

All of the vice principals' responses were collected in a qualitative database and analyzed for recurring themes. The resulting findings provide a window on how vice-principals both theorize and operationalize their conceptions of restorative practices. Based on these findings, the authors propose that the theoretical underpinnings do support school leaders' efforts to build community pre and post cyber-events.

Earlier approaches to school discipline in Ontario, as seen through a review of the literature, were perceived as punitive, so much so that they were brought to the attention of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Safe School policies in Ontario were subsequently revised and, in the process, they offered alternative approaches to school disciplinary responses. These changes now allow the school administrators to choose from a toolkit of potential responses related to legislated expectations. The research outlined here explored the basis on which school leaders were making decisions about which tools they would use when responding to cyber events.

This study also examined current secondary school administrators' views regarding the efficacy of restorative practices as a means of responding to cyberbullying and online aggression. It also examined how and in what circumstances secondary school administrators use restorative practices for incidents that happen or originate online.

5. Findings

The findings from this study provide a window into what is happening in the contributing secondary schools with respect to restorative practices and cyber events. First of all, a finding which was not expected was that most of the school leaders in the study observe what is happening in social media, and use social media to track student behaviour, but they participate rarely, if at all, in social media for their own personal purposes, preferring to look in at the online world from the edges.

Other findings were more predictable. The study was designed to assess school leaders' training in restorative practices. These findings are reported in the section which follows. The second and third categories of findings focus on the use of restorative practices. The school leaders reported both *proactive* restorative practice use as well as restorative practices which were *responsive* to the cyber events. The fourth category of findings indicates that the vice principals in this study use restorative practices as learning opportunities. These findings are categorized in this way and reported below.

5.1. Vice principal training

All vice principals in the study indicated that they possessed an understanding of restorative practices. Approximately 1/3 of the vice principals had workshop training. 1/3 had one-day training, and approximately 1/3 had two-day training. Most respondents, therefore, had some degree of training in restorative practices but not extensive training. It was evident from the study's findings that, regardless of the level of training, the vice-principals included restorative practices as part of their toolkit for maintaining a respectful community in their schools.

5.2. Proactive restorative practices

One of the interesting findings of this study is that, while some respondents indicated that no negative cyber events were reported, they still felt that restorative practices were being used that focused on the proactive communication approaches the school had to prevent cyberbullying. One respondent posted that "Prevention/awareness is a big factor for us and having students repair harm and learn from their mistakes is very important." Proactive approaches included offering workshops to attempt to prevent incidents and to help create a healthy school climate in an effort to proactively "make things right." Members of the community were also brought in to address students in assemblies in an "attempt to prevent incidents and to help create a healthy school climate." This language, included in the restorative questions asked in conferences and encounters, would appear to be part of the language administrators used in their statements to students as a general approach to students involved in school-based and online conflicts.

This idea of prevention and awareness as part of restorative practice is reflective of earlier claims that restorative practices can precede the harmful incident in a proactive way [24].

5.3. Responsive restorative practices

Most of the events reported by vice principals taking place over the six-week research period were in response to cyber events that had created harm to other students. The reporting of the events was not always done by the victims of the cyber issues. School leaders reported that all stakeholders in schools – staff, parents, and students- were potential sources of information for negative online behaviour and cyberbullying.

The continuum of responsive restorative practices reported in this study ranges from informal to formal

interventions which administrators may choose to use in response to cyber wrongdoing.

The research data did indicate that small impromptu conferences were held. Vice principals did acknowledge the use of affective questions in their dealings with both students who had been wronged and students who had caused harm. The participants appeared to use these questions in different circumstances with different degrees of formality. For example, one respondent stated “we generally tend to fluctuate from the informal affective statements to the small impromptu conferences and/or group conferences.” Another vice principal indicated that they used a small impromptu “offenders only” conference. They did not articulate the nature of the questions nor the extent to which they had been adapted.

However, the vice principals did not always use small conferences. They did not, during the course of this study, identify using a large group conference. They did, however, consider using it but this decision was subject to the willingness of those involved in the cyber incident.

Sometimes a “restorative focus” was reportedly used with one vice principal responding that establishing dignity, putting aside grievances, and maintaining respect were the outcomes of school-based restorative practices.

In one instance reported by a vice-principal, restorative practices were used to respond to tweets made in relation to a school-based verbal altercation. In this case, the altercation preceded the tweets, but the tweets preceded the restorative practices.

Restorative practices were also used in the early stages of an investigation of online threats although this practice, too, was in response to cyber aggression. In this case, however, the instigator was not interested in participating in a restorative conference.

Restorative practices were also used in relation to a team conflict that had then escalated on social media. In this case, small and individual conferences with restorative questions took place. The school-based conflict preceded the negative cyber activity which was met with restorative practices.

Restorative practices were also considered in response to threatening online behaviour by someone who was impersonating a student. This example was especially complex and was followed by a number of sanctions that included police involvement. Once again, a vice-principal reported that restorative practices were used in response to negative cyber activity.

5.4. Adaptation by the vice principals

Vice principals reported variations in how they considered and used restorative practices in relation to online aggression and cyberbullying. For example, they took action at different points of the restorative continuum. Sometimes that included only asking restorative questions. Sometimes that included impromptu conferences although the data indicated that school administrators rarely used the formal conferences. The findings indicated that while vice principals typically decided upon what kind of restorative practice was used, that decision was subject to the willingness of students to participate as they “must be open to discussion.” In other words, vice-principals used discretion to determine the level of formality of the restorative conference.

