety in the classroom will require engagement from all levels of teaching staff. Across the board engagement may contribute to an enhanced level of safety in both the classroom and the playground as a school asserts itself as a restorative community.

## Topic 4: How can schools use restorative practice to build participative school communities?

The Network defines a participative school community as one which meaningfully engages with all systems which may impact on a child or young person’s development. This aligns well with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development. This model recognises that a child’s development is directly impacted by the relationships which flow between the child, their immediate interactions (e.g. schools, family members, neighborhood), the broader community (e.g. community services, media) and overarching cultural values.[[10]](#footnote-10) The relationship of the child with schools and family members is seen to be reciprocal, with each relationship directly impacting the child’s development. As such, it is important to recognize that beliefs held by a child will directly impact the parent and those of the parent will impact on their child.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Attendees identified that a lack of a participative culture could be a barrier to restorative practices working effectively in schools. Attendees commented that there was a need for schools to work closely to build relationships of trust with parents, recognizing the fact that the parents themselves may have trauma histories or personal beliefs that could impact the child. Disengaged parents would therefore, be more likely to support their child’s participation (as a wrong-doer) in a restorative justice process if the parent felt that they were unlikely to be labeled by the school which would focus on their child’s behaviour, rather than their character. Attendees recognized that if a child was attending school without their basic needs being met (e.g. coming to school hungry and tired), it was likely that they would be severely limited in their capacity to maximise their full potential. It was considered that a restorative environment would make it much more likely that these families would be more able to discuss their issues and needs and be responded to with compassion and sensitivity.

Recognising the matters addressed above, it was acknowledged that significant social welfare issues exist and impact on families in schools which will demand practical and ethical responses alongside expectations of responsibility taking and accountability among all school community members. To respond to these concerns, it was suggested that

schools explore opportunities to provide free access to healthy food for vulnerable students, a place to sleep and work with parents to provide referrals to support agencies such as the Domestic Violence Crisis Service or a Child and Family Centre if they were required. These strategies were believed to be an opportunity to support the student, recognizing the fact that building participative school communities will require the support of the broader community involved in a child’s life.

The Network accepts that creating a participative school community requires an investment on behalf of the school in building relationships of trust. Attendees believed that this also required a change in the mindset of educators to move away from a preference towards punitive consequences for behavior in the classroom. Attendees recognized that restorative practices have an important role to play in these areas, but noted the use of the term ‘restorative’ could appear loaded and reactionary – with the use of the word ‘restorative’ implying the need for a matter to be fixed or restored. Recognizing this, attendees identified that there was a need for big picture thinking to ensure that more vulnerable members of the school community did not become disengaged due to loaded terminology.

To further build trust between parents, students and schools, attendees considered that schools should ensure that restorative processes are available and practices taught to students from a very young age. It was proposed that if harm occurred that required a restorative justice based intervention, schools should invite students and parents to participate in such a fashion that it was apparent that judgment on the child’s character had not been passed. Attendees proposed that a restorative justice process could include a ‘celebration of courage’ which would occur after the process had taken place. It was further proposed that schools ensure that the language of such invitations to responsibility exclude loaded terminology such as ‘victim’ and ‘wrongdoer’ – instead using the collective term ‘those who have been affected’ by what happened. Attendees reinforced the importance of teaching restorative practices and conducting restorative processes in a fashion which focused on the behavior, rather than negatively labelling student or students involved. This was seen to be key to building a participative school community as such a strategy would involve parents, teachers and students in a non-stigmatizing process designed to support the recognition of positive behaviors in all aspects of the young person’s life.

## Topic 5: How can restorative practices be used to counter discrimination, sexism, class and body image pressures as well as stigmatizing speech about Islam and other religions within a school environment?

The Network recognises a prominent research gap relating to the use of restorative practices as a response to discrimination and other hate crimes. This is supported by research which perceives hate crimes as ‘a grey area’ for restorative justice practices, ‘mainly due to the power imbalances that are created in the victim-offender relationship’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Hate crimes, like other forms of discrimination may contribute to an individual feeling isolated, victimised; and in a school setting, becoming disengaged from the education system. Such consequences of discrimination are harmful to a child’s development, with disengagement from the education system linked to an increased experience of vulnerability.

