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Developing student social skills using restorative practices: a new framework called H.E.A.R.T

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Abstract Students attending schools today not only learn about formal academic subjects, they also learn social and emotional skills. Whole-school restorative practices (RP) is an approach which can be used to address student misbehaviour when it occurs, and as a holistic method to increase social and emotional learning in students. The aim of this study was to explore the impact of RP on student behaviour from the perspectives of students and teachers. Six schools participated in interviews and focus groups. Students and teachers were asked about the use of RP and the impact on behaviour. Students and teachers identified five main themes: greater harmony, increased empathy towards others, awareness of one's own behaviour and being accountable for that, increased respect, and reflective thinking. These aspects increase students' social skills. This paper discusses a new framework which describes the positive impact of RP on student behaviour and thinking. The findings have broad implications for school communities and highlight the need to move towards more relational behaviour management approaches.

Keywords Restorative practices · School discipline · Behaviour management · Qualitative study · Teachers · Adolescent students · Social skills

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1 Introduction

Traditionally, children have attended school to be taught academic subjects that will enable them to take their place in the working world (Seligman et al. 2009). Today, children who attend school are also taught how to work together, behave responsibly, and act with respect towards others (Seligman et al. 2009). There is an increasing emphasis on expecting students who attend school to learn a range of life skills so that they will grow up to be responsible citizens within the wider community (Lewis et al. 2005). In a classic study by Dreeben (1968) he suggests that the social experiences a student encounters in the school environment offer them opportunities to learn about social norms. These experiences provide an opportunity to learn resilience and ways to cope when things go wrong. Dreeben (1968) describes the school environment as providing "a broad range of experiences other than those restricted to academic in nature" (p. 72). The study by Dreeben highlights that within this context, there is a growing need for education to continue to move beyond the formal academic curriculum to incorporate social values as well as develop students' skills such as empathy, assertiveness, and problem-solving (Seligman et al. 2009; Wong et al. 2011). Teaching students these social and emotional skills reduces student behaviour problems such as aggression, and bullying as well as rates of anxiety and depression (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). For school staff one of the dilemmas is finding ways to not only deal with student misbehaviour, but also to proactively teach social and emotional skills to students as a preventive measure (Payton et al. 2000). One promising method is restorative practices (hereby referred to as RP) approach.

The RP approach aims to deal with student behaviour in a holistic way through increasing social and emotional skills in students and staff as well as handling behavioural incidents as they arise (Drewery and Winslade 2003; McCluskey et al. 2008; Morrison et al. 2005; Porter 2007). To date, there has been limited research that has actively engaged both teachers and students through interviews or surveys to explore their perspectives of RP in the school environment and how it influences student and teacher behaviour (Drewery and Winslade 2003). This paper addresses this gap by reporting the perspectives of students and teachers in relation to the use of RP in their schools.

1.1 Restorative justice

School-based RP developed from restorative justice. Restorative justice (RJ) consists of a variety of practices used at different stages of the justice system. Rather than serving as an alternative to retributive or punitive actions, the approach is used in tandem with traditional processes (Daly 2002; McCluskey et al. 2008). RJ has a long history in various indigenous cultures such as the Māori culture in New Zealand and Native American Navajo (Daly 2002). The history and origins of RJ date back hundreds of years and can be reviewed in various books and academic journal papers (Coker 2006; Daly and Immarigeon 1998; Johnstone 2011; Morrison and Ahmed 2006; Pranis 2005; Zehr and Mika 1998).

The modern pioneer of the RJ approach is considered to be Howard Zehr, an American criminologist (Johnstone 2011). Zehr (2002) described RJ as a process that involves people who have a stake in a specific wrongdoing. The wrongdoing is collectively identified and addressed. This offers the opportunity to express remorse, forgiveness, and work towards reconciliation (Zehr 2002). RJ places value on personal change rather than compliance. It is considered as a reactive approach, responding to crime or other wrongdoing after it occurs (Wachtel 2012). In the 1990's, the use of RJ was adopted in Australia as a means of preventing juvenile offenders from being subjected to the rigors of the judicial system (Blood 2005; Fields 2003). The purpose was to allow the offender to express guilt, and make amends, as a substitute for potential incarceration. The use of this approach is considered as less stigmatizing and allows the offender the opportunity to reintegrate into society (Fields 2003). Subsequently, the approach was introduced into the education system in 1994 with the first restorative conference being conducted at a school in Queensland (Blood 2005). Since this time the use of restorative conferences to respond to student misbehaviour has grown (Blood 2005). Following the introduction of restorative conferences, the use of the term 'justice' was removed when used in the school setting. It was considered the term RJ was not reflective of how the approach was used in this environment. It was replaced by the term "restorative practices" (RP).

