

# Towards a Restorative Culture in Lutheran Schools

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper outlines the journey of Trinity Lutheran College in implementing Restorative Practices. With the development of a new college strategic plan and a passion for ensuring all students are academically, relationally and spiritually engaged some confronting questions needed to be answered. The result was the decision to implement Restorative Practices within the college. The challenge of moving towards a restorative culture is still ongoing as we share both our personal and professional experiences to date. The integral challenge was the alignment of restorative practice to our Christian ethos and values.

A little over 2 years ago we began the journey of developing our new college strategic plan. No small task in what is today a very fluid educational environment. Put simply, how do we define the way we do things here at Trinity Lutheran College? In what ways are we distinctive as a Christ-centred educational community? Most importantly, are we authentic to our college mission?

All worthwhile journeys of growth begin with reflective practice. Reflective practice goes beyond mere critiquing in that it requires the deconstruction of the accepted beliefs, traditions and values that drive a school's culture. As all members of the school community are carriers of that aspired culture they must assume the perspective of external observer and critically examine why they do what they do. This in turn becomes the public yardstick of either a flourishing or stagnant educational community.

Renewal of our college strategic vision was achieved by focusing attention on many questions in many areas. For the purpose of this paper attention is directed to the following: What gives our college its educational identity? How do we go about being authentic to this identity? How, as a Christ-centred college, do we ensure our aims for academic excellence are aligned with our deepest wishes for each student and the life they will lead post school.

Let's begin with what it is that distinguishes us as Trinity *Lutheran* College. This is not a matter of simplistically considering what it is that gives us our unique educational identity compared to our competitor schools. It is the understanding of what, as a faith based educational community, do we truly believe to be at the heart of education. The origins of our college are founded upon the values of our Lutheran faith. These core values are selflessness, the gift of humbleness, the pursuit of knowledge and Godly wisdom, and response to stewardship. It is not necessary here to provide a detailed explanation of these values, simply to understand that they are the foundation of our existence.

However, the reality is that every school, whether secular or non-secular, has its own set of core values which explicitly shape the teaching and learning as well as the quality of relationships between all members of the school community. At Trinity if our aim is to be educators of integrity, holding true to our Christian values, how then do we create an authentic educational environment in which all members of our community are afforded the opportunity to develop, grow and live out these values each day. How do we ensure for each of our students that every moment at school counts? Statements identifying core values, verbal or written, are meaningless if they cannot be translated into practice on a daily basis.

Consideration also needs to be given to the developmental needs and inherent signature strengths of each learner across the year levels. Throughout the primary years it is developing

an individual identity. During the middle school years students crave social attachment to their peer group. It is at this developmental age more than any other that a young person's relationship with oneself, one another, and with significant adults is critical to their concept of wholeness as a person. Moreover, it is also a developmental age when being openly Christian and having the presence of positive adult mentors can be viewed as countercultural. Through the senior grades the focus lies with where the student fits post school.

As we proceeded it became clear that as contemporary Christian educators we needed to reconstruct our definition of 'education'. One that acknowledges that it is also through nurturing the whole of the person spiritually rather than only in narrow terms of curriculum knowledge and content, that we authentically empower each of our student's capacity to enhance not only their academic potential but human potential beyond school.

Consequently, if our mission is to develop the whole person then we need to develop a culture in which we have high expectations and standards of both students and teachers. We also need to actively nurture a culture of care and support in which all members of our college community have both a strong sense of belonging together with a strong sense of place.

The cyclical review of our college strategic plan is not an exercise in getting a job done. Here the purpose is to gain a deep understanding of what it is that makes a real difference when a school is being authentic to its origins and mission. Simply defining ourselves narrowly as a school or college will not cut it. Instead we need to see ourselves first and foremost as a community with long term, deep relationships between staff, students and parents. One in which the pursuit of academic excellence is founded through student pride in and a sense of place at Trinity Lutheran College, that is an authentic Christ centred community.

To ensure that the Christian ethos is lived out in the classroom by all teachers on a daily basis was the challenge. Our initial goal was for all staff to possess a thorough working knowledge of the key relational concepts of forgiveness, harm, restoration and motivation for a changed heart. For us to be a community of integrity, our mission statement needed to be aligned to God's ultimate goal for us. This is to live in, through and from our relationship in Him.

Restorative Practice is all about relationships. It emphasises a focus on behaviour while preserving the dignity of the person as a child of God. It emphasises forgiveness recognising healing removes the barriers between people and draws them closer together in relationship. It emphasises the importance of repairing the harm caused and the restoration of the relationship. It respects our response to God while still honouring the law of the land. Clearly, as a Lutheran college restorative practice is a perfect relational fit.