The Network understands that many children and young people in Australia identifying as Arab and/or Muslim have experienced discrimination relating to their cultural and religious identity. International politics influenced the development of a negative stereotype associated with what it means to be Muslim in the West.[[13]](#footnote-13) This stereotype portrays ‘all Arabs and Muslims as the type of bloodthirsty criminals and terrorists who drove their planes into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Recognising the relationship between discrimination and a child’s increased vulnerability, the Network welcomes research which identifies restorative practices as an effective way to challenge and respond to learned prejudices which are ‘the result of pervasive stereotypes about those who fall outside the prescribed boundaries of the dominant culture’.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is from this basis that the Network has chosen to discuss the application of restorative practices as a response to counter stigmatizing speech about Islam within a school environment. In doing so, this discussion will support the development of the research base relating to restorative practice as a response to hate crimes.

The Network understands that the stereotype discussed previously has negatively impacted Arab and Muslim children living in the Canberra community. The impact of such racism is that children are consistently hearing debilitating messages relating to their identity. One workshop attendee explained that there ‘is now a group of children who have only ever known that to be a Muslim means to be a terrorist’.[[16]](#footnote-16) With ongoing coverage through traditional media and social media networks about the Islamic State and the radicalization of children and young people, it is important for schools to celebrate the contributions of their Muslim students in an inclusive fashion. As such, the Network sees the implementation of restorative practices in schools is a viable opportunity to support children and young people facing discrimination and stigmatizing speech to limit the amount of students who feel that ‘people are judging’ them because they ‘are Muslim’.

To respond to stigmatizing speech about Islam, workshop attendees proposed that schools provide opportunities through their pastoral care systems for students to talk about their views, debate, ask questions and, in turn, feel included and empowered. One of the attendees, a teacher, explained that in their school students were encouraged to present projects to their cohorts relating to topics like wearing the hijab, what it meant to be a Muslim young person in Australia and the experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI).[[17]](#footnote-17) These presentations provided the opportunity for students to take ownership over areas which traditionally were linked to experiences of discrimination. By presenting to their cohorts and being allowed the opportunity to respond to questions, these presentations contributed to the development of an inclusive classroom where students had built the relationships to converse freely as opposed to relying on stereotypes.

To respond to the other areas of discrimination identified above, workshop attendees suggested that schools implement and use circle times more widely. The use of circle times was seen as a way to build a student’s problem solving skills as well as develop their social and emotional literacy. Circle times were seen as an opportunity for a teacher to explore with their student what the impact of discrimination was on those affected and encourage empathy and the understanding of differences within their class. Attendees believed that these discussions would provide a valuable lesson on respect to the children in the class, namely, that to be different does not mean that you are wrong.

Attendees identified that schools could use circle time in a targeted fashion to respond to discrimination. It was proposed that teachers could provide students with scenarios (e.g. a news article) about a particular issue which the class could discuss as a group to debunk stereotypes and identify how the individuals involved had been impacted by discrimination. By allowing students to debate the issues raised from all sides and participate in targeted role plays, circle times could be used as an opportunity to teach students to listen to all viewpoints (including those negative or different to their own) and model respectful ways of voicing disagreement. This process would, according to attendees, empower the students and develop their interpersonal skills – effectively aligning with the principles of restorative practice.

To effectively use restorative practices to respond to discrimination, attendees identified that further resourcing for schools may be required. At the crux of a restorative classroom, according to a teacher in attendance, is the belief of teaching staff that the welfare of students was not a 9am-3pm job and instead needed to be supported at all times throughout the student’s academic careers. As such, teachers may require further support and resources to change mindsets to devote more than the current practice of ‘1.5 hours towards student wellbeing a week’. This support would give teachers additional skills to effectively manage circle times to not only respond to issues of discrimination but to create a more effective learning community.

## Topic 6: How can schools effectively use restorative practices as an alternative to suspensions?

The Network understands that student misbehavior directly interferes with teaching and learning outcomes in schools and is considered a major contributor to a school’s staffing turnover.[[18]](#footnote-18) Anecdotal evidence from schools in the United States identifies that when a student is suspended from school as a result of a disciplinary action, they are twice as likely to become disengaged from the education sector and ‘drop-out’ of the school system.[[19]](#footnote-19) This international example is particularly concerning, with suspensions being applied to students that had voluntarily missed or skipped a class – essentially rewarding truancy with further time away from the classroom.