1.2 Restorative practices

The restorative practices approach reflects many of the key components of RJ, however, the RP approach is used to deal with student behaviour as opposed to crime and deviant behaviour which is where RJ has it foundations. Both approaches consider that when a wrongdoing has occurred it results in damaged relationships and these relationships need to be repaired by engaging the parties in conversation. Doing so allows the victim to feel empowered (Ahmed and Braithwaite 2011; Blood and Thorsborne 2005; Drewery and Winslade 2003; Morrison et al. 2005). Through this approach, there is an emphasis on maintaining and strengthening relationships to prevent the isolation and rejection that can be felt by both the victim and the wrongdoer (Morrison et al. 2005). The philosophy underlying RP is to promote resilience in both the person who has been harmed but also the person who has caused the harm. Ultimately, this approach helps young people become aware of how their actions affect other people and gives them the opportunity to take personal responsibility for those actions (McCluskey et al. 2008). The RP approach is in direct contrast to a punitive approach, which primarily focuses on the wrongdoer and how they defend themselves to minimise or avoid punishment (Morrison et al. 2005).

Over time, there has been a shift in how RP is applied in schools. Johnstone (2011) describes a shift from the old ways of using RP as a reactive method (which is reflective of RJ) for dealing with misbehaviour to a proactive, holistic approach that uses modelling pro-social behaviours and a common language that avoids focusing on blame or excuses (Blood and Thorsborne 2005). Today RP in schools is

considered as existing on a continuum incorporating both reactive and proactive approaches (see Fig. 1).

The reactive approach involves formally bringing together the students in a conference, after an incident has occurred, to discuss what happened and how to resolve the issue. Teachers ask students a series of affective questions when reacting to these situations for example (Wachtel 2012):

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

Although formal, reactive approaches continue to be widely used in schools, they are enhanced through proactive, holistic and relational style of language to communicate with students (Blood and Thorsborne 2005; Morrison 2006). This is achieved through the use of affective language. Affective language involves using statements about how someone was impacted by the other person's behaviour with the aim of eliciting feelings. An example of an affective statement might be 'I feel sad when you call me names because it hurts my feelings'. This style of language is promoted by many schools through the use of circle time (Hopkins 2002; Morrison and Vaandering 2012; Mosley 1993). During circle time, students sit in a circle with their teacher, which allows them an opportunity to speak as well as to listen to their peers. Circle time is used as a regular classroom activity, not just when a behavioural issue arises (Blood and Thorsborne 2005; Hopkins 2002; Morrison and Vaandering 2012).

Many schools have adopted a whole-school approach to RP which incorporates reactive and proactive approaches, and develop a shared ethos and philosophy within the school community. This is achieved through the adoption of codes of conduct and consistent school policies reflecting restorative principles (McCluskey et al. 2008; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). It is important to acknowledge that in many school settings RP can co-exist with punitive measures. However, leadership
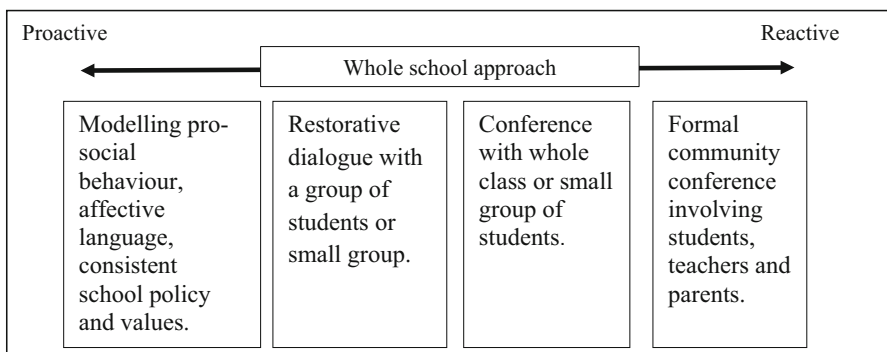

Fig. 1 The RP continuum. Adapted from Armstrong (2007), Morrison et al. (2005), and Wachtel (2012)

teams and teachers in RP schools strive to minimise their use of punitive approaches.

