

# Engaging troubled students pays off

## MOE initiative focuses on building bonds instead of punishing offenders

By BRYNA SINGH

A LITTLE-KNOWN programme that helps troubled students through activities and counselling in schools rather than punishment-based methods has made strides, with more schools planning to adopt it.

Restorative Practice (RP), a low-key initiative of the Ministry of Education, started as a pilot scheme in four schools in 2005 and is now established in an estimated 30 schools.

Another five schools are keen to adopt it next year.

The ministry does not keep

track of the exact number of RP schools, but Mr Daniel Ang, executive director of Lutheran Community Care Services Singapore, said there has been a growing interest in the approach.

The actual content of the programme is left to the schools and can range from non-academic activities such as art or baking classes to counselling and sharing sessions.

The programme was crucial in saving recalcitrant student Grace, (not her real name), 15, from becoming a dropout.

Her principal at Hougang Secondary – one of the first schools

to adopt the RP scheme – told the then 14-year-old to look for a new school in February last year.

She had not only been disciplined repeatedly, but was also arrested thrice for different reasons each time: glue-sniffing, theft and attempted housebreaking.

The Secondary 3 student had been suspended at least three times for breaking school rules and had also been warned repeatedly about her behaviour.

Her parents had hoped she could start afresh in a new school, but none of the 23 they approached would accept her because of her disciplinary record.

The repeated rejections were a sobering warning that she could end up a dropout and Grace decided she had to end her self-destructive behaviour.

She received a second chance when Hougang Secondary vice-principal Fong Kim Wah allowed her to return to the school in April last year and placed her in an enhanced RP programme.

This year, courses in graffiti art and baking were included. Students are taught by baking professionals and get an industry-rated certificate when they finish the course.

“Exposing them to baking allows them to decide if they want to pursue it in the future,” said Mr Fong.

This year, the school also started a programme called Adopt the Lost Starfish, which pairs a select group of staff with Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical) students who require more attention.

Staff adopt two to four “lost starfish”, or troubled students, to help change their “negative attitudes”.

“I was really bad then, one of the top 10 naughty students in the school and an embarrassment to my parents,” said Grace. “I now study hard and hope to be a journalist in the future.”

Other programmes by RP schools include Bishan Park Secondary’s “Circle Time” where teachers make time to listen to students’ concerns via relational teaching.

Such practices have also been used to resolve conflicts between students from different schools.

For instance, former St Andrew’s Secondary principal Belinda Charles had broached the idea of a reconciliation between boys

from her school and those from Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) after a post-match brawl broke out between rugby players from the two schools in 2010.

Mrs Charles reportedly said at the time that it was part of the school’s RP framework that helped.

“It is important not merely that the boy is punished, but that he must restore the relationship with the other party,” she said.

The RP initiative was not rolled out to all schools here by the Education Ministry because it “may not be suitable for every school”, said a ministry spokesman.

“Schools have the autonomy to explore a range of programmes before adopting the ones that best suit their needs,” he said.

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