



Restorative Practice in Education – Transformative Potential

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Abstract

Schools are challenged as never before to respond to changing societal needs in ways that will support students, parents and teachers in meaningful learning communities. The writers contend that the old punitive paradigms are proving to be inadequate and advocate a relational based approach which is respectful, creative and is proving in early research to be effective in its outcomes. Based on their experience in Irish schools and as restorative trainers, the writers attest to the restorative approach as one that now merits serious consideration by educators everywhere.

Keywords

Practice in education, transformative potential

Restorative Practice in Education – Transformative Potential

Restorative Practice (RP) in education, youth and community work has been growing in Ireland over the past ten years. As trainers we have been part of that energy and excitement. It has also afforded us an opportunity to observe the potential for transformation in a community: the calm atmosphere that emerges, the young people who say they are listened to now, and less marginalisation of the already marginalised. Moreover, we have observed the importance of changing relationships as core to the whole process. Where Restorative Practice is used solely to restore order and deal with misbehaviour, adults often instinctively revert back to the more familiar punitive methods. When relationships become central - peer to peer and adult to young person - then a change seems to happen that can be seen in that community years later because this is accepted by everyone as simply the way they function now.

Educators will identify many issues that make their job difficult: curriculum demands, pupil-teacher ratios, expectations from parents. However, challenging behaviour, which tends to be perceived as a threat to the teacher's authority, is particularly identified. Teaching is an intensely human profession, and that creates both potential for relationships that support teaching and learning or relationships that result in exclusions and other sanctions as a way of controlling behaviour. Teachers are not immune from a predominantly punitive climate and the negative beliefs that emerge when they feel under threat and are



least able to find a professional solution. Young people can be provocative, disinterested, challenge authority, react to self-esteem issues, struggle with relationships, achievement and failure, and yet they need high quality interventions from confident professionals. Restorative Practices is a simple yet effective way to help create this confidence, and provide high quality interventions and skills for educators.

Positive Learning Environments

The primary purpose of a school community is for teaching and learning. The OECD (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*) has for many years examined the optimum conditions for learning environments, and in its 2013 *Innovative Learning Environments* responds to some challenging questions about the future of education. Innovation is a key element of how modern society grows and develops. Product development, skills requirements, social interactions and how learning happens are radically changing. Educational change, to be innovative and part of the global innovation journey, needs to do more than make traditional teaching better. Education needs to create learning environments open to new processes that impact directly on teaching and learning that is responsive to the changing needs of the global society. Based on the detailed analysis of schools that have taken the innovation journey, this publication presents a new framework for understanding these learning environments with the central preoccupation of improving learning.

The Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) principles should run through all these different layers, activities and relationships. These principles state that in order to be most effective, learning environments should:

- Make learning and engagement central.
- Ensure that learning is social and often collaborative.
- Be highly attuned to learner motivations and emotions.
- Be acutely sensitive to individual differences.
- Be demanding for each learner but without excessive overload.
- Use assessments consistent with learning aims, with strong emphasis on formative feedback.
- Promote horizontal connectedness across activities and subjects, in and out of school.

Ideally all of these principles should be met, not just a selected few. (OECD, 2013:15)

The above recommendations calling for collaboration, sensitivity, differentiation - all attuned to learner needs and motivations - speak loudly to the fact that the relationships that exist in the education environment are the foundation on which this vision is built. As William Glaser says:

We can teach a lot of things, but if the teacher can't relate by talking to a group of friendly students, he'll never be a competent teacher (Glaser 2002: 96).



In another of its research reports (2011) the OECD reached the conclusion that positive student-teacher relationships are crucial for establishing a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. This research finds that students, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged students, learn more and have fewer disciplinary problems when they feel that their teachers take them seriously. Interestingly for us, Ireland was placed 30 out of 38 countries when students were asked if teachers *'had time for them if they asked for help'* (OECD 2011: 4). Do we need to do things differently in Ireland?