The emphasis in RP schools is on prevention, education, and engagement rather than controlling students through punitive measures (McCluskey et al. 2008; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). In addition, through the whole-school approach, school staff seek to build quality relationships through open dialogue to promote openness, honesty, and fairness for both staff and students (Wong et al. 2011).

1.3 Benefits of using RP

To date, school communities adopting RP have identified many positive impacts on the school environment. These include reductions in bullying incidents, greater collegiality amongst staff, and more caring, positive attitudes among staff and students overall (McCluskey et al. 2008; Wong et al. 2011). A study conducted in the state of Victoria, Australia, between 2002 and 2004 sought to examine a pilot community and RP program; its results suggested that RP could successfully address problem behaviours, develop social skills, and build quality relationships between students and teachers (Shaw 2007).

Although there are positive impacts on student outcomes and behaviour, adoption of a whole-school approach to RP has its challenges. One of the greatest challenges identified is creating cultural change across the school environment, especially where there is resistance from staff to move away from a traditional punitive approach (McCluskey et al. 2008; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). Shaw (2007) concluded that in order for school communities to sustain RP the focus needs to move from one of behaviour management and consider one of relationship management. For successful integration of RP, there is a need for students to be considered as participants in the process and not objects that need to be controlled (Morrison 2002; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). Engagement of students in the process can move a school from being ruled-based to one that is relational, and seeks to nurture social engagement (Morrison and Vaandering 2012).

1.4 Present study

Although there has been a series of studies internationally (Drewery and Winslade 2003; McCluskey et al. 2008; Shaw 2007; Wong et al. 2011) that have examined the effects of RP in the school setting, most of these studies have tended to concentrate on the reactive RP approach, as described. To date, there have been few studies that have sought to understand the direct impact that RP may have on changing students' behaviour. The current study sought to include both students' and teachers' perspectives to explore the extent to which this occurs. The main aim of the current paper was to address the following research questions:

1. What is the student experience of RP and how does RP impact on students and their behaviour?
2. What is the teacher experience of RP and how do they think it impacts on student behaviour?

2 Method

Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and focus groups were selected to address the research questions.

2.1 School recruitment

Participants were recruited from Catholic, government and independent schools in Melbourne, Australia. The schools needed to meet the following criteria: (1) RP had been implemented at least 4 years prior to the commencement of the study; (2) staff had undergone training in the use of RP; and (3) a 'whole-school' RP approach was being used. Six schools that met these criteria participated in the current study—three primary (students aged 5–12 years) and three secondary schools (students aged 12–18 years). Schools ranged in size from 300 students to 1350 students, with 22–170 teachers. The schools had diverse ethnic populations with languages other than English accounting for between 5 and 50% of the student population.

Prior research suggests that the change process during implementation of RP can take between 3 and 5 years (Blood and Thorsborne 2005). The current study used a minimum criteria of 4 years post initial implementation as a recruitment strategy. This timeframe was purposely chosen to ensure sufficient time had elapsed between initial training and the data collection for the study. A further reason was to explore the use of RP in experienced schools as a 'best practice' model hence the duration or time elapsed since implementation was an important component.

All schools who agreed to participate reported implementing the approach at least 5 years prior to the study.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1 School staff

School principals were requested to approach and recruit teachers to participate in the research. The inclusion criterion for teachers was for them to be familiar with and using RP to manage student behaviour. It was not a requirement for the teachers to have a strong interest in RP. From the six schools, there were 14 teachers who participated in one-on-one interviews. Of the teacher participants, 79% were female ($n = 11$) and 21% were males ($n = 3$). This number reflected the proportion of male and female teachers in Australian schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). All staff participants were teachers with the exception of one participant, who was primarily a pastoral carer/school psychologist. Teachers had between 5 and 20 years of teaching experience. In addition, six school principals (one from each school) completed a basic demographic questionnaire.