Vice principals also reported the consideration of time. In short, circumstances, willingness, and time were identified as considerations in the use of restorative practices as found in the restorative continuum. As one vice principal stated, “We can’t always restore relationships...What we can do is come to a common understanding.”

While vice principals fitted restorative practice responses to the nature of the cyber event, they cited instances in which they would not proceed with restorative practices. For example, both parties have to agree to voluntarily participate. The offender has to agree to participate and take responsibility. As one vice principal stated, “A restoration meeting will only move forward in a positive direction if both parties are willing to be open to discussion.”

Vice principals also reported using other resources and sanctions that included police, social work, ongoing parent communication, and what they identified as ongoing restorative practices as a result of the complexity of the cyber issue.

6. Conclusions

This study finds that while the vice principals in this study were not, themselves, involved in social media, they found themselves working at the edge of social media because schools are indeed at the nexus or the point where out-of-school, online behaviour becomes reported to the school because it has impacted students and the school community. The vice-principals also reported that their schools were experiencing a range of different situations associated with online misconduct of a harmful nature but that most of the incidents did not involve bullying. The vice-principals indicated that the restoration of community and safety was something they took very seriously and occupied a fair amount of their time.

This study finds that vice principals consider the use of both formal and informal approaches, and apply discretion to determine the level of formality matching a definition of restorative practices which is “the use of informal and formal processes that precede wrongdoing...build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing” [24]. In addition, the school administrators report that they use both proactive and preventative approaches. Most of the restorative practices reported by the vice principals were in response to a negative cyber events or a school event that had spilled over into social media which also was met with a restorative response.

6.1. Informal use

With respect to the restorative practices continuum (Figure 1), this study finds that the vice principals generally use situational restorative practices and most often, informally. They described their use of restorative practices as in fluctuation and in relation to individual situations. They reported their use of restorative practices as using statements, questions, and small impromptu conferences in response to wrongdoing.

The findings in this study would indicate that vice principals adapt restorative practices to suit the circumstances of the situation. They also readily opted not to include some participants if they were not willing or if their participation would further affect the victim. This is in keeping with the established principles of restorative practices as articulated by Wachtel [24]. Of interest in this study’s findings is that no formal conferences were reported during the six weeks of data collection.

If violations against people and relationship create a sense of responsibility which then becomes the obligation to make things right [25], then the vice principals who participated in this study appear to understand and enact these principles and, in the process have assumed this responsibility themselves. For example, the vice principals in this study used Zehr’s specific language of “making things right.” They also spoke repeatedly of a sense of obligation they had to “keep students safe”, an obligation they said that preceded the legislation requiring them to do so.

McCluskey et al., [15, 16] make a critical distinction as they consider approaches used by schools that include restorative practices and those found exclusively in the legal system. In the legal system, the victim and the offender do not have to continue to be part of the same community. In schools, those involved in the conflict often do remain in the community.. This study supports this

finding. Because of this distinction, what happens in schools requires a distinct skill and experience set. All restorative approaches and practices in schools are subject to the ongoing interaction of both victims and offenders in classrooms, in social media sites, and in anonymous chatrooms. The vice principals in this study indicated that restorative practices in schools require the willingness of both parties to make this happen but also the awareness that “We can’t always restore relationships.”

The vice principals in this study also discussed the importance of educating parties about the nature of communication online. They want students to understand that online activities establish a “digital footprint” which is an online record of the harmful event unfolding. The vice principals attempted to at least soften the digital footprint if they could and they wanted students to use cyber events as learning experiences.

6.2 Recommendations

Restorative practices, as indicated by the responses of the Ontario secondary school vice principals in this study, are seen as one viable means of responding to negative online activity including conflict and cyberbullying. Although these online environments typically indicate a lack of social regulation through social presence, these deficiencies can be offset by the use of restorative practices. This offers some encouragement to continue to train school leaders in restorative practices while still acknowledging that they will use discretion in their application.

According to the data provided, vice-principals report that their responses may be proactive, preventative measures or actions taken in response to a harmful cyber event. Regardless, school leaders report that they create opportunities for students to take responsibility and to feel empathy. The responses of the vice-principals indicate that it seems promising that online activity can be regulated through attempts to maximize affect, create opportunities for empathy, and taking responsibility. These findings may help other school leaders to see both the proactive and responsive uses for restorative practices. In addition, it is hoped that this study helps other secondary school vice principals see themselves and the situations that they encounter reflected in this research.

Further, this study also provides recognition that the schools have become the nexus for cyber crisis management and restorative practices solutions. Given that reality, there is also promise seen in the potential of restorative practices as a productive response to the reported rise in cyberbullying and

online conflict. Academics, school stakeholders, policy writers, and lawmakers who view this research may be encouraged to continue research into social presence and the impact of its absence in the anonymity of social media.

6.3. Limitations and implications for further research

This is a small study which took place over a six-week data collection period. Further reporting on this study will consider both the policy context of secondary schools and the absence of social presence in harmful cyber events. More research is needed to understand as well, why the secondary school administrators in this study report that they use social media only from the sidelines or “standing on the edge” of their students’ cyber-worlds.

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