On a local level, the Network noted a Canberra Times article from 15 February 2016 which showed that a total of 4543 suspensions had been issued to students in ACT Public Schools during the timeframe of January 2013-July 2015.[[20]](#footnote-20) This article further identified that ACT students were suspended because they had been ‘aggressive, disruptive, verbally or physically abusive or intimidating towards other students or staff’.[[21]](#footnote-21) While student attendance in ACT Public Schools remains high, it is concerning that in 2014 11% of Year 8 students, 13% of Year 9 students and 14% of Year 10 students did not attend school – an example of disengagement from the education system.[[22]](#footnote-22)

While it was understood that suspensions provide respite for teachers and ‘planning time’ to respond to harmful behaviors in the classroom, the number of children and young people who have been or may become disengaged from the education system through this process is of concern. Attendees recognized an important role for restorative practices in reducing the need for and the presence of suspensions in schools, but that this would be appropriate for many matters but not all. If schools were to become more restorative, attendees posited, suspensions might be reserved for specific cases where the school had recognized that there was no other way possible to respond to the student’s behavioural issues within school time such as with specialised classes.

Attendees identified that restorative practices would mean that students and teachers were able to acknowledge the importance of their relationship and rebuild trust sooner which had been broken through classroom misbehavior. A merit of this process was, according to attendees that all stakeholders involved would understand the importance of having conversations before proceeding to conferences – a process which would help to ensure that all parties felt that their concerns were genuinely listened and responded to. By consistently applying restorative practices, schools will be able to respond to behavioral issues as they arise in a fashion involving open communication. Open communication through a restorative process will support the school to balance the reactions of all parties to an incident of harm – from staff, to students and their parents – so that as a group they are able to fully understand the impact of the offending harm.

Attendees also recognized that restorative practices provided schools with an opportunity to effectively engage with parents. Incorporating parents into a restorative process would, according to attendees, give parents the opportunity to meet and understand each other and in doing so, they would be able to engage with differing views on the relevant circumstance.

The Network notes Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development (discussed previously), which identifies that engaging with parents is important for schools as the beliefs and attitudes of parents will directly impact on and may be transferred to their child. Given the potential for differing expectations from stakeholders, attendees strongly agreed that it was important to recognize that some incidences of harm were too serious and could not be appropriately and safely responded to by schools solely through any internal process. It was also recognised that for some serious matters, the dignity and ongoing wellbeing of victims of acts of harm, should be prioritised which may well lead to agreement that the removal of the harm-doer for periods of time as in suspensions, or permanently as necessary.

## Shared Topic 1: What are the barriers to restorative practices working effectively?

Attendees were asked to identify the barriers which would limit a school’s ability to effectively implement restorative practices. The responses raised have been categorized in accordance to whether or not they relate to the school’s environment, culture or values; a need for broader community engagement or a need for additional resources, training or education. These barriers are listed below:

Attendees proposed the following as barriers relating to a school’s environment, culture and values:

* Inconsistency for students transitioning from a restorative primary school to a non-restorative high school. The high school may use punitive disciplinary measures which contradict the values and practices that the students have previously learnt.
* Schools may not be prepared to use restorative practices at all levels.
* Schools require data evidencing the number of suspensions/detentions and other disciplinary measures issued to students to be used as data to support funding requests for restorative investments.
* Schools need to engage the student voice in developing a restorative culture in their community.
* Schools are choosing not to identify as ‘restorative’. Anecdotal evidence shows that the number of schools identifying as using restorative practices is lower than the number of schools who use restorative practices in the community.
* Schools need to see restorative practices as more than just a behavioral program – restorative practices need to be seen and valued as a whole philosophy about how individuals relate to each other.
* Schools need to build trust with students and their families to ensure that all stakeholders participating in a restorative process feel that it is happening in a safe place where their viewpoints are valued and respected
* Teachers need to perceive student wellbeing as more than a job from 9am-3pm Monday to Friday. Restorative practices cannot be used effectively if they are limited to ‘1.5 hours a week’ as a tool to support student wellbeing.
* Schools need to ensure that a restorative process occurs in a fashion which does not cause undue harm to any participant. This requires schools to consider the impact of appearances (i.e.: if a conference is held in a principal’s office this may create a climate of fear). Schools also need to review the terminology and language used to ensure it is not unduly ‘loaded’.