2.2.2 Students

All students in years 6 and 9 were asked by either their school principal or classroom teacher if they would like to participate in the study. All eligible students

participated. Many of the students recruited into the study were unfamiliar with the term "restorative justice" or "restorative practice" so were informed that the study was about their experience of school, school discipline, and circle time (the latter was the restorative approach term with which students were most familiar). Forty students participated in one of six focus groups. For the student participants, 52% were female ($n = 21$) and 48% were male ($n = 19$). Table 1 presents the number of male and female participants by school. Of the 19 secondary students, all were aged 15 years with the exception of two students who were 14 years of age. Primary school students ranged in age from 10 to 12 years.

2.3 Materials

Questions for teachers sought to establish teacher perceptions on the impact of RP within the school and the impact on student attitudes and behaviours. Teachers were asked to describe their use of RP, in particular when dealing with issues and as a means to promote positive behaviour. See "Appendix A" for an example of the teacher interview questions.

Similarly, the aim of the questions for students was to establish their understanding about RP and their opinions on the use of this approach to manage behaviour. In addition, students were asked how their teachers dealt with behavioural issues, if they liked the way their teachers dealt with issues, and their reasons for liking or not liking what their teachers did. Finally, students were asked to comment on what they thought was the best way to deal with student behaviour. See "Appendix A" for an example of the student interview questions.

2.4 Procedure

Subsequent to ethical clearance from the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee and relevant education authorities, school principals were contacted to ascertain their willingness for their school to participate in the study. Each school principal was provided with an information letter that outlined the study and he/she was asked to provide written consent for his/her school to participate. Each school principal that was contacted agreed to participate. Teachers were provided with an information letter and consent form to sign prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and teachers were advised all identifying

Table 1 Number of male and female student participants by school

School	Males	Females	Total participants
Primary school 1	5	3	8
Primary school 2	4	3	7
Primary school 3	2	4	6
Secondary school 1	3	2	5
Secondary school 2	–	9	9
Secondary school 3	5	–	5
Total	19	21	40

information would be removed to ensure confidentiality. Prior to commencement of the focus groups, written parental consent and student assent was required. Students were reminded that they could withdraw at any time, their names would not be identified, and all information would remain confidential.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted by an experienced researcher, between September and November, 2012. All the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.5 Data analysis

The data analysis was managed using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software package (QSR International 2013) and based upon an inductive approach. See Table 2 for a summary of the analysis. An inductive approach was chosen since it allows themes and findings to emerge from the data. This method of analysing the data is useful to explain how people experience a situation, event, or phenomenon which allows for a theoretical framework to be developed (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Creswell 2007). In practice, the transcripts were analysed for concepts and themes. The main themes were examined for similarities and differences then coded or grouped into categories (Liamputtong and Ezzy 2000). Following the initial coding process, the focus was on connecting themes and finding links within the data. Within Nvivo qualitative data analysis package, the initial theme or node is

Table 2 Data analysis process from transcribed interviews to deriving themes

Stage	Analysis activity	Researcher involvement
1	Interviews were read and re-read with initial coding using Nvivo data analysis software. Subsequently, interviews were hand coded with pen and paper. Key concepts were extracted and placed in a table indicating which of the interview participants was identified with which concept	1
2	Researcher 3 independently read and re-read 1/3 of the transcripts and rich text/key concepts	3
3	Rich text quotes to represent each of the key concepts were extracted and placed in a table with the key concepts	1, 3
4	Three researchers examined the rich text quotes and discussed the concepts and categories, thereby refining these into themes and sub-themes	1, 2, 3
5	Once the themes and sub-themes were agreed upon by all researchers a continual process of comparison occurred. This process continued until thematic saturation occurred. Thematic saturation occurred when no new concepts emerged from one interview and continued until there were no new concepts from all interviews identified	1, 2, 3
6	Reconstruction of the main themes commenced in a systematic manner. The themes were expanded and re-worked back into broader concepts through a process of meaning making. This process occurred over several months	1, 2
7	The analysis stage was finalized with an illustrative concept map and representational quotes were identified as common or contrasting views	1, 2

labelled broadly with relevant quotes being placed within the node. This main node is then examined further for sub-themes that are delineated by sub-nodes. The process continues reducing the quotes into smaller themes. In addition, the process allows for connections to be made vertically across themes as well as horizontally along themes. As part of the analysis process the concepts continued to be developed in a systematic manner. Once the concepts had been refined, they were expanded and re-worked back into broader concepts which refined commonalities. This constructivism approach resulted in the framework illustrated in the results.

