

# RANGIĀTEA

## OPOTIKI COLLEGE

# EXEMPLAR

The Rangiātea project consists of case studies and exemplars from five secondary schools, each of them on a journey towards realising Māori student potential. The case studies look at the strategies used by the school leadership team and report on the key factors that contributed to lifting Māori student achievement. The exemplars step through how a particular programme has been used successfully in each school.

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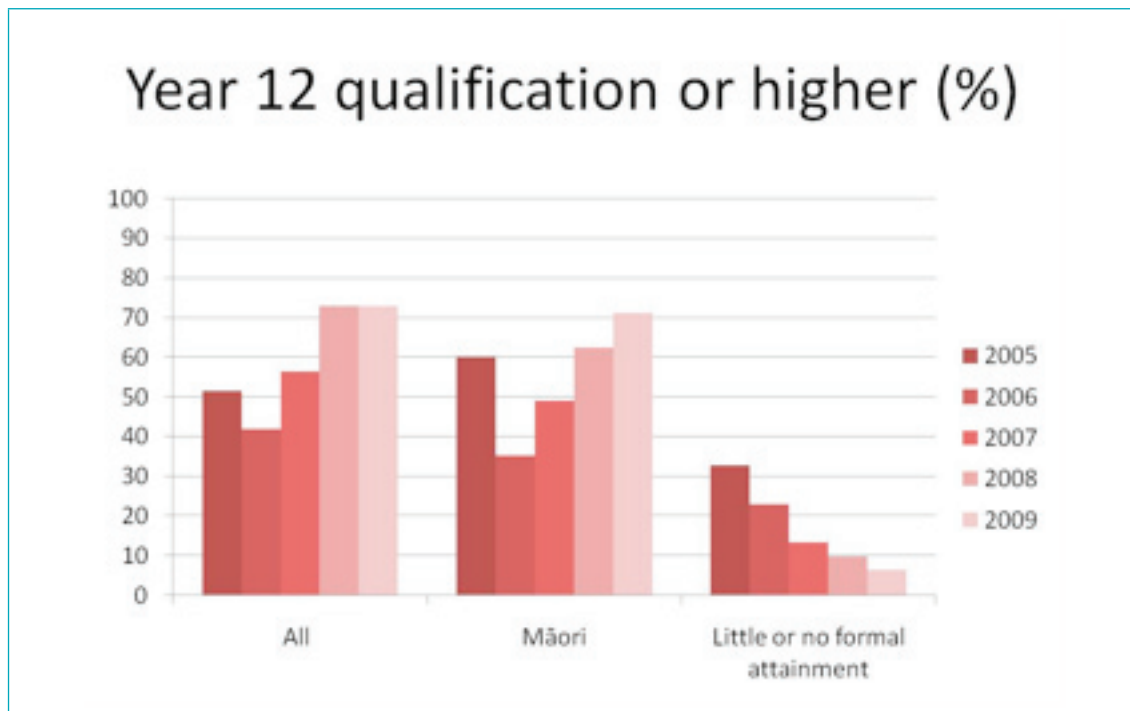
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Spee, K., Oakden, J., Wehipeihana, N., & Pipi, K. (2010). *Rangiātea: Opotiki College Exemplar*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

# RESTORATIVE JUSTICE—CREATING EDUCATIONALLY POWERFUL CONNECTIONS AND RESTORING FAITH AMONG THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

1. This exemplar shows how the use of restorative justice can transform the character of a school and have a considerable impact on student achievement.

**FIGURE 1** School leavers with Year 12 qualification or higher



Source: Ministry of Education School SMART website data

2. Opotiki College, a decile 1 school based in a small, rural, relatively isolated community, had a punitive system of detentions, suspensions and expulsions up until 2006. The relationships between the school, Māori whānau and students were damaged through a disciplinary system that was viewed by Māori whānau as unfair and unjust:
 

*The detentions, the suspensions, the punitive layers in the school were creating horrible relationships between kids and staff.* [Senior management team member]
3. The principal recognised that a change of approach was needed within the school and, during conversations with a local kaumātua, views were shared on discipline, restorative approaches and trying to teach young people tools for life—not just punish them:
 

*I remember asking what restorative justice was, why it worked with Māori. He answered, 'When someone does something wrong, make them responsible and then love them' ... His reply stayed with me.* [Principal]
4. In 2006, the school introduced a restorative approach to behaviour management. The decision to no longer suspend students had a huge impact on staff, students and whānau. Restorative principles and practices were embedded in the school's culture. Teachers became more skilled and able to work effectively across all levels of the school. Since 2006, restorative practices have provided a solid foundation for improving student achievement, school–home relationships and staff learning and development—within durable systems and procedures:
 

*For me it's about getting back on track ... I have always being treated fairly and after the punishment I am treated normally ... The principal is always encouraging no matter what I have done in the past.* [Student]