Attendees identified the following as barriers relating to a need for broader community engagement:

* Schools need to engage with the student’s family to develop an understanding of their experiences away from the education system. Depending on the family’s circumstances and their level of trust in the school, this may impact on the school’s ability to successfully hold a restorative process.
* Schools need to identify what and if any other agencies are working with the child or family in question and engage that agency’s contact point to benefit from their previously developed relationship of trust with the child.
* Schools need to understand that the style of communication that children and young people is evolving with communication skills developing in an online fashion. This means that schools may need to work harder to develop a child’s face-to-face communication and relationship building skills.
* Schools need to engage with parents to respond to the fact that there may be a contrast between what behaviors are considered acceptable at home, and what behaviors are considered acceptable at school.
* Schools need to recognize that the success of a restorative program will be impacted by societal attitudes and the broader community’s relationship of trust with the school itself. If the overriding perception in the community is negative, then there will not be a strong relationship of trust that the school can benefit from as it attempts to become more restorative.

Attendees identified the following as barriers relating to resources, training and education:

* Schools and teachers are often time poor. This limits the school’s ability to give a restorative process the preparation and time that it requires.
* Students and teachers may not understand what restorative practices are and what it means to be a restorative school. Restorative justice and restorative practices are commonly confused terminology which can impact on a perceived ‘loaded nature’ of the restorative process
* Schools may require additional funding and resources to ensure that educators can be fully trained in the use of restorative practices. This is particularly relevant for lower socio-economic schools who may have limited resources to distribute across a wide range of meaningful and important areas.
* Restorative schools can be impacted by a change of leadership within the school. For a restorative culture to become embedded, it needs to be supported widely by the school’s senior executive staff to ensure that if, for instance, the school principal left the organization then it would remain as a priority for the school.

## Shared Topic 2: In examples of the use of restorative practices in schools, what are measurable indicators which will tell us that the shared vision for success (i.e.: that our schools are becoming more restorative) has been achieved?

All attendees were asked to identify measurable indicators which could be used by schools to show that as an organization, they had successfully become more restorative. The responses have been categorized in accordance with whether or not there are tangible outputs which are measured or could be measured on a regular basis. Where possible, data sources for these measurable indicators have been identified. These measures are listed below.

Measurable indicators with current data sources appropriate for government use:

* **Suspension rates**This data is collected by the Education and Training Directorate. This data is unpublished.
* **Attendance rates**This data is collected by the Education and Training Directorate. It is published on an annual basis in the ACT Government publication, *A Picture of ACT’s Children and Young People.*
* **School Satisfaction Surveys**This data is collected by the Education and Training Directorate. Overall satisfaction results of the survey are published annually.
* **Young people involved with the criminal justice system**

Data measuring the number of young people who offend, the number of young people under community based supervision and the number of young people under youth justice supervision or in youth justice facilities is measured by the Community Services Directorate and provided to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This data is published on an annual basis in the ACT Government publication, *A Picture of ACT’s Children and Young People.*

* **Retention rates**This data is collected by the Education and Training Directorate as it relates to the proportion of ACT students continuing from Year 10 to Year 12. It is published annually in the ACT Government publication, *A Picture of ACT’s Children and Young People.*

Measurable indicators which require additional development of data sources:

* **Core Competency Training**This indicator is proposed to measure the number of staff in a school who have received training the core competencies of restorative practices. This would need to be measured by individual schools and could be collated by the Education and Training and Justice and Community Safety Directorates.
* **School population changes**This indicator is proposed to measure a growth or fall in a school’s population. A perceived growth in a school’s population, over the long term, could indicate a community perception that it a safe community that children and parents want to be a part of. This would need to be measured by individual schools.
* **Whole of system approach to restorative practices**This indicator proposes to measure the number of schools in the ACT who have implemented a restorative practice program. This measure would, over time, identify the development towards a ‘whole of system’ approach to restorative practice. This would need to be measured by individual schools and could be collated by the Education and Training and Justice and Community Safety Directorates.
* **Social Return on Investment**This indicator places a dollar value on restorative practices in schools. Additional research would be required to develop this indicator and may require the support of the academic community in the Restorative Communities Network.