The research team had various meetings and discussions regarding the main themes and concepts to seek agreement. Verification of the main themes between the researchers allowed for triangulation to occur. Finally, excerpts from the data were assigned to illustrate the main themes based on the participants' quotes.

3 Results

Results and key themes described were derived from all participants, primary and secondary teachers, and primary and secondary students. Both teachers and students could identify the broader benefits of the RP approach. In particular, they identified an increase in social skills which revealed benefits to personal relationships, and the overall school environment.

The results show the use of RP impacted on student behaviour and built social skills in five key ways; *Harmony* (both personal and being part of a more harmonious environment), *Empathy* for others, *Awareness* and *accountability* of one's own actions, *Respectful* relationships and *Thinking* in a reflective way (producing the acronym *H.E.A.R.T.*). Each of these aspects was described as being vital to learning, personal feelings and values. See Fig. 2.

All teachers, from both primary and secondary schools, agreed on the common key themes depicted. However, there were some differences between students. Primary school students spoke in broader terms about their increase in social skills and having a general insight or awareness about their behaviour. Although similar aspects were mentioned by secondary school students, the older students tended to focus on why certain skills were important, for example, having respect for others means they are more likely to respect you. Each of the key themes is described in the following section.

3.1 Harmony

Both students and teachers described how the use of RP gave them skills which promoted a more harmonious environment.

Teachers described how the RP framework gave them the skills to manage student behaviour in a calmer manner. As Ms H, a secondary school teacher, describes, *"I deal with it* [the behaviour] *in a more calm manner knowing that if I follow the process then we can have a good outcome"*.

It was felt that when this process occurred then it resulted in more effective communication and a more harmonious environment as Ms C, a primary school

Fig. 2 Key themes—social skills and H.E.A.R.T

teacher, explains *"You don't hear raised voices or that sort of thing as you walk through the corridor. It's got a very warm feel about it and it's very much a community based school in that we have a strong sense of community"*.

Student reported similar beliefs and could identify that when their teacher was calm it was beneficial to how they felt. One female secondary student believed that *"…them* [the teachers] *being calm and understanding and stuff, that really helps"*. Students describe how a harmonious school makes them feel safe. Another student explains *"them* [the teachers and staff] *being calm and understanding and stuff, that helps…everyone is so genuinely nice and* [they] *make you feel safe"* (female secondary student).

One female primary school student describes how she felt a sense of community was built through peer mediation with older students assisting younger ones. This created a safer, calmer school playground, provided reassurance to younger students and gave a sense of responsibility to older students. This concept was supported by one male primary student who explains *"Sometimes you are dealing with one problem and then another problem comes along ….one good thing about peer mediating is that the little kids trust you with their problems"*.

3.2 Empathy

When teachers were asked about the biggest impact RP had on the school culture the common response was empathy. Ms N, a primary school teacher, described how she identified this by the way students spoke and the language they used, *"I think the language…they are aware of the language and the empathy…they now talk*

more about the effect…when you deal with them they are talking about how their behaviour is affecting others". Mr M, a secondary school teacher, supported this belief and described how RP was *"powerful in terms of developing empathy"*.

Similarly to the teachers, students also identified their ability to empathise. One female secondary school student gave a definition of empathy *"…it's a two-way street so it's the way you feel* [you] *might affect someone else and* vice versa". Students tended to offer examples of how they thought about other people in an empathetic way and why it was important to think of others. One female primary school student describes, *"It makes me upset to see other people upset because no-one deserves to be put through bad times at school"*. Another female secondary student explains, *"they were calling her midget and pushing her around and stuff and it made us feel really bad—we really wanted to help her"*.