5. Restorative practices help to realise the school's expectations that students need to be at school and in class to learn, and that both students and staff have a right to be treated with respect and supported in their learning. Teachers are expected to teach all students—particularly Māori students—using a consistent school-wide approach. Teachers understand that all students have potential that can be realised with appropriate support:

*The best teacher in Opotiki College is aware of the students' context, actively encourages the relationship between students and themselves and is always enquiring into their own teaching practices.* [Principal]

## What was the challenge?

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6. Back in 2005, every Sunday afternoon the Opotiki College principal and board of trustee (BOT) members were engaged in disciplinary meetings with students and whānau that could extend until the late evening. On average, 50 students were suspended from the school each year.
7. The school faced major drug concerns, with the majority of suspensions linked to marijuana use. The principal, senior management team and BOT members recognised the school systems did not enable them to respond to students in a way that took into account the community context and environment.
8. Suspensions and continual stand-downs were alienating some students and their whānau from the school, as punishments for behaviour were often neither timely nor relevant for the student. The punitive system was unsustainable: the principal believed that if it were continued it would have alienated a large proportion of the Opotiki community. The principal had the courage to declare that students would no longer be suspended within the school. This statement led to a profound change in the way the school perceived and responded to students.

## Flow-on effect of deciding not to suspend students

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9. Since that decision, restorative principles and practices have become embedded in the school's culture and provide a solid platform for supporting student achievement, school-home relationships, staff learning and development and durable systems and procedures.
10. Teachers have bought into the restorative approach and are now more skilled and able to work effectively across all levels of the school. Results of a staff survey in 2009 showed that 94 percent of staff agreed restorative practices had helped to make teacher-student relationships more positive, and 88 percent of staff strongly agreed that individual incidents are responded to more effectively:  
*Relationships are mended more quickly and learning can begin again.* [Staff survey response]  
*By feeling more confident of the restorative language, my dealings with students have changed. Restorative practice has given me the tools to model the learning in social development and to give students the chance to practise it.* [Staff survey response]

## Rationale and motivation for the use of restorative approaches

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11. Student involvement with marijuana was the catalyst for transforming the school's response to management of students' behaviour within the school. With 40 suspensions and 10 expulsions annually, Opotiki College leadership was aware that policies and procedures were not serving the interests of its students, community or indeed themselves. Prior to 2006 the school had a policy of suspending every student who had any involvement with marijuana. The BOT tended to lift suspension if the students made a commitment to be drug-free, with a warning that a second offence would result in exclusion. Despite giving students a second chance, each year a small group of students were excluded from the school. These students were given the opportunity to go into alternative education based in the community. Consequently, the alternative education programme was fully occupied by students who were repeat drug offenders.

12. The principal considered alternative options for the school, weighing up the challenges for the school, the students' lives and the community. The restorative practice approach appeared to be a promising way to bring about school-wide change in managing student behaviour and to deal with drug offending:  
*We had become good at catching students but weren't able to change behaviours.* [Principal]
13. During this stage of contemplation and research to find a new way forward for the school, the principal and members of the senior management team looked around the country to see how the problem was being managed in other schools. In 2005, while at a student engagement initiative conference, the senior leadership team learned of a programme being run out of a school in Taranaki. They visited the school to learn more about the programme. Around the same time, they also attended a Ministry of Education conference workshop that added to the feeling that restorative practices with an "Opotiki flavour" could work.
14. As the principal and deputy principal drove back to Opotiki after the Ministry of Education conference, they received a phone call and were told that a netball team attending a tournament had been caught drinking. Based on what they had learned in the previous weeks—and the conviction that a new approach was needed—they made a decision to undertake their first restorative hui whakapai (a term used to describe a collaborative solution-seeking forum).
15. An essential component of a successful hui is the inclusion of whānau alongside key people affected or involved in the issue. The students, their whānau, a netball association representative, police youth aid officer, the principal and deputy principal all attended the hui. This first hui was successful—the students faced up to their responsibilities and developed a consequence that was meaningful to them. The overall lesson for the principal was that serious discipline issues could be dealt with effectively using restorative approaches, without resorting to suspensions:  
*Before we would get the feeling they weren't listening, that as whānau we were being judged or blamed ... Now punishment is a negotiated agreement, nonblaming, where the focus is more on the learning and academic ... Teachers are even looking at themselves and what they can be doing better.* [Whānau]
16. The following month, a group of Year 9 boys were involved with marijuana. It was a second offence for all of them and in the past would have resulted in an immediate suspension and alienation from the education system. Instead, the school held a restorative hui, and the students were subsequently enrolled into a drug counselling programme.
17. One of several resources developed and utilised to support hui whakapai was a drug contract—an agreement between whānau, students and the school. The drug contract outlined the conditions that students must adhere to following an incident with marijuana—including counselling and random drug testing.
18. At the beginning of 2006, the restorative approach was introduced school-wide, and it was a challenge to implement the restorative practices throughout the school at all levels. However, the principal believed that all staff needed to support the approach. This meant bringing the teachers on board and involving them in the implementation and development of how a restorative approach works in the classroom.
19. The principal and deputy principal trained in the Margaret Thornsborne restorative model and facilitated the staff training. Staff received restorative justice training, including the principles underpinning the approach and how a restorative approach between a teacher and student works in practice. Although, according to principal and senior management team, the training was imperfect, it was a great start to positive change.
20. As a result of the implementation of restorative approaches in the school, the repeat drug offending significantly decreased.
21. The principal acknowledges that perhaps there could have been more groundwork done prior to launching the restorative justice approach, but circumstances did not allow this. Further, the school had an urgent need to develop a model that worked for Opotiki, and the school did not have the luxury of going through an extensive trial process or waiting for a suitable approach to emerge:

*We built an aeroplane while we were flying it.* [Principal]



## Theory of restorative practice—what are the principles?

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22. The restorative approach adopted by Opotiki College is based on the restorative justice model of Margaret Thorsborne & Associates.<sup>1</sup> Restorative justice is also known as transformative justice, where wrong-doing is seen as a violation of people and relationships.
23. In the restorative practice, relationships are key. Strengthening connections between people and placing relationships at the heart of the school are important underlying principles. This fits well with an “as Māori” approach, where matters are addressed from a Māori world view:
- We have come to understand that significant cultural change is possible within schools when they choose to work restoratively with young people. (Thorsborne & Vinegrad, cited in The Opotiki College Behaviour Management Handbook, p. 4)*
24. Underlying principles of the restorative process are that:
- students (and their whānau) are given a choice to participate in a restorative or punitive process
  - all staff will do everything in their power to encourage participation in the restorative process.
25. Restorative approaches are not a soft option. Students are encouraged to take responsibility in the first instance by committing to working with and in the systems of the school. Further, students, teachers and whānau are all called to account at times and encouraged to work collaboratively to support students to reach their full potential:
- It's not just soft talk; there has to be consequences but the difference is that the consequences are meaningful to the student and that they occur in a timely, relevant way to the behaviour. [Senior management team member]*

## What did the change look like as it started to occur?

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26. As the restorative practices were implemented in the school, gradual changes started to occur. The forerunner to change was the determination by the principal and senior management team that no students would be suspended.
27. The new restorative approach was used for all behaviour management issues and not just the serious offences such as drug use. It was seen as a way to keep students in class to learn and to support teachers to teach.
28. Where necessary, the school uses its right under Section 27 of the Education Act to allow students to be kept at home for up to five days (subject to an agreement between the principal and the whānau), rather than apply suspension provisions. This is seen as a cooling-off period for all parties involved and allows time for counselling or other restorative processes to be put in place. Whānau/families appreciate the use of Section 27 as an alternative to suspension and see it as supportive and rehabilitative, rather than punitive.
29. The challenge then is finding a workable solution to address marijuana use in the school. The school uses a combination of drug counselling, random drug testing, drug-free contracts and general support, and has found this to be very effective:
- The school shows us that they care about our kids ... There is a reciprocal relationship. [Whānau]*
30. The school recognises that young people will make mistakes—and rather than being punitive, such mistakes can provide opportunities for learning and redress. The use of Section 27 also sends a positive message to the other students that the school promotes responsibility for actions and that there are consequences for the student as a result of their behaviour. On the other hand, students know that suspension and expulsion are not automatic and that help and support are available:
- [The teachers] just don't give up on us ... They really care about us and they treat you like normal after the punishment. [Student]*

31. The restorative approach is also about teachers and students connecting in the classroom. Opotiki has developed a range of strategies for teachers to use to manage classroom behaviour, including nonverbal cues, assertive verbal messages and chosen consequences:

*They encourage me to just get on with it but make me enjoy what I'm doing at the same time. They give me a lot of chances at school. You end up being a different person sometimes during the years.* [Student]

32. Teachers initially were unsure of how successful or useful the new restorative practices would be in the classroom. Restorative practices were a challenge to some who had been working within authoritarian and punitive school systems for many years. As a number of staff struggled to implement the approach effectively, a working group was formed to develop a behaviour management handbook:

*It felt like a loss of power where as teachers we were suddenly being asked to look at ourselves; take responsibility for how our behaviour affects a situation ...; to be the bigger person and make it work.* [Teacher]

33. Realising that staff buy-in was critical to the overall success of the restorative approach, the principal and senior management team members worked hard during 2006 to build understanding of the approach. Staff collectively developed responses to common behaviour management issues such as students failing to bring correct equipment, being late to class or causing continual disruption. These responses evolved into a restorative handbook, which became a resource for all teachers. This handbook is a living document, changing as the needs of teachers and students have changed. The handbook outlines examples of behaviour that teachers may be confronted with in class and gives clear directions about how to respond restoratively.

