

Restorative Justice at St Matthew's Mudgee



At the end of 2004, St Matthews Central School Mudgee decided to embark on a new programme of behaviour management using the Restorative Justice programme developed by Marist Youth Care in Sydney. St Matthews' staff, students and parents were all involved. Students were the first to be introduced to the programme with the entire Year 9 cohort participating in the student leader workshop at the end of 2004. At the beginning of 2005, staff had a pupil-free day which introduced them to the values and ideas which underpin the programme. The aim is to skill the staff, improve the pastoral care structures and establish a restorative culture. Sixty parents and teachers attended an evening meeting to learn about the programme and secondary parents in particular were very amused and enlightened by the role-plays. They were particularly impressed with the strategies for dealing with a problem with young people in a non-judgmental way.

The programme was undertaken with funding from the Australian Government Quality Teaching Project (AGQTP) under the National Safe Schools banner. St Matthews was selected as a pilot school as they were about to review their behaviour management policy and the school was keen to embrace the philosophy of Restorative Justice. Marist Youth Care group from Sydney under the direction of Lyn Harrison with the assistance of Maurizio Vespa and Br Tony Leon ran the programme for the school.

Restorative Justice views misbehaviour not as a breaking of the rules but as a violation against people. Compassion, forgiveness and inclusiveness are the cornerstones of the programme so sound relationships must be maintained and teachers and students are given the tools to support these sound relationships. Students are helped to analyse the impact of their behaviour on others, with the teacher listening to them and guiding them through the process rather than disciplining them. The focus is on the behaviour, to allow the student to learn from the misbehaviour and to re-establish good relationships while maintaining everyone's dignity. This is not seen as a soft option as students are asked to listen to others, accept their poor behaviour and make amends and find a way forward.

If there is misbehaviour or conflict, then the key people need to be brought together to heal any damaged relationships. A continuum of processes is in place to help to reintegrate a student who has been badly behaved. This moves from use of the "affective questions" to full-scale conferencing, which can involve a large number of stakeholders.

St Matthews has found that there was a significant drop in detention and a more cohesive happy school environment ensued. Senior students have taken on a mentoring role with younger students in the playground and have assisted them in solving problems and re-establishing good relationships. A teacher noted how satisfying it was to see students take ownership of the programme and work with each other to settle conflicts.

The school will continue with the programme in 2006 with new staff being serviced by Gene Smith who completed a six-day Restorative Coach programme in Sydney. MacKillop College has embarked on the programme in 2005 with a staff day and several executive workshops and St Mary's Dubbo, Cathedral School, Holy Family Bathurst will begin in 2006. Later in the year two more Central schools, St Lawrence's Coonabarabran and St Joseph's Oberon will begin the programme.

"Celebrating Catholic Education 2006"
Catholic Observer
February 2006 issue