

School Educators' Perspectives on Restorative Practices in Aotearoa, New Zealand Elementary Schools

By: Ben Dyson, Yanhua Shen, [Michael Hemphill](#)

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper was to investigate school educators' perspectives on Restorative Practices (RP) in Aotearoa, New Zealand elementary schools. Based on a case study design, this study collected qualitative data by interviewing and observing elementary teachers and principals. Five themes were drawn from the data: showing empathy, making decisions, managing emotions, building relationships, and empowering students. The findings indicate that RP are effective pedagogical practices that facilitate social and emotional learning and provide an alternative to zero-tolerance discipline in elementary schools. We argue teachers' and principals' voices can inspire and inform future directions of school-based SEL programs and interventions grounded in RP. This paper provides evidence from educators that discipline policies can be changed from punitive to proactive Restorative Practice.

Keywords: Restorative Practices | Elementary Education

Article:

Introduction

Restorative Practices (RP), as a process of mediation conference for students in conflicts, emerged within educational settings in the 1990s as a worthwhile alternative to the punitive zero tolerance (ZT) policy in schools. Earlier in the 1980s, ZT was widely adopted by western school educators (Taylor & Kearney, Citation2018). ZT policy was defined as “a school or district policy that mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for a specific offense” (Stader, Citation2004, p. 62). Many western countries, such as the US (Lyons & Drew, Citation2006), Aotearoa, New Zealand (Rae, Citation1999), and Canada (Daniel & Bondy, Citation2008), have utilized ZT as a severe and punitive method of school discipline for drug abuse, school violence, bullying, and crime. However, the negative impacts of ZT policy were reported on students' attendance, academic performance, and overall school climate (Henault, Citation2001; Hoffman, Citation2014; Melvin, Citation2011). Based on the negative effects caused by the ZT policy, researchers and practitioners proposed RP as an alternative approach to address students'

behavioral issues and improve school attendance and overall school climate (Cameron & Thorsborne, Citation2001; Popa, Citation2012).

The Aotearoa, New Zealand education system has had a noteworthy history of strong influence from MāoriFootnote1 customs and culture (MOE, Citation2007). In the Māori language, tikanga o nga hara means the law of wrong-doing, emphasizing that responsibility is collective and conflicts should be addressed collectively and restoratively (Restorative Practices Development Team, Citation2003). In the early 1980s, people aged 10–14 in the justice system were referred to Children’s Boards, where offensive cases were processed by police officers, social workers, representatives of the Department of Māori and Island Affairs, local community members, and parents. The Children’s Boards became the first attempt in Aotearoa (the Māori name of New Zealand) to involve families, communities, and Māori in decisions about young offenders (Morris & Young, Citation1987). Following the Children’s Boards, in 1989, the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act was passed. The 1989 Act legislated “community alternatives to institutions, to respond more effectively to the needs of victims, to provide better support for families and their children” (Maxwell & Morris, Citation2006, p. 241). In Aotearoa schools, RP was promoted as a common pedagogical strategy to teachers in professional development programs. RP provided the schools with a set of relational approaches to manage students’ misbehaviors and strengthened positive and respectful relationships across the whole school community. The Restorative Practice Kete books, which are suitable for primary schools, are available online under the support materials provided by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education [MOE], Citation2021). New Zealand is the first country to include restorative justice in the legislation system and has also extensively promoted the introduction of RP in schools (Carruthers, Citation2013).

Despite growing exploratory studies on RP indicating positive outcomes on behavioral changes, emotional restorations, and relationship improvements (Cameron & Thorsborne, ; Hemphill, Janke, Gordon, & Farrar, Citation2018; Popa,), the research on school-based RP “is still at the infancy stage” (Fronius, Persson, Guckenbug, Hurley, & Petrosino, Citation2016, p. 2). With few exceptions (e.g., Bevington, Citation2015; Reimer, Citation2019; Vaandering, Citation2014), there is limited research on school educators’ perspectives on the implementation and impact of RP, which is also true in Aotearoa elementary schools. Teachers have been recognized as the most critical figures for implementing value-based school programs (Dyson, Howley, & Shen, Citation2019; Humphries, Williams, & May, Citation2018). In addition, previous studies have also confirmed the importance of school leaders’ beliefs and support toward value-based practices (Durlak & DuPre, Citation2008; Lustick, Citation2021). However, it is still unclear how RP has been supported by school principals and implemented by teachers in elementary school settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ and principals’ perspectives on RP in Aotearoa elementary schools.