34. The restorative approach has been accompanied by ongoing professional development, primarily delivered by the principal and senior management team. They have shared information and readings about restorative practices and taken opportunities during teacher-only days to re-vision the school. They also showed how other new initiatives being introduced in the school at the time, such as the New Zealand draft curriculum key components and Te Kotahitanga, aligned with restorative practices:

*It really helped giving people the bigger picture ... where the school was going and how the jigsaw pieces all fit in together ... It works as a way to bring people on board.* [Principal]

*[Restorative process] fits really well with Te Kotahitanga ... It's about acknowledging them first and then the subject you're teaching ... You get to hear the motivation behind their behaviour and learn about them as people ... It is a way to build connections.* [Teacher]

35. By the end of 2006, restorative principles were becoming a part of the everyday vernacular of the school. No students were suspended during that school year, and teachers had learned new ways to respond to students.

36. The process of implementing restorative practices in the school continues to evolve; alterations based on feedback from students and teachers occur as needed. Since the original implementation, new developments have included: the introduction of the ruma whakaaro—a restorative thinking room; new policies on verbal abuse of staff resulting in immediate removal from class; and daily morning meetings between deans, the ruma whakaaro teacher and the principal.

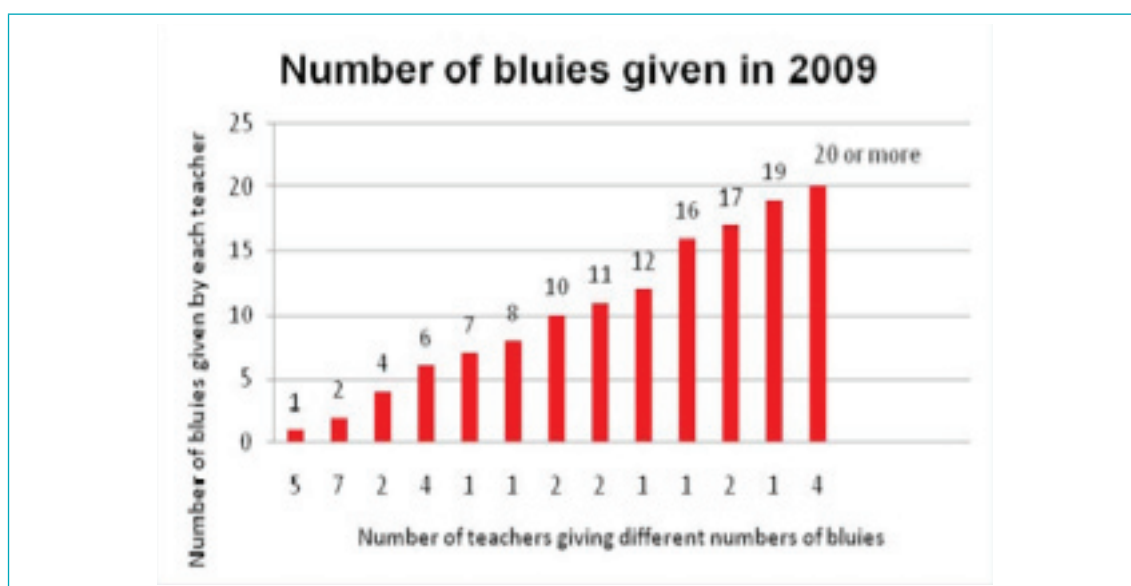
## Monitoring progress

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37. Over time, the school has developed a number of activities to monitor the progress and success of the restorative practices including staff surveys, daily meetings and an analysis of blue<sup>2</sup> referrals to the ruma whakaaro. A critical component of the success of the restorative approach is the continual focus on improvement, based on what is working and not working for the teaching staff and students.

38. Staff surveys on restorative practices seek teacher feedback on how:
- effective restorative conferences are in responding to individual incidents
  - restorative practices help to make student–student relationships and teacher–student relationships more positive
  - effective restorative strategies are at dealing with class difficulties
  - accepted restorative practice is amongst staff and students
  - positively the restorative practices are viewed by parents and caregivers.
39. Teachers acknowledge that working restoratively is beneficial to the school on a number of levels:
- Many students have commented that they like having their say.* [Teacher]
- Relationships are mended more quickly and learning can begin again.* [Teacher]
- Parents have commented on how they feel more listened to and empowered, unlike their own schooling experience.* [Teacher]
40. The school attempts to acknowledge the concerns of staff and more recently has brought in a new policy for verbal abuse. This came about because teachers indicated that they felt unsafe in situations where students were verbally abusive. No swearing is allowed and an incident of swearing results in the student being removed from class.
41. The principal undertakes a ruma whakaaro referral analysis each term. This tracks the number of bluies individual teachers are giving to students. In 2009, the majority of teachers gave few bluies, but a few teachers gave out more than 12 bluies.