According to Drewry (2013) most research and theory about education centres on curriculum, quality teaching and learning, and includes the need for quality relationships. What is missing is the how 'quality' is brought about in a teaching – learning relationship. Many approaches for achieving quality in this relationship offer certain ways of thinking about behaviour in the education environment regardless of the context of how the people involved experience the world. Teachers intent on safeguarding their 'authority' or their 'professionalism', students disengaged or even actively pursuing their growth processes in a healthy yet challenging manner, are two of the many contexts in which teaching and learning is played out. Culture, age, gender, ambitions, expectations, health, organisational demands, time, and communication – all of these determine who and how we are in the world and in the cauldron that is the classroom. To work relationally, while respecting context, demands an attitude of working together where there is the 'authority' of the teacher and collaboration of the learner. This means that power resides in the interactions and not in individuals. Ted Wachtel (2003) proposes that *"human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behaviour when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them."* This is his underlying philosophy of Restorative Practices.

Restorative Practices – potential for creating positive learning spaces

Restorative practices have its roots in restorative justice, a way of looking at criminal justice that emphasizes repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than only punishing offenders (Zehr,1990). Restorative justice broadened from these roots to include communities of care as well, with victims' and offenders' families and friends participating in collaborative processes called conferences and circles. Conferencing addresses power imbalances between the victim and offender by including additional supporters.

As Restorative Practices was introduced to education there tended to be an emphasis on behaviour management, finding an alternative to an ineffective punitive system. However, experience has taught us that Restorative Practice is about managing relationships across the school environment. This demands a respectful awareness of the dignity of each individual, and leads to a conversation that allows for each one's 'way of speaking' and meaning- making. Respectful speakers engage with the 'person' of the other rather than the often expected role of authoritative teacher and submissive student.

The challenge of working and relating in our schools in a restorative way can go far beyond managing behaviour and dealing with issues of 'control' to creating dynamic, respectful, innovative, collaborative environments. Restorative Practice offers a 'How', a pathway, in a clear, human, caring, supportive and



structured way. Those last two statements might be challenged by some analysts as magical thinking. However, the experience of Restorative Practice in schools in Ireland to date has given schools the hope and the tools to become more effective and child-centred learning environments.

How School Communities Can Respond

With relationships firmly at the centre of a restorative school community there are a number of processes that facilitate their development, management and repair. Probably the best known process is the Restorative Conference. This is the most formal in structure, and is used infrequently in response to serious offences such as intractable bullying situations and other harmful behaviours within the school community. It involves bringing together the person(s) harmed, their family members, the wrongdoer(s) and their family members, relevant school personnel and, where appropriate, outside agencies. In many countries, outside trained facilitators are brought in to conduct the conferences but in the model pioneered in Irish schools, some school staff members receive more intensive training as facilitators so that the necessary conflict intervention skills are always available in-house. The Restorative Conference model was devised by Terry O'Connell, a community policeman in New South Wales, Australia in 1991 and many schools use his script as the basis for their conferences. (O'Connell, et al., 1999).

Like all meditative interventions, participation is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the process at any time. The facilitator creates a safe and supportive environment for the participants to express how they have been affected by the wrongdoing, and encourages free expression of emotions which allows the development of empathy between the participants. There is an opportunity to exchange ideas, develop a plan to address the conflict and repair the harm that resulted. Preparation is key and includes meeting the parties in advance in groups – families/school staff/other possible participants e.g. social workers/police to explain how the process works and to invite them to participate. It is important that in this pre-conference phase, participants reflect on their actions so that they can take appropriate responsibility for them. The conference provides a space where apologies may be offered and accepted, although improved understanding between the parties can occur even if spontaneous and heartfelt apologies do not emerge. Finally, everyone is invited to share an informal social gathering with refreshments served, and people can come together in a symbolic and meaningful act at the end of the conference.