3.3 Awareness and accountability

Another key response from teachers was how the regular use of RP in the classroom through circle time created conversations which allowed students to build awareness of their own behaviour and take accountability for their actions. Ms H, a secondary school teacher, described the change she saw within students *"it would be the responsibility the kids take for their actions…there tends to be that tendency for them to straight away stop and go 'oh great, what have I done in this situation?' …instead of always going 'but she said this', 'but that teacher hates me' or whatever. You don't get nearly as much. So less of that victim mentality"*.

One male secondary student supported this claim by explaining how teachers use circle time to help build awareness *"when we're really unsettled she'll be like 'all right, everyone in a circle' and we all know"*. All students were able to explain why it was important to be aware of their behaviour, *"Yeah, and how both of you can overcome it, the issues and what you can do in the future to prevent it from happening as well"* (male primary school student). Students explained how building awareness gave them the skills to see how situations can affect people in different ways, one female secondary student describes a situation *I had a bit of a situation just recently in my class, and a few other girls, and something Ms 'X' helped me and a few friends work out that everyone is completely different. No matter what you do, you just – it affects other people in different ways"* (female secondary school student).

3.4 Respectful relationships

Both primary and secondary students described how they learnt from their experiences and how they observed other people behaving helped them distinguish between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. In particular, students could identify the benefits of acting in pro-social ways when they witnessed these behaviours being demonstrated by their teachers, as one female primary school student comments *"… the way they talk to each other and the way our teachers interact with each other, basically just looking up on people and how everybody else acts to each other, like how they treat each other"*.

In addition, students' comments suggested that they valued a positive student-teacher relationship. Students were astutely aware of the need to respect their teachers, believing if they treated their teacher with respect then their teacher would treat them in the same manner, as one female secondary student describes, *"…the teachers are all really nice to each other as well, and they treat each other with respect as well, and that teaches us to also do the same"*. Similarly, Ms I, a secondary school teacher identified that she had more positive and respectful relationships with colleagues as well as with students *"I've always had good relationships but I've found that my relationships with staff and students I think have become even more respectful"*.

Teachers and students spoke of how the use of circle time was a way to develop respect and practice skills for each other. Ms C, a primary school teacher, said *"… the use of circle time* [to] *develop those open lines of communication and develop respect for all students, all people within the class and even across the class levels"*. When the students were asked what they learnt from circle time they gave a similar response, one female secondary student said *"…respecting others. Just understanding where people come from"*.

3.5 Reflective thinking

The final main theme which emerged was 'thinking', in particular, thinking in a reflective way. Both students and teachers were asked a variety of questions about life at school including relationships and dealing with behaviour. Students across all schools described situations where they were encouraged to think in a reflective way which generally involved having a conversation or meeting with their teacher to address issues, one male primary student explained how teachers use a restorative session to achieve this *"…you hear the other side of the story then you can hear what annoyed them and they can see what annoyed you so then you can sort of see…"*. Other students spoke of how RP *"helps you reflect on a lot of things"* and *"put themselves in someone else's shoes"*. One female secondary student felt this was important because *"you need to be considerate of everyone…you need to be aware that everyone has different feelings"*.

Teachers also identified that students demonstrated thinking in a reflective way *"…they come in and you can just see them and go 'is everything all right?' and they'll just say 'I did this and I know I shouldn't have'."* (Ms F, primary school teacher). Another female primary teacher explained how the use of RP had, overtime, increased students' ability to think of others *"…I don't think they'd* [the students] *ever been forced to think about it [their behaviour] from the other person's point of view. Whereas now, well I personally don't have to do a lot of restoratives because my children have come up from Prep. They're aware of how their actions affect others"*.

The five key themes described were collectively seen to develop and build social skills with others, such as more effective communication and understanding. In particular, students spoke of how the skills they learnt at school improved their social skills. As one female, primary student explains *"it's important to go to school because it teaches you social skills…if you wagged you wouldn't have any social*

skills". A male secondary student elaborated on this *"I think to do well you have to have* [social] *skills. Yeah, you need to be able to get along with people because if your boss hates you they're not going to promote you"*. The students were aware that they needed the skills to get along with other people, resolve conflict and communicate effectively to build healthy relationships. Teachers made similar comments explaining that 'conflict management' and an increase in social skills would be beneficial in future relationships.