Theoretical perspectives

RP is rooted in the tenets of Restorative Justice (RJ) (McCold & Wachtel, Citation2002). RP can be recognized as an educational process by which RJ strategies are transformed and implemented in school contexts (Morrison & Vaandering, Citation2012). Restorative Justice (RJ) is defined as “a process involving direct stakeholders in determining how best to repair the harm done by offending behavior” (McCold & Wachtel, , p. 111). The goal of RJ is to heal the network of

relationships, promote peace, and eradicate political, spiritual, and emotional injustices (Gray & Lauderdale, Citation2007).

RJ echoes cultures embedded in ancient and indigenous practices, which claim people in indigenous communities are all connected (Kimmerer, Citation2013; MOE; Citation2007). Therefore, when one person does harm to another, their relationships are out of balance, and the practice of restorative justice facilitates bringing back the balance (Boyes-Watson, Citation2005). RJ includes three distinct but connected concepts. First, the Social Discipline Window (Wachtel & McCold, Citation2001) suggests a structured process utilizing high control and high support exercises to confront and disapprove wrong-doing while supporting and acknowledging the intrinsic worth of the offenders. Second, the Stakeholder Needs (McCold, Citation2000) addresses the importance of empowerment for those who are directly affected in a conflict to share their feelings freely and have an opportunity to influence the outcome of the conflict. Third, the Restorative Practices Typology (McCold, Citation2000) calls for the participation of all direct stakeholders (victims, offenders, and their communities of care) in a process to determine the appropriate response to wrong-doing.

Research on school-based restorative practices

In response to conflicts in schools, RP can provide a face-to-face meeting opportunity for the students to solve conflicts in a safe and structured environment. RP shifts our attention from the traditional mind-set of punitive punishment to the innovative and proactive strategies of restoration and integration between members in school communities (Lawson & Katz, Citation2004; Wachtel, Citation2013). One of the primary goals of school-based RP is to keep students from the juvenile justice system and “establish environments where members of the community take responsibility to repair harm when it occurs, hold each other accountable, and build skills in collective problem-solving” (Gonzalez, Citation2012, pp. 300–301). Unlike RJ where professionals work solely with youth who have offended (McCluskey et al., Citation2008), school-based RP is often facilitated by trained school social workers, teachers, and community volunteers. In school-based RP, students in conflict will be given the opportunity to describe the conflict, and explain “how the incident has affected them, and how it may have affected immediate friends, and/or their families” (O’Reilly, Citation2019, p. 159). By discussing the consequences of an incident and reaching an agreement, the harm between the students in conflict can be repaired (Drewery, Citation2004), and the overall school climate has the potential to be improved (Mirsky & Korr, Citation2014).

School-based RP has been utilized as a proactive and responsive approach to repair relationships between students, teachers, administration, and the community (Karp & Breslin, Citation2001). The forms of RP include restorative conference, affective statement, and classroom-based circle. The restorative conference is the most formal practice and is facilitated by a trained school staff member and brings together those involved to explore what happened, who was affected, and what actions were needed to make things right (McGrath, Citation2002). Affective statements are an informal RP that improves relationships in a school community. The affective statement focuses on humanizing a person who conducted a negative behavior by responding with the expression of personal feelings (Mirsky, Citation2011). The classroom-based circle provides opportunities for students to share emotions, ideas, and experiences for trust-building and mutual understanding (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, Citation2016).

Method

A case study design (Stake, Citation2005) was adopted in this research. The study investigated the phenomenon of RP in elementary schools in Aotearoa. Interviews and field notes were used as two sources of data in this study. Data collection and analysis were followed by qualitative research traditions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, Citation2014).

Participants

The study was conducted with 26 teachers ($n = 26$) and three principals. In total, 33 individual and focus group interviews were carried out with teachers and principals from three primary schools in Aotearoa. The three schools were purposive samples (Patton, Citation2015), based on the lead researchers establishing and maintaining a collaborative partnership with the three schools over a four-year period. Following university ethics regulations, all the names of schools and teachers in this study have been given pseudonyms.

Ten teachers were interviewed at Paletta School, located in a low socio-economic area of a small urban city on the North Island. It was a very culturally diverse school with 650 students. The students' ethnicities include Pacific Islander (40%), Māori (29%), Indian (30%), and White (1%). Among them, 10% of the students were also enrolled in the special education program. Nine teachers were interviewed at Goodson, an elementary school located in a mid-socioeconomic area of a large urban city on the North Island. It had more than 895 students, including Pacific Islander (7%), Māori (9%), Asian (29%), White (51%), and other mixed ethnicities (4%). Seven teachers were interviewed at Pounamu School located on the North Island. It had approximately 215 students, among which 73% of students were Pacific Islander, 23% of students were Māori, 3% of students were Asian, and 1% of students were White. All schools were public schools. There were no private or charter schools. The demographics of the three schools varied, and Pounamu was the highest-resourced school, meaning it was provided more public funding because it was in a lower socio-economic area. Principals of all the three schools were interviewed.

Data collection

In total, 26 teachers were interviewed at the three schools individually or in small focus groups for between 55 and 85 minutes. Six teachers, three from each school, were interviewed three times individually in March, July, and November to investigate their ongoing RP experiences related to the lessons' learning intentions (18 interviews). We used purposive sampling (Patton, Citation2015) to match the teachers' availability. We carried out 12 focus group interviews as a way to create open discussion with the teachers about the implementation of RP and to illuminate the differences in perspectives between the teachers (Rabiee, Citation2004). In addition, three principals were interviewed individually between 45 and 60 mins. There was a total of 33 interviews conducted at the three elementary schools. Interviews with the principals provided perspectives of the efficacy of RP at a broader level of school culture and climate. The study involved non-participant observation of the classes using an organized method of taking and organizing field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, Citation2011). Field notes ($n = 18$) were collected by the principal investigator and a graduate research assistant. The investigators took field notes during the classes (90–120 minutes) and were informed by discussions with the teacher before or after the class.

Data analysis

Qualitative inductive analysis and deductive analysis were employed (Miles et al.). The process started by transcribing interviews, followed by importing all the data into NVivo 12 plus for further organization and management. Descriptive coding is the process of assigning labels to statements or events in the data and summarize them in a word or short phrase (Miles et al.). Descriptive coding formed the first data analysis cycle, which produced nodes or thematic descriptions from the data. The second stage of analysis involved pattern coding followed by axial coding, which aimed to identify conceptual links, discover relationships among categories, and generate themes by constant comparison and triangulation (Saldaña, Citation2016).

The trustworthiness of the data analysis was confirmed by the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, Citation1985; Miles et al.). Credibility was achieved through extended periods of time at schools in Aotearoa. Member-checking was also utilized to strengthen the credibility of data analysis, which allowed teachers and principals to check on their interview transcripts for accuracy. The dependability of the findings was addressed by laying out an audit trail for a colleague that is familiar with this research but not directly involved with it (Hemphill). Confirmability was attempted by peer debriefing with research colleagues and teachers. The non-participant observations, interviews, and field notes triangulated the findings. Transferability becomes plausible since RP appears to have a common thread for different cultures globally that ties together theory, research, and practices in many fields, including education settings (Mbambo & Skelton, Citation2003; Mirsky, Citation2004; Wong, Citation2005).

Findings

Teachers' and principals' words are presented in themes to represent their shared perspectives of RP. All participants were given pseudonyms for privacy protection. Five themes were drawn from the collected data: showing empathy, making decisions, managing emotions, building relationships, and empowering students.

Showing empathy

School educators identified showing empathy as a key learning outcome for students in RP-based classes and provided different examples that facilitate the learning process. Lucy (Grade 6 teacher) shared that RP helped her students "understand and care about how someone else feels." Casey (Grade 6 teacher) addressed the importance of "understanding about yourself [students] and the diversity of what group you [student] may be working with" during RP. For Lynsey (Grade 5 teacher), students being able to show empathy was linked to "team-building" in the classroom, as in RP-based classes, students could "talk about how other people want to be treated, you know, what does it mean to be a good friend? What does our classroom environment want to be?" Daniel (Principal at Paletta School) and Michelle (Grade 2 teacher) also agreed that RP has the potential to educate students to "care for others" and "see each other's emotions."

Showing empathy does not only help students "develop friendships" (Lynsey) but also contributes to students' future success in the workplace. Casey discussed her understanding of future benefits of being able to show empathy as "when we go out into the workforce, one of the

biggest skills is being able to work together, develop ideas and build on the ideas of others and your own through the support of working with other people.” Teachers addressed the need for students to develop empathy at elementary schools. Lorrall (Grade 2 teacher) noticed that:

They [students] should have some form of empathy that they have gained from early childhood [pre-school]. A lot of our kids don’t even go to early childhood, so that is something that we as teachers in the school are having to pick up.

Showing empathy is not a natural trait. It demands reiterative practices at schools. Josh (Grade 4 teacher) explained, “teaching kids that their actions actually affect a whole lot of people around them is probably not something that they are aware of.” Michelle added to that point by saying, “we [teachers] are asking them to think and put themselves in other people’s shoes, which is very, very difficult and so there has to be some teaching around that.”

In order to develop students’ ability to show empathy, teachers referenced different examples of using RP in their classrooms. Lynsey referenced getting her students to learn how to show empathy, starting with emotion recognition in an RP circle, “we talk about happy; we talk about anger; we talk about sadness, and we talk about being scared. They’re all four core emotions that we do with them [students].” Kara (Grade 4 teacher) shared her experience in teaching students how to show empathy, “it is just reinforcing [RP] all the time around. If you want to be listened [to], then you need to listen to other people as well.” Being able to comprehend other’s emotions and being willing to listen to others’ words are two critical elements for developing empathy in RP. As noted in field notes: “Teachers talked about restorative conversations that asked students to put themselves in other people’s shoes, which is difficult for students.”

Making choices

Making choices emerged as another key learning outcome in RP-based classes that the school educators repeatedly discussed. Josh defined making choices as “self-management,” and “working independently,” and “being able to respond to people in the right kind of way.” Josh commented: “The traditional structure is top-down, and you [students] basically just follow instructions and [are] not really required to interact with each other and make decisions because they [students] have never been given the freedom to do that.” Josh believed RP allowed his students to have “some independence” and “learn how to respond respectfully or respond after having some thoughts rather than reacting to things on a daily basis.” Caroline (Principal at Pounamu School) saw the value of RP as RP could “actually empower them [students] to make the changes for themselves.”

School educators referenced different examples of RP that facilitate students’ learning of making choices. It was observed in field notes that “the teachers wanted to empower students to make their own decisions and manage their behaviors in the classroom and the playground. The teachers addressed the importance of making good choices frequently.” Paige (Grade 3 teacher) shared her experience in RP circle with her students as “we were talking about good choices and bad choices, and what are some good choices we can make at school.” Carolyn shared her experience of assisting students making choices of conflicts at the playground, “playground stuff, it is that fitting in with the hierarchy of their friendship group,” and when the conflict happened, she would encourage students making a choice and “find friends who make me happy to play with.” For Daniel (Principal at Paletta), giving students the choices to decide the topic for an RP

circle from “a set amount of artifacts or pictures or videos,” and “the children for that day and for that week will choose one of those things that they are interested in.” By doing so, Daniel became “a facilitator having activities or having ideas that they [students] could build on within the group.” Similar to Daniel, Riha (Grade 2 teacher) referenced her way of promoting students’ decision-making in RP by “giving them [students] a choice whether they want to do it in smaller groups in one big class environment.”

Managing emotions

Managing emotions was mentioned regularly by school educators when considering RP learning outcomes and strategies. Casey described managing emotions as strategies of “talking about their emotions, talking about their actions through their emotions, making goals around managing emotions.” Being able to manage emotions will make her students “coming up with strategies to deal with emotions when emotions are high.” For Michelle (Grade 2 teacher), managing emotions is an essential skill for his students, as he explained that “if I’m an adult facing how to interpret other children’s emotions, that brings up the question of how they [students] are coping with how they see each other’s emotions as well.” Lynsey saw the importance of students being able to manage their emotions when she talked about the topic of youth suicide. She believed that “being able to talk about it [suicide], you know if you can develop that [manage emotions] from a young age, you would like to hope it continue to grow.” Teachers also reported utilizing different types of RP to facilitate students’ development in restoring or managing emotions. As noted in field notes: “During circle time for RP, teachers encouraged students to talk about their different emotions. Managing emotions was a focus during the restorative circles in the classroom.” Casey felt that restorative circle was good practice for students since “it explicitly talks around emotions how we feel, how we act in those moments of those feelings or emotions, skills, and strategies that we can use when we feel like that.” Michelle felt that restorative conversation could help her students learn “how to participate in the conversation,” as his students “needs more emotional like more emotional comprehension.” James (Grade 4 teacher) preferred using expression cards in RP to encourage students to share and understand emotions:

I may have a picture of a sad cartoon bear. I ask them when was the last time you felt like this or just for an opportunity for them to talk about that particular feeling ... we all feel somewhat similar emotions throughout our lives.

Building relationships

School educators recognized building relationships was a vital learning intention in RP-based classes and proposed several RP strategies to build relationships among students. Caroline noticed so many “broken relationships” inside and outside the classroom and among the students and teachers. She believed that RP was a “starting process in building and maintaining relationships,” which contributed to the “trust between student to student, student to teacher, teacher to teacher.” For Casey, the “broken relationships” were incrementally destructive because “the student hasn’t been able to manage that emotion in a positive way,” which led to “moments of disruption.” Casey believed that RP could “validate the position in which the student is in that moment [of disruption]. It supports that broken relationship and helps keep everyone’s mana [spiritual power] intact. It also helps that student to work through whatever happened at that moment [of disruption].” Lynsey

found students tend to “buddy with friends, so they talked to their friends quite fine.” However, building relationships with someone unfamiliar was also an essential relational skill for the students, since “a problem shared is a problem halved,” which means it is easier to deal with a problem if you tell someone about it and work together on it.

School educators shared their experiences of facilitating relationship-building using RP, which built a stronger sense of trust among the students. Casey mentioned that the critical point to assist students in building relationships in RP was making sure “the right people were having these conversations,” and the right people were “the ones having the consistency of conversations” with the students and “trusted” by the students. James referenced getting his students to learn about relationship building in a proactive way. In James’s RP-based classes, he led students to discuss some inappropriate behaviors in a circle, and “the consequences of that action [inappropriate behaviors] could be the deterioration of the relationship. The other kids might also get the idea that we don’t want that. We want a violence-free classroom.” Riha (Grade 2 teacher) described the restorative circle practice, which aimed to develop students’ listening skills in her classroom, as:

Yeah, in a nice big circle, so we all have a seat, and we are all at the same level, so there is no teacher, so you have your listening ears, looking eyes, thinking brain, and folding arms, so they are not moving around.

Empowering students

School educators perceived empowering students as an essential practice during the implementation of RP. In field notes, the researchers observed: “student agency in the form of student choice was a teaching philosophy these teachers used to empower students.” Caroline saw the purpose of RP as “It’s empowering the students,” and she stressed that in RP, “the power-holder isn’t the teacher” and “the children [students] can often come up with their solutions for each other without always having to go to a teacher. So, they start to support each other and come up with ideas for each other.” In Caroline’s practice, she used RP to empower her students. She further explained that:

The children [students] know that they will be heard, they know that they will have the space to be able to state their view, and through doing that and talking about the impact and how they feel about what happened, they can come to a shared understanding about how to move forward.

For Janine (Grade 4 teacher), empowering students was to teach them how to take ownership. She suggested that “you [teachers] are not jumping straight to the conclusion like something bad, and it is making them take ownership of what they have done.” She further explained that taking ownership encouraged students “to solve how to deal with it [conflict] rather than saying I’m sorry. They have got to look at how it has affected the other child and themselves and the best way to deal with it.” Similar to Janine, who disagreed with the notion that teachers should use punitive punishment, Barbara (Grade 3 teacher) and Caroline stressed the importance of analyzing conflicts and discussing consequences with their students during RP. Barbara shared that “looking at rather than punishments, we look at consequences.” Caroline supported Barbara’s point of view by saying that “if you have got a punishment if you are sitting in a [punitive] punishment model, it doesn’t work in the restorative conversations.”

School educators mentioned using RP circles to infuse empowerment to their students. Riha emphasized that teaching the necessary knowledge and skills during RP circle was a purposeful way to empower her students in solving conflicts on their own

The only way I tackle that [conflict] is through circle time and role-playing. If someone doesn't want to be your friend, what are some things you can do ... just trying to build their [students'] knowledge or skills so they can handle those situations instead of coming in and telling straight away.

James added that one of the benefits of RP circle was empowering his students as "I think circle time is a good time ... to teach them how to re-evaluate, how to think about what just happened and what kind of action they should choose to proceed with." In order to empower students' conversations and to learn how to implement RP, Casey discussed the importance of being patient and keeping a neutral position for teachers, "you're [teachers] in a position that's neutral, and you're seeking to understand the assignment when you start a conversation."

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' and principals' perspectives on RP in Aotearoa elementary schools. Five themes were drawn from the interviews with school educators and field notes from the class observations, including showing empathy, making decisions, managing emotions, building relationships, and empowering students. Findings in our study confirmed that RP has the potential to be an effective pedagogical practice that is capable of creating a "more positive school climate" and provides a focus of "whole-school change" to address issues of social justice (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, Citation2016, p. 326). School educators in Aotearoa elementary schools, including teachers and principals, expressed strong appreciation of RP as a proactive approach to teach students how to show empathy, manage emotions, build relationships, and make decisions.

There has been a long history of foregrounding social justice on the school agenda (Hyttén & Bettez, Citation2011). Social justice has been described as an attempt to overcome institutional and systemic inequity or unfairness (Shriberg et al., Citation2008). For a long time, policymakers and researchers have endeavored to address the social justice issues and concerns that have historically been embedded in schools and society (Anfara, Evans, & Lester, Citation2013; Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher, Citation2020). School has been recognized as a critical context to address social justice issues by educating the young generation (Normore & Lahera, Citation2017). Social justice issues have been primarily manifested as "racism, sexism, classism, and ableism" in schools (Azzarito, Macdonald, Dagkas, & Fisette, Citation2017, p. 207). Our study has shown that RP is an inspiring pedagogy that balances the social injustice in schools by empowering the young generation to be responsible for their decisions and behaviors and educating them on how to repair harm and conflict when it happens. Teachers' and principals' words and experiences in RP aligned closely with three key elements of achieving restorative justice, including victim reparation, communities of care reconciliation, and offender responsibility (Wachtel). Using RP, students are empowered to resolve conflicts in peaceful and meaningful ways (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, Citation2005). Our findings add valuable evidence to the study of school-based RP in addressing issues of social justice in a meaningful and proactive way.

Themes drawn from this data suggested a close connection between RP and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Findings in the study provided preliminary evidence, showing that RP can be an effective pedagogical practice that develops students' SEL competencies. SEL was defined as the process of acquiring "the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life ... It includes self-awareness, control of impulsivity, working cooperatively, and caring about oneself and others" (Elias et al., Citation1997, p. 2). Generally speaking, the primary goals of SEL programs are to foster the development of five interrelated sets of competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, Citation2021). Findings of the school educators' perspectives on RP aligned well with the current SEL framework. For example, teachers reported RP being authentic in building relationships among students, which was aligned well with the development of relationship skills (CASEL, Citation2021). School educators also reported that RP helped students control their emotions and show empathy, which aligned well with the developments of self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, Citation2021). These findings show that RP can be an effective pedagogy that promotes students' SEL development. In addition, RP is a content-free pedagogical practice that is navigated by a set of core values instead of specific content knowledge. We would argue that RP could be infused into the existing school curricula to reduce the perceived barrier of insufficient time for stand-alone school SEL programs (Dyson, Howley, & Shen, Citation2021). We would suggest that RP can be utilized with other validated pedagogical practices to develop students' SEL competencies and should be widely promoted in elementary SEL programs.

The Aotearoa curriculum has a distinctive indigenous (Māori) emphasis infused throughout the curriculum, emphasizing five key competencies: relating to others, managing self, thinking, participating and contributing, and using language, text, and symbols (MOE, Citation2007). The findings in this study have provided strong support for the value of school-based RP as a pedagogical practice in promoting these key competencies that are considered essential in the Aotearoa curriculum (MOE, Citation2007).

Conclusions

Guided by the tenets of Restorative Justice, RP is emerging as a growing pedagogical strategy to prevent misbehavior and strengthen students' relationships. The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' and principals' perspectives on RP in Aotearoa elementary schools. This study is among the few that have adopted a qualitative approach to investigate RP in schools and purposefully seek out the perspectives of teachers and principals. Findings confirmed the potential of RP in promoting empathy, managing emotions, building relationships, and empowering students to make responsible decisions. Those findings are closely aligned with the fundamental Aotearoa key competencies (MOE, Citation2007) and the current SEL framework (CASEL, Citation2021). We argue that by asking teachers' and principals' perspectives, their voices can inspire and inform the future directions of school-based SEL programs and interventions grounded in RP. This paper provides evidence from educators that discipline policies can be changed from punitive to more proactive Restorative Practice conversations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. The Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. In New Zealand, the country must follow the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, which ensures indigenous knowledge is protected in our schools (Ministry of Education, Citation2007).

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