Attendees further identified indicators which could measure a school’s development to becoming more restorative. It is noted that while these indicators are measurable, they could not be measured on a regular basis to keep data which would be appropriate for government use. They are, however, indicators of the development of a positive school culture and a community that is becoming more restorative. These measures are listed below:

* Teachers identify increased resilience
* Students demonstrate increased emotional intelligence
* Schools observe a rise in creative thinking
* Parents report an increase in their child’s self esteem and behaviors in the home
* Staff model restorative behaviors consistently
* Students identify less incidences of bullying in schools
* Students report actively seeking restorative practices and using the language of a restorative process
* Students report an increase in positive and caring relationships with their teachers and other members of their student body
* Teachers report a reduction in classroom misbehavior
* Schools observe an increase in the number of informal restorative practices occurring on the premises
* Children identify an increased willingness to communicate and to become more involved in the classroom
* Students report an increased ability to problem solve
* School counselors report a reduction in visits by students relating to bullying or classroom misbehavior

## Shared Topic 3: Overall, how can restorative practices be best implemented, maintained and supported into everyday behaviors in schools to ensure that they (restorative practices) are not felt as an imposition on a teacher’s limited time and resources?

Attendees were asked to comment on how restorative practices could be best implemented to ensure that they were not perceived as an imposition on a time poor teacher. Much of the discussion for this topic focused on the question of how restorative practices could best be implemented rather than to address the needs of the time poor teacher. These discussions, however, highlight that if restorative practices are implemented successfully and according to the strategies raised, it will limit the long-term resource drain on the school community. The suggestions raised by attendees have been categorized in accordance to their nature as policy based approaches, community engagement approaches and approaches relating to increased resourcing, training or educational opportunities for schools.

Attendees identified the following as policy based approaches to support the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools:

* Government should work with schools to ensure that the use of restorative practices in schools is applied as a behavioral/relationship management policy across all schools in the Canberra community. This would highlight the fact that restorative practices are considered to be a priority for the Government as it moves towards a declaration of Canberra as a Restorative City.
* Schools must be encouraged to give priority to restorative practices, particularly if time is needed to hold a conference. Teachers must be advised that restorative processes can occur outside of normal school hours as opposed to needing to take place during class or a student’s lunch hour. This will ensure that other students not impacted by student misbehavior are not negatively impacted by a restorative process (i.e. through missing lunch or becoming disengaged in class as the teacher responds to the incident of harm).
* Schools should be encouraged to implement a tiered policy approach to restorative practices. The bottom-most tier of the program should involve a focus on the use of restorative circles. At the middle tier there should be a focus on corridor conferencing and problem solving circles, and finally at the top-most tier there should be a focus on formal conferencing. This was seen to be an effective and efficient guide to embedding restorative practices within the culture of a school.

Attendees identified the following as approaches relating to community engagement strategies which would support the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools:

* Schools need to engage with parents, families and the community, in accordance with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development, to ensure that a relationship of trust is built up between the major stakeholders in a child or young person’s life.
* Schools need to pursue a simple program to engage with parents. This could involve running parenting support sessions, providing free access to healthy foods and providing judgment-free referrals to support services as required by the family.
* Schools need to facilitate collaborative peer discussions between students and staff relating to restorative practices and the values that they, as community members, want to embed in the school culture. These discussions serve as an opportunity to empower the school community as it moves to become more restorative.
* Schools need to engage students as peer mediators. These children and young people have the skills and experience to become effective restorative practitioners. Engaging young people will ensure that restorative practices are supported at all levels of the school community.
* Schools need to ensure that restorative practices are embedded into the school culture – to ensure that every member of the school and the community within which it is involved understand what restorative practices are and why they should be using them. This would also ensure that the use of restorative practices was not considered voluntary by the school community, and contribute to a development of the school’s restorative culture.

Attendees identified the following as suggested approaches relating to increased resourcing, training or educational opportunities which would support the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools:

* Universities have a role in teaching new and up and coming teachers about restorative practices. Teaching restorative practices to trainee teachers would provide a benefit to their future employers, as the up and coming teachers could provide additional support to current staff members regarding the use of restorative practices as a positive alternative to punitive consequences for student misbehavior.
* Schools need to understand that time is a key issue in the successful implementation of restorative practices. Teachers will need to be allowed time to train and practice in this area. It is important to note that a transition towards cultural change will not happen overnight.
* Schools will need to benefit from professional learning communities and networks which can provide guidance as to how they can become more restorative. The ACT Restorative Communities Network could play a major role in providing this knowledge base and support.

# Conclusion and Suggested Approaches

The Network’s February 2016 workshop, *Restorative Practices in Schools,* highlights that the Canberra community continues to be committed towards becoming a Restorative City. This workshop provided an appropriate forum for community members to contribute to policy development in the ACT. Members of the Network overwhelmingly support the use of restorative practices in schools as a viable alternative to more punitive disciplinary measures designed to address student misbehavior in the classroom. The suggested approaches of the Network are as listed below. Some of these may be achieved with support provided by the Restorative Communities Network.

