

What Does Current Research Say About Restorative Practice?

Five findings for educational leaders about culture, implementation, accountability, and repair

Current research is encouraging, but it does not support treating restorative practice as a quick disciplinary technique. The strongest theme across recent studies is that implementation quality matters: relationships, leadership, staff buy-in, training, time, local systems, and clarity about what restoration is for all shape the result.

1 Restorative practice is cultural, not merely procedural.

Recent school-leader and teacher research emphasizes that restorative practice becomes durable when relationships, adult attitudes, expectations, policy, and everyday interactions change together.

Source: Moran et al. (2024); Moran, Walsh, & Sloan (2025)

2 Implementation quality is part of the intervention.

A 2025 mixed-methods study of 493 educators and 4,805 students found wide variation in practice use and identified leadership expectations, local discipline systems, and organizational conditions as important implementation factors.

Source: Dhaliwal et al. (2025)

3 The outcomes are promising - and context still matters.

A 2025 systematic review of 13 studies reported positive patterns for school climate, violence reduction, emotional wellbeing, empathy, cohesion, and social skills, while cautioning that the evidence base remains heterogeneous and geographically concentrated.

Source: Alonso-Rodriguez et al. (2025)

4 Restorative justice is a practice, not a program.

Research with restorative coordinators highlights the difference between isolated, top-down programming and collaborative practice embedded in the culture - especially when equity is a goal.

Source: Lustick et al. (2024)

5 Sustained implementation requires organizational capacity.

A 2026 mixed-methods study found that staff buy-in, ongoing training and consultation, school-community coordination, and sufficient time were central to sustaining restorative approaches.

Source: Her et al. (2026)

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

- Relationships must exist before they can be restored.
- High standards and high support can coexist.
- Restorative practice requires leadership modelling and organizational coherence.
- Consequences and restoration are not mutually exclusive.
- Safety, voluntariness, and the needs of those harmed remain central.

Restorative practice asks not only what happens to the person - but what happens to the harm.

What Restorative Leadership Requires

Accountability is stronger when boundaries, support, truth, responsibility, and repair are held together.

CREATE CONDITIONS FOR

- Strong relationships before conflict occurs.
- Clear standards, safety expectations, and boundaries.
- Processes that let people understand impact and take responsibility.
- Support for the person harmed without forcing forgiveness or reconciliation.
- Re-entry plans that rebuild trust through changed behaviour over time.

WATCH FOR THE HAZARDS

- Calling a conversation restorative when no real accountability follows.
- Rescuing people from consequences in the name of compassion.
- Using punishment alone and leaving the harm untouched.
- Pressuring harmed people to participate, forgive, or move on too quickly.
- Expecting students to be restorative inside a punitive adult culture.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- 1 Where have consequence and accountability become interchangeable?
- 2 Whose experience does our current process centre?
- 3 How restorative are our practices with adults?
- 4 What does responsible re-entry look like here?

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