4 Discussion

This study explored both the experiences and the impact of RP on student behaviour using an inductive qualitative approach. Five key themes emerged from the data summarised as the acronym *H.E.A.R.T.* to reflect a new framework. The five themes were, *Harmony* (feelings of calmness and a more harmonious environment), *Empathy* towards others' feelings, *Awareness* and accountability for personal actions, *Respectful* relationships and *Thinking* in a reflective way. *H.E.A.R.T.* is a framework that represents core RP values and is synonymous with the foundations of competent social skills (see Fig. 2).

4.1 Harmony

When RP was successfully implemented, a more harmonious school environment was described by both students and teachers in the study. This finding is similar to Wong et al. (2011) who reported that RP contributed towards a more harmonious school and classroom environment. Wong identified circle time as attributing to improve relationships. The current study found that when teachers used RP, the process following gave teachers confidence to deal with situations in a calm manner. Students and teachers thought this calm response and the more harmonious environment increased the sense of community within the school. Consequently, students felt safe at school. Other previous research concurs with these findings (Kaveney and Drewery 2011; McCluskey et al. 2008).

4.2 Empathy for others

The current findings showed that empathy was one of the greatest effects of implementing RP in a school. Students were able to think about the language they used and how that could impact on the feelings of others. Prior research has also identified that one of the benefits of RP is an increase in students' understanding of others' feelings and this enhances their empathy (Wong et al. 2011). Wong et al. suggested that the increase in empathy was due to clear and consistent guidelines within the school. The current study concurred with such findings. Further, the current study attributed empathy to the style of language used. RP uses an affective style of language such as 'when you disrupt the classroom I feel disappointed' (Wachtel 2012, p. 9). The use of this style of language aims to empower the individual to reflect on their behaviour.

4.3 Awareness and accountability

The current findings demonstrate that awareness and accountability was also built through the use of language. In particular, through regular conversations such as those promoted through circle time. Circle time can be used proactively such as a general discussion with the teacher about the weekend or when reacting to a particular issue, thereby offering students the opportunity to problem solve (Blood and Thorsborne 2005; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). The main purpose is to promote open dialogue and build healthy relationships. Prior research findings suggest that there is an increase in awareness following class meeting such as circle time (Kaveney and Drewery 2011). A unique finding in the current study included that students reported development of an increase in awareness through circle time with consequential increase in respect for their peers. This finding links with the fourth main theme in the current study, respectful relationships.

4.4 Respectful relationships

The current study found that when students observed their teacher treating others with respect, they then could see the benefit of behaving in a similar way. This finding is consistent with the principles of Social Learning Theory (Bandura and McDonald 1963). When teachers, parents, or other adults act in a positive pro-social way it conveys to students the most appropriate ways of behaving in the school environment (Morrison et al. 2005). In a school using RP, there is a high level of importance placed on fostering quality relationships between students and teachers. Teachers in such schools are aware of the influence their own behaviour has on the children they teach (Morrison et al. 2005). A community-based approach, such as RP, is particularly effective in managing and melding student behaviour when there is commitment, enthusiasm and modelling of appropriate behaviour from the school staff (McCluskey et al. 2008).

4.5 Thinking in a reflective way

The final theme and finding was thinking in a reflective way. Research suggests that the use of RP in schools gives students the skills and opportunity to reflect on their behaviour (McCluskey et al. 2008). Consequently, students take personal responsibility for their actions. In the current study, students who took responsibility for their behaviour developed an awareness and were prepared to reflect on the impact of their behaviour toward others. In addition to the students, teachers also reflected on their relationships with colleagues and described greater levels of respect. This finding is consistent with McCluskey et al. (2008) who suggested that RP could have the greatest impact on the school environment when staff developed the ability to reflect on the process and their relationships with students and other staff. Building healthy relationships through developing connectedness and a sense of community is a key component of the RP model (McCluskey et al. 2008; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). These aspects are important components to a healthy school environment.

This study found that students had a good understanding of RP and were engaged with the process. Prior research has suggested that in order for RP to be successfully implemented into the school environment students need to be actively engaged in the process as opposed to being subjected to a rule-based approach that controls behaviour (Morrison 2002; Morrison and Vaandering 2012). The current study found that there were many perceived benefits when schools adopted a holistic RP approach. The findings highlight how the use of RP can foster social skills and relationships, taking responsibility for one's own behaviour, and develop understanding and empathy for the feelings of other people. Students described how RP and the use of circle time was a means to enhance these pro-social skills and ways of thinking. All participants, both students and teachers, identified the potential long-term personal benefits of adopting the RP approach such as getting along with others, and conflict-resolution which they considered as important social skills.

4.6 Limitations

There were some limitations to the current study. The qualitative nature of the study means the methodology limits the generalizability of the findings. While the findings advance the knowledge about the impact of RP on student behaviour and social skills, they did not determine whether students in other schools gain these skills. Further, with regard to the use of focus groups with students, the use of focus groups can create challenges in the management of participant responses to ensure a balance in views and opinions. As such, the skill of the researcher is an important component in managing group interactions. However, the authors acknowledge that various ages and comprehension level of the students may have a limiting impact on the findings. Despite these limitations, the current study collected interesting new data on the impact of RP on student behaviour. Of particular value were the perceptions of the students reflecting on their own behaviour.

Due to limited prior research examining students' perspectives on the use of RP, the findings of the current research offer a perspective that has not previously been reported. The current findings suggest that students not only embrace and value the RP approach, but they also learn some key skills that seem to further their own social skills, emotional wellbeing and impact the whole school community. Such a finding supports the importance of RP in the development of a school community with students who are capable of connectedness, reflection, and who can build healthy relationships. When students gain skills to get along with others they can feel connected to their school community, and academic performance can improve (Mirsky 2007).

Future research might explore the extent to which changes in student behaviour are sustained over time. The purpose of RP is to promote personal accountability, change and increase pro-social skills. To date, no longitudinal studies have determined the long-term benefits of schools adopting an RP approach. Future research should include longitudinal studies to gauge the long-term impact on the use of RP on individuals and the whole school community. In particular, they should focus on the extent to which the use of RP influences the use of punitive disciplinary measures, and changes the long-term pro-social outcomes for students.

4.7 Implications and conclusion

One of the main strengths and outcomes of this study is the development of the *H.E.A.R.T.* framework which illustrates the impact of RP on student behaviour. The user-friendly term allows both students and teachers to understand some of the core values which underlie the RP approach. The authors suggest that the term is easy to remember so application is more likely. The use of the *H.E.A.R.T.* framework sees a further move away from the terms associated with crime and the justice system; it implies an attitude which is more reflective of the school environment and would be easily identifiable to students of all ages. The focus is one which promotes positive behaviour, relationship and community.

The authors suggest that the *H.E.A.R.T.* framework might be used in various practical applications throughout the classroom and school environment. For students, the framework could be used as an everyday tool to prompt them and to guide recall of the principles of RP, for example, through the use of visual material such as posters. The framework and contents would be particularly suited to circle time in either a formal or informal manner, for example with discussion on the meaning of each main theme. For teachers, the *H.E.A.R.T.* framework can act as a reminder about the benefits of social/emotional learning to the whole school community. It may encourage teachers to move away from punitive measures in favour of restorative methods. Teachers can support student social and emotional learning and change by incorporating each aspect of *H.E.A.R.T.* into daily learning. For the school community including administration, parents and visitors, seeing evidence, such as posters, which promotes social and emotional learning through the use of *H.E.A.R.T.* is likely to build confidence about the outcomes of the RP approach.

The study highlights the benefits that using the RP approach can have as opposed to only being considered as a process to manage student behaviour. Future research might further explore the use of *H.E.A.R.T.* during implementation, evaluation and explore if it aids in the sustainability of the RP approach. In conclusion, the findings make a valuable contribution to research in this field and highlight that when RP is adopted as a whole-school approach to manage student behaviour and promote pro-social skills, the potential benefits to students, teachers and school communities can be significant.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix A: interview guides

Teacher questions

1. How do you think using restorative practices techniques have influenced or impacted on the students?
2. Can you tell me about some of the restorative practices you might use in the classroom?
3. How has student behaviour changed over time?
4. What do you see as being the main challenge in sustaining restorative practices?

Student questions

1. What have you learnt from your teachers or being in school about getting along with others?
2. What have you learnt using restorative practices?
3. Tell me about some of your school rules?
4. If you were involved in an incident at school or broke one of the school rules what would happen?

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