### All schools within the ACT consider how they may best implement restorative practices;

### All schools should explore how they can introduce, implement and maintain circle times as an ongoing feature of the pastoral care curriculum;

### All schools should consider how they can further develop a relationship with and engage with their broader community (i.e. the parents of their students)

#### It is further suggested that schools consider hosting parenting support classes, explore options to provide free access to healthy food choices for vulnerable students and consider providing referrals to community support agencies where required;

### All schools should explore professional development opportunities which can be provided to staff relating to the best practice models of restorative practice in a school setting.

#### Once staff receive such training, schools should explore how resources can be allocated to ensure that restorative practices can be easily and effectively incorporated in a classroom setting;

### All schools should consider how they may engage with students to become leaders in a restorative process.

#### Schools should consider opportunities to empower young people to engage with and lead a restorative process;

### The Education and Training Directorate and the Justice and Community Safety Directorate should explore appropriate ways to measure the social return on investment in a restorative school;

### All schools should consider opportunities to share knowledge and participate in a professional learning community in order to develop the capacity of students and staff as restorative practitioners.

# Appendix 1: Restorative Communities Network Champions

The following individuals have been identified as champions of the Restorative Communities Network. They each represent a diverse range of backgrounds and life experiences and share a common passion for restorative practices and working towards life in a restorative city. RCN Network champions include young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, teachers, advocates for carers and persons with disabilities and those with experience in the government sector.

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| **Restorative Communities Network Champions**  |
| **Name** | **Sector** | **Organisation/Role** |
| Diana Abdel-Rahman | Non-Government | Australian Muslim Voice |
| Michele Abel | Government | Galambany Court |
| John Braithwaite | Non-Government | Australian National University |
| Alison Brook | Non-Government | Relationships Australia |
| Matt Casey | Non-Government | Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra-Goulburn |
| Reece Cheater | Government | Wanniassa School |
| Cheryl Condon | Government | CMTEDD |
| Kim Davison | Non-Government | Gugan-Gulwan |
| Jan Day | Non-Government | Former School Principal |
| Rosemary Dupont | Non Government  | Duponts HR |
| Jenny Henderson | Non Government | Duponts HR |
| Adam Horner | Non-Government | Netball ACT |
| Rudi Lammers | Government | Chief of Police |
| Kelly Lokan | Government | Restorative Justice Unit  |
| Fiona May | Non-Government | Chief Executive Officer |
| Kate Milner | Government | ACT Corrective Services |
| Charles Morrice | Government | Namadgi School |
| Dave Peffer | Government | Access Canberra |
| Mary Pekin | Non-Government | Relationships Australia |
| Commander Andrea Quinn | Government | Deputy Chief Police Officer |
| Lisa Ross | Government | Restorative Justice Unit |
| Jon Stanhope | Non-Government | Former Chief Minister of the Australian Capital Territory |

# Appendix 2: Proposed Workshops

The Network is committed to holding an additional two workshops in the first six months of 2016. These workshops will focus on the topics of Restorative Practices in the Health and Disability Sectors. The Network is committed to engaging with stakeholders and practitioners who have experience in and/or a passion for the selected areas in order to ensure that, upon the completion of the workshop, informed policy advice can be provided to government.

A list of proposed workshop topics for the remainder of 2016 and early 2017 is provided below. It is envisaged that all future workshops will be held in the Function Room of the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre in the Canberra City (off London Circuit). All Network members who are interested in helping to shape the workshop and its discussion questions are invited to provide feedback to Kelly Lokan at the Restorative Justice Unit on 6205-1772 or Kelly.lokan@act.gov.au at their earliest convenience.

The topics proposed for future workshops are:

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| **Restorative Communities Network Future Workshops** |
| **Topic** | **Details** |
| *Restorative Practices in the Health Sector – From Cradle to Grave* | Monday 18 April 2016 (12:00pm-2:00pm) |
| *Restorative Practices in the Disability Sector*  | Thursday 26 May 2016 (12:00pm – 2:00pm) |
| *Restorative Practices and the Care and Protection Sector* | TBC |
| *Restorative Practices and Young People* | TBC |
| *Restorative Practices and the Procurement Process* | TBC |
| *Restorative Practices and Indigenous Issues* | TBC |

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