**FIGURE 2** Number of bluies given by staff in 2009

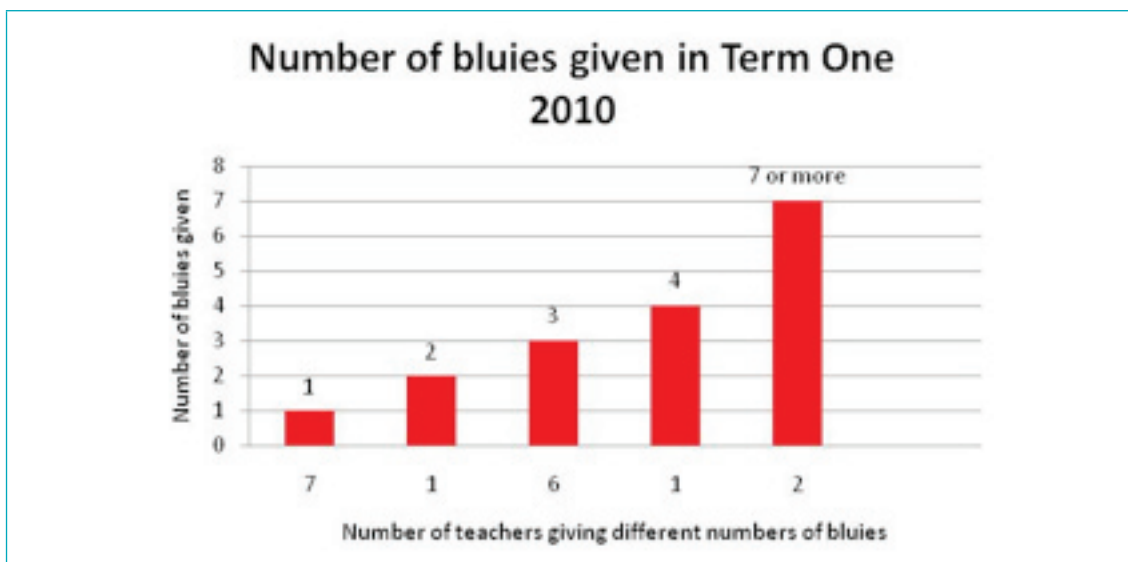


Source: Opotiki College

42. Teachers who were identified as giving out relatively more bluies received further support from the principal in restorative strategies and building relationships with students. The principal and senior management team worked individually with the relevant teachers and the students to repair relationships. The principal believes that learning occurs best in reciprocal relationships, where students and teachers have a very clear understanding of each other and bridges can be built.
43. More recent tracking of blueie hand-out rates shows that teachers are now giving fewer bluies than in previous years.



**FIGURE 3** Number of bluies given by staff in Term One 2010



Source: Opotiki College

44. The current practice is that a daily morning meeting is held between the principal, deans and ruma whakaaro teacher. This is a short, succinct meeting carried out over 15 to 20 minutes where the ruma whakaaro attendance from the day before is discussed, and deans give feedback on the timing and set-up of any restorative hui between a teacher and student. If some hui are going to occur more than three days after the incident due to conflicting schedules, the principal and senior management team members help facilitate the restorative hui.

### When restorative justice works well what happens?

45. Restorative justice is a structured system where students are given the choice of participating in a restorative process after an incident. All staff encourage student participation through a mini-chat. The mini-chat is part of the process and not a consequence; however, possible consequences that may result from a mini-chat are: (1) the student is given another chance to get it right; (2) the student agrees to have some catch-up time with the teacher; or (3) referral is made to the dean with a high probability of catch-up time with the dean.
46. A number of strategies are used by the teacher before a mini-chat occurs. The strategies of Relaxed vigilance and Slightly less-relaxed vigilance involve nonverbal cues and direct verbal messages.

### Summary of the restorative process in the classroom

- Relaxed vigilance—deliver supportive behaviour management strategies in a low-key approach including eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and saying the student’s name.
- Slightly less-relaxed vigilance—corrective behaviour management through assertive verbal messages such as “I” messages, stating expectations, delivering a “broken record” of requests, limiting choices and rule reminders.
- Mini-chats—aim to get the student to acknowledge their wrong-doing and agree on a consequence.
- Blui—student is sent from the class and referred to the ruma whakaaro if the student’s behaviour does not improve and the agreement reached during the mini-chat is not upheld by the student.
- Ruma whakaaro—student first reports to the office where blui details are recorded, then goes to the ruma whakaaro and begins the restorative process, working with the dedicated teacher to fill out a reflection form.