In implementing Restorative Practices the processes that we engaged in and continue to engage are:

### **Stage One: Establishing the ground work**

Firstly, a formal proposal was presented to the college administration executive. Once approved, key staff were identified and invited to be leaders of this change process. Here we chose staff with a strong faith background. These staff then familiarised themselves with the Restorative Practices theory and model through selected professional readings,

formalised external training and visits to a nearby school with an established Restorative Practices model. Through this process the college acquired a critical friend. Branding of RP@Trinity also took place to communicate to staff a whole of college's level of commitment.

### **Stage Two: Capturing the hearts and minds of staff**

Over the course of a full school year, RP 101 staff workshops (teaching and non-teaching) were conducted introducing the theory and model underlying Restorative Practices and how it aligns to our college mission statement. Staff could elect to attend either 2x4 hour after school workshops or a full day Saturday workshop. Attendance by all staff was compulsory.

### **Stage Three: Developing responsive and effective practice**

Presently there is a Restorative Practices induction training program for all new staff to the college. Development of the P-12 Relational (formerly Behavioural) Management Plan occurred ensuring consistency with our Restorative Practices model. A Restorative Practices committee is now in place. This committee is comprised of staff members who have voiced a strong commitment to this approach in their daily classroom relational management. There is ongoing support to staff as they develop and grow in their restorative practice skills. However, this is undertaken by the original staff trainers as well as other colleagues. Other tasks we have planned for this year are to develop a parent RP brochure, to identify opportunities to inform parents of the RP process in the college as well as the development of a P-12 Restorative Practices Framework.

### **Our top 10 tips for successfully introducing RP**

1. Do your homework!
2. Ensure you have the school administration on board.
3. Enlist the services of a critical friend – early!
4. Ensure your change leaders are authentic to restorative relationships.
5. Invest in quality training of your change leaders.
6. Show your serious – Brand RP in your school.
7. Introduce in stages slowly over time.
8. Hold to your convictions – Change is tough! Challenging people's well-established belief system is tougher!
9. Be prepared to lose staff members who can't make the mind shift
10. Be patient! Be affirming! Celebrate small successes!

### **Conclusion**

As educators we are the decisive element in the classroom. At school if students are shutting down academically, relationally or spiritually then as Christian educators we need to have the courage to ask ourselves some confronting questions and also have the courage to seek out the answers. The culture of a school is not a program or a strategy but a belief. If we are to be true to our existence as a Lutheran college then that belief must be grounded in three principles. Everything we do at Trinity counts. Every member of our college community is visible. Each person is responsible.

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# WHY?

- Firm platform
- Reason for educational change
- Strategic process
- Resist implementing the recipe



# Filling in the gaps

- Go back
- Targeted discussions
- ASK : What makes us distinct as a Lutheran School?



# Think Pair Share

- THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY. WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

(Achievements, innovation, strengths, financial assets, traditions etc)



# Think Pair Share

- WHAT IS THE GREATEST STRENGTH OF YOUR LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY?



# Think Pair Share

- AS A LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY WHAT DO YOU CARE MOST DEEPLY ABOUT?



# Think Pair Share

- WHAT IS THE IDEAL FOR YOUR LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY?  
WHAT ENHANCES IT'S INTEGRITY/AUTHENTICITY?



# Think Pair Share

- HOW WOULD WE KNOW WE HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL?



# Collective identified signature strengths

- Thankful for the people you work with (rely on one another)
- Keeping each other safe in our mouth (respect, compassion, empathy)
- Communication (being present) what look/sound like
- Walking in integrity with god ( walk the talk, leading by example)



# 'Resiliency Stones'

- Spirituality
- Relationships
- Shared Purpose
- Gratitude
- Being Present (with one another)
- Building Community Together



# Comparison with concepts from RP

- Spirituality (Law & Gospel)
- Relationships (Relationships)
- Shared Purpose
- Gratitude
- Being Present (with one another)  
(Having a voice)
- Building Community Together  
(Reintegration back into community)



# Sharing Student letter at the end of a restorative process



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# Our 10 Top Tips for successfully introducing RP

6. Show you're serious – Brand RP in your school.
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GOOD LUCK



# restorative



## PRACTICES@TRINITY

Questions that will be discussed and addressed throughout the workshop.....

1. THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY. WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?
2. WHAT IS THE GREATEST STRENGTH OF YOUR LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY?
3. AS A LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY WHAT DO YOU CARE MOST DEEPLY ABOUT?
4. WHAT IS THE IDEAL FOR YOUR LUTHERAN SCHOOL COMMUNITY? WHAT ENHANCES IT'S INTEGRITY/AUTHENTICITY?
5. HOW WOULD WE KNOW WE HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL?