

Report From Singapore: A High School Adopts Restorative Practices

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

In 2005, Ping Yi Secondary School in Singapore was chosen by the Ministry of Education as one of four pilot schools to receive training and begin using restorative practices (RP). The school is now entering its fourth year of the pilot and is working to train teachers and administrators to use RP reactively in cases of discipline, but also proactively to create a restorative school culture.

Singapore is a prosperous industrial nation and center of trade for south Asia. The city sports beautiful high-rise office buildings as well as successful factories. The small island country about the size of Chicago (one of the few city-states in the modern world) has a population of over four million and sits just off the coast of Malaysia a few short miles north of the equator. The population is comprised of about 75 percent Chinese, 14 percent Malays, 9 percent Indians, and the rest Eurasians and other groups.

Ping Yi Secondary School (<http://www.pyss.edu.sg>), with 1300 students aged 13 to 18, is located in a mature Singapore neighborhood (Chai Chee) with a population of about 80,000 to 100,000, on the eastern part of the island. The public school serves students from blue and white collar families alike.

In a society with a tradition of punitive discipline measures – including “caning,” corporal punishment involving hitting a student with a rattan cane for the most serious offenses – RP is seen as a route to a more cooperative form of discipline and as a means to building better relationships between students and staff.

Said Julia Woo, principal of Ping Yi, “When Ping Yi embarked on the RP

journey in 2005, we were looking for a disciplinary tool that could really work for our socially disadvantaged and disengaged students. Initially, the buy-in was slow as teachers were trying to reconcile the non-punitive approach of RP to traditional punitive approaches.” She added, “However, as we progressed in our RP journey and gained deeper understanding and insights into RP, the school began to see RP differently. It is not about discipline per se, but a whole-school philosophy that would trigger off curriculum reform, organizational change and re-culturation of the school.”

generic questions and told our teachers, ‘Maybe you’re already doing these things, but we want to look at it from another perspective.’”

Chan said that shortly after the initial training he helped run a restorative conference for a senior class (4th year) where all the teachers found the group difficult to teach because students were constantly noisy and disruptive and seemed uninterested. First, teachers were asked if they would like to have a meeting with the students where they could tell them how they were being affected by their behavior. They agreed. The children were



Ping Yi Secondary School students participate in a restorative circle.

Added Martin Chan, head of the department of pupil management at Ping Yi, “We were mindful at the beginning to package RP as something that teachers could and would want to use.” A trainer from Australia delivered the initial three-day training, where teachers learned the restorative questions, the rationale behind RP and how it could help to correct behavior and build positive relationships. The restorative questions include: “What happened?” “Who was affected?” and “How do you and others feel about the incident?” These questions help children think about the impact of their actions. Added Chan, “We started with these

told about the idea, and they also seemed disposed to the meeting.

The students and teachers were arranged in a circle and the conference was held. During the conference, one teacher broke down and talked about how much she wanted to teach the class and how it hurt her because she couldn’t. One student talked about how she was angry at the teachers because they were spending so much time scolding the misbehaving students, so she lost out on time for learning. One of the teachers apologized, saying, “I didn’t see it from your point of view, but now I do.” There were four students who were the most

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disruptive. It was clear that they were listening throughout the conference, and one spoke, apologizing to the teachers and the class.

At the end of the conference, an agreement was reached where students who had been disruptive or had neglected to bring assignments to school would remove their desks to the hallway. A student came up with the idea and the teachers and class were all agreeable. They wrote the terms on a piece of paper and pinned it up in the classroom. Chan said that when he was making his rounds a few days later he saw four or five students with their desks out in the hallway. They were all craning their necks to try and see what was going on in the classroom. "It was amazing," said Chan. "Learning and teaching could again take place, and a couple months later all the students graduated."

Part of the discipline policy at the school is to give teachers independence and authority in their classes. "Teachers used to refer the slightest offenses to the discipline committee," said Chan. "It doesn't help if the administration comes in, and then the students think the teacher can't handle anything. RP provides a first round of intervention."

Part of the difficulty is making this work. When teachers started using the restorative questions the students began to say, "Why are all you teachers asking us the same questions?" Said Evelyn Choo, a social studies teacher at Ping Yi, "The students begin to give the answers they think we want to hear." She also said that for every 10 interventions it seems only one or two lead to positive changes in behavior.

But Choo has also had some very good experiences using RP. She oversees discipline for the second and third year students (equivalent to 10th and 11th grades in the U.S.) and she gets to meet a lot of parents. In one case where a student was frequently truant from school,

she engaged the parents by holding a conference with them and their son. She started a restorative dialogue by asking the student: "Who has been affected by your truancy?" Having the parents present helped the student take a serious look at his actions.

"It's important to get the right people in," said Choo. For example, she's found that in cases of bullying it's really useful to bring the offender and the victim together. "The offender has to sit there and listen to the feelings of the victim," she said. "It really hits them to hear how the person feels, because they often just bully without thinking about it."

The idea to begin implementing RP in public schools in Singapore came after implementation of restorative justice (RJ) in the juvenile court system, starting about five years ago. (It could be said that this progression in Singapore echoes the development of RP in general, in that the principles of RJ were initially adapted for use in other contexts, such as schools, social work and the workplace.) The Ministry of Education has since expanded its pilot to include more than 20 schools.

After the initial year of the pilot, a group of teachers and administrators went to Australia to witness firsthand the use of RP in several schools. According to Chan this gave the group "a total change of perspective. It gave a lot of hope to see it working in all the schools—from private schools to neighborhood schools." The group shared their experience with the teachers when they returned and set a five-year target to become a restorative school by the year 2010.

The success of RP in a school is generally easiest to determine by qualitative measures. The positive feelings and atmosphere that pervades a school culture is what the team that visited Australia experienced so strongly. Still, there are quantitative measures that can be made. Chan and his colleague Ismail Bin Yu-

soff presented a report at the IIRP's 10th World Conference, in Budapest, Hungary, in November 2007, which showed that their implementation of RP correlated with reductions in the number of students who were late to school, the number of smoking offenses and the number of fights. Overall, from 2005 to 2007, the total number of disciplinary referrals dropped sharply from 500 to less than 200 per year (See "Toward a Restorative School," pp. 12-16: http://www.iirp.org/hu07/hu07_martin_yusoff.pdf).

This year Ping Yi will officially introduce the ideas of RP to student leaders. In the following year, the school hopes to formally educate parents about RP. The school leadership also supports an annual RP seminar for all the staff to take stock of what has happened and how to move forward with RP.

According to Chan, at the annual RP seminar there is a platform for sharing of success stories and the hope is that the stories will rub off on others. "All the teachers are very caring; it's a very caring culture and the students know it," Chan concluded. "The bottom line now is about developing positive relationships with teachers, students and parents—all the stakeholders."

Woo believes that RP is helping to improve "the quality of relationships between all members of the school community." She said, "There is better communication and engagement of pupils as they feel that their voices are heard. My vision is to make RP a permanent feature of the school where RP is embedded in every aspect of school life, such as building a supportive school culture, a conducive learning environment and even in staff management." Woo concluded, "I hope that Ping Yi will be a success story for other schools and organizations to emulate in developing a professional working environment that is underpinned by restorative philosophy and practice." ☉