- Student reflection form and restorative plan—the student is asked to consider what they did, why they did it and how it affected others. A key component is getting the student to reflect on goals when they return to class.
- Staff self-reflection—teacher is required to identify what steps were taken prior to the blueie being given and how the student usually works in class.
- Restorative hui—the year dean facilitates a hui between teacher and student where both parties are given the opportunity to voice their opinions, encouraged to take responsibility for their part in the incident and develop a plan to move forward and restore the relationship.

## The other side of the coin—rewarding positive behaviour

47. Rewarding positive behaviour is also a critical component of the restorative approach as follows:

- Student reddy<sup>3</sup>—teachers can refer students to the deputy principal through a reddy slip, which acknowledges improved or sustained positive behaviour or attitude. Three reddy referrals are rewarded with a letter home and recipients' names go into a monthly reddy draw for a canteen voucher.
- Class reddy—teachers can refer Year 9 and Year 10 classes to the deputy principal to acknowledge improved or sustained positive behaviour and attitude by the whole class.

48. Students and whānau view the restorative approach as a fair system; a caring and supportive approach from the school:

*[The restorative process] made you think about what you had done and the teacher really explained how they felt ... I wouldn't be at school because there are about three times where I could have just been kicked out. [Student]*

*We had to come to the school and had a hui with the teacher and our child ... It was a negotiated agreement between all of us ... What was really impressive is that the teacher looked at himself and his participation in what had happened. [Whānau]*

49. The following stories show how effective the restorative approach is in keeping students in school. Stories like the ones below are common since the introduction of restorative practices, which have gone a long way to breaking down barriers that originally existed between whānau and the school.

### Student example

When I arrived at the school from primary I wasn't used to things like room changes and the whole college thing. I was in trouble quite a lot, blueied and sent out of class. I got lots of support, though, and the teachers and principal always talked with me, asking what was going on. Teachers always accepted my apologies and never gave up on me. They really would try and understand me. In Year 11 I had no catch-up days, no blueies and it was great. At the beginning of my Year 12 I was caught smoking marijuana and again went through the restorative process. My whānau were called and we had a meeting with the principal. I went on to drug counselling and random drug testing. I am getting back on track and I will be back for Year 13. I know I wouldn't be at school if I hadn't been treated in the way that the principal and others have treated me. He knows what I have done but when I see him in the corridors or around school he still says 'Hi, how's it going?' [Year 12 student]

50. Whānau are also prepared to engage in the restorative process and report it is helpful for their children. Stories like the ones above are common since the introduction of restorative practices, which have gone a long way to breaking down barriers that originally existed between whānau and the school.

### Whānau example

**A whānau went through a restorative process with their daughter. The change in their daughter had been impressive. She has a positive attitude and is more able to look to herself and take responsibility. The staff at the school gave support and showed that they cared about her, and the gains are that she is still at school, is motivated and a better student.**

*They asked her to think about what she had done; to look at herself, and the teacher looked at himself as well. So it wasn't all about our daughter and what she was and wasn't doing. [Whānau]*

51. As hoped, the school has found that the restorative approach facilitates development of powerful connections between teachers and students, and improves and strengthens relationships with whānau and the community. Restorative practices provide a process to work through genuine challenges in a caring and constructive way—to achieve positive outcomes for all.
52. Students are guided to understand where they have gone wrong and the things that get in the way of them doing well, while teachers are advised on how to better manage behavioural issues.
53. Due to the restorative approach, ordinary misdemeanours that in the past might have been dealt with at a principal or BOT level are addressed between teacher and student. There is an expectation that teachers will deal with their students and not escalate misdemeanours to the principal. This can be empowering for teachers as they learn a range of skills to help deal with student behaviour.
54. A very small number of staff are still challenged by the new approach, but there is an expectation that embedding change takes time.