Less formal restorative encounters are planned around problem behaviour that can be addressed within the school e.g. Year Head meeting a student referred by a teacher/ Class Teacher for recurring misbehaviour in an Impromptu Conference.

In the classroom, teachers in restorative schools use Restorative Circles to address issues that arise. For example, when a new student joins the class, the group can hold a Welcoming Circle to integrate the newcomer socially. Or if there is a problem with unacceptable behaviour, a Solution-focussed Circle can be very effective. Here desks are quickly stacked along the classroom walls and the chairs are placed in a circle. The facilitator (usually the teacher) assists the group in creating a space where everyone can speak openly and honestly in telling their story. To ensure everyone is listened to, the



participants agree that only the person holding a talking-piece is allowed to speak. Circles are not just good for addressing wrongdoing but can be a powerful way of building relationships in a class group (Pranis 2005). Many second-level schools now arrange for class groups to meet up in circles for an early morning check-in before the day's work begins.

In a restorative school, there is an enhanced sense of interactivity between students, school personnel and parents. People engage at a number of different levels including emotionally in the thousands of informal exchanges that happen on an average school day. You hear statements from students like: *"John, when you call me names in front of my friends it makes me feel very upset. Can I ask you to not do this please?"* Or a teacher might share their reaction to a student who is constantly late for class: *"Jane, you undertook to improve your timekeeping but things have not changed. As your teacher I have a need to be respected. This does not happen when you keep arriving late for my class. Can I ask you to address this need please?"* These honest exchanges let everyone know that actions impact on other members of the school community, sow the seeds of empathy in students, and encourage behaviour appropriate to valued members of a supportive community.

Finally, there are Restorative Questions that are designed to encourage the wrongdoer to think about their actions and how they have affected others. These can be used informally to facilitate a person to reflect constructively on their actions:

- What happened?*
- What were you thinking at the time?*
- What have you thought about since?*
- Who has been affected by what you have done? In what ways?*
- What do you need to do to make things right?*

There is no judgment on the part of the questioner, no advice given, no reprimand, no implied criticism. This is mediation at its very purest where the facilitator assists the party in taking their own cognitive, emotional and moral journey through the impact of his/her actions on others. There is a challenge to make amends that taps into the person's creativity and acknowledges them as the expert in their own conflict.

These processes involve the participation of a community of support for the offender and the victim. Braithwaite (1989) identifies the importance of bringing together those who are held in high esteem by the parties and within this safe space, the victim and offender get to express their needs. The process is restorative in that the intervention (1) makes it clear to the offender that their behaviour is not condoned within the community; (2) is respectful and supportive of the individual while not condoning the behaviour (Morrison, 2001).

The more informal aspect of a restorative school is the creation of an ethos of welcome, respect and mutuality that the above processes and skills are built upon. In times of stress, schools and teachers



tend to default to a more punitive approach. In a restorative school, often an ‘incident’ can be a signal of relationships not working, including issues such as bullying, power imbalance, differing viewpoints and often related to peer struggles with identity and development. According to McCluskey (2013) a strong version of RP must include reflection on issues that may be impacting the learning experience. In the face of more pressure it has been the experience of many schools that *‘RP can produce a calmer school where staff feel valued and listened to and where students feel they have a voice’*. (McCluskey 2013: 139)

The Donegal ETB Restorative Practices Project 2013

As most of the available research into the impact of restorative practices in schools comes from countries like New Zealand, Australia, the United States of America, Canada and the UK, Irish educators might well question the relevance of restorative practices to the Irish education system. A study published in 2013 by the University of Ulster gives insight into a restorative initiative involving 14 second-level schools, 5 Youthreach Centres and 2 youth organisations in Co Donegal.

The participating schools were funded to engage restorative trainers to work with the school communities during the year 2012-13. The extent and nature of the training was determined by the individual schools, and there was a spectrum of needs and priorities across the schools involved. Some of the schools had an understanding of restorative practice