## Is restorative justice a sustainable approach?

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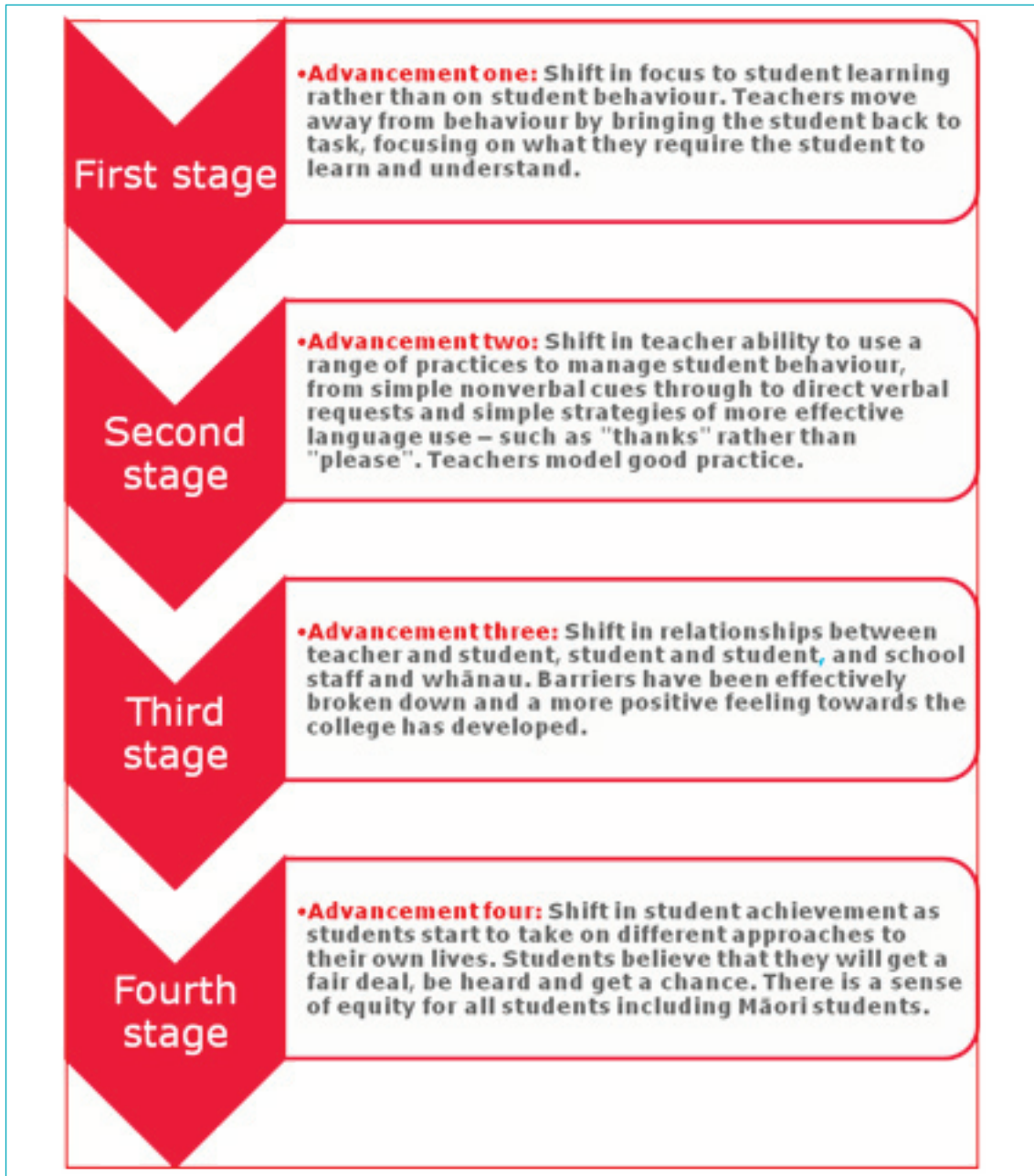
55. The restorative approach is now part of the Opotiki College culture, its policies and its practice. The fact there have been no suspensions since 2006 means more of BOT members' time is spent on governance and less on disciplinary matters. Many key staff completely understand and endorse the process; it is not dependent on the principal alone, although he is a key advocate.
56. Now that the restorative approach has been employed in the school for around four-and-a-half years, ongoing work is minimal. There is a clear expectation that all staff will use, and be supported to use, a restorative approach. From time to time there is a need to provide extra support to a small number of individual teachers. To ensure that new staff are aware of the Opotiki culture, advertisements clearly state it is a restorative school:

*No one will arrive here now without restorative DNA. [Principal]*

## Shifts in development

57. There have been some key learnings and progress, as the following chart illustrates.

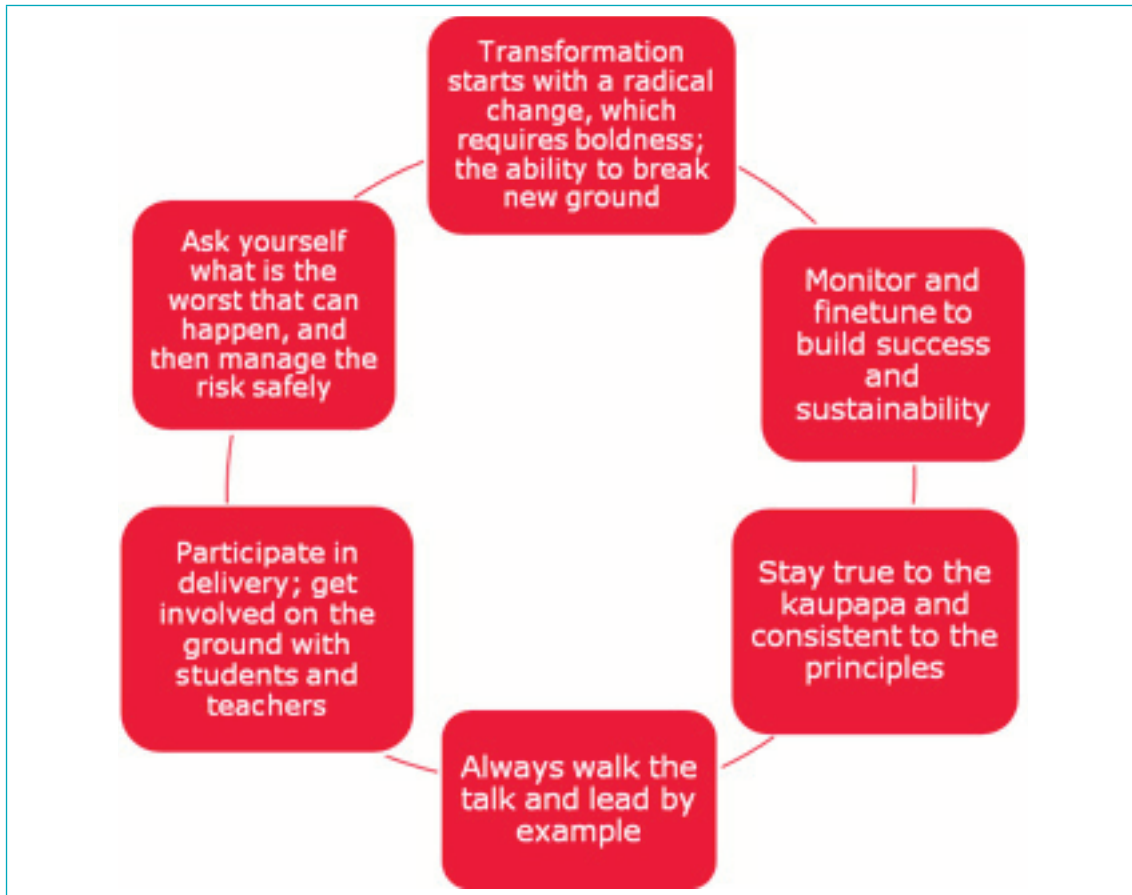
FIGURE 4 Shifts in the restorative process over time at Opotiki College



## Lessons from the principal

58. The principal has learned a number of lessons as he implemented the restorative processes at Opotiki College, which are summarised in Figure 5 below.

**FIGURE 5** Key lessons from the principal from implementing change at Opotiki College




## Acknowledgements

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59. This exemplar has developed from the knowledge and expertise of many people, whom the research team would like to acknowledge.
60. Firstly, we would like to acknowledge the school—in particular, the research team would like to offer a special thank you to the students and whānau who shared their personal experiences of involvement in the restorative processes at Opotiki College and their journeys of growth and development. As a research team, we would like to thank them for sharing intimate details with openness and faith.
61. We would also like to acknowledge the honesty and genuine dialogue of senior management and teaching staff, their ability to talk freely about the challenges in implementing the restorative approach and the personal learnings, and changes that have occurred in their teaching practice.
62. Sincere acknowledgement is also due to the principal who was enthusiastic and supportive throughout the development of the exemplar, always receptive to requests, constantly shared information regarding the restorative process in the school and willingly provided additional data where needed.
63. Secondly, staff from the Ministry of Education made an important contribution to this exemplar. We would like to acknowledge the support of the Professional Leadership Team, Group Māori and the Best Evidence Synthesis team within the Ministry of Education; as well as those working on the He Kākano project who provided ongoing guidance and overall vision for Rangiatea—the case study and exemplar. The timely communications and willingness to participate in meaningful dialogue with the research team helped to draw out the most cogent learnings and enhance the final production of this exemplar. In particular, we acknowledge the support of Darren Gammie, Cheree Shortland-Nuku and Linda Stockham, along with Rawiri Gibson, Cathy Diggins and Ro Parsons.
64. The research team included Kellie Spee, Nan Wehipeihana and Kataraina Pipi. At their invitation, Judy Oakden led the team and had overall responsibility for the project.

### (Footnotes)

- 1 For more information, go to [www.thorsborne.com.au](http://www.thorsborne.com.au)
- 2 A blueie is a blue form completed by the teacher when requiring a student to leave the classroom. The form is given to the student who must then leave the class and go to the school office where staff note the student is no longer in the class and organise for a letter to be sent home. The student then goes to the ruma whakaaro (contemplation/reflection room) with a reflection sheet to complete.
- 3 A “reddy” is a red form that students or classes get for good behaviour, completion of work, being on time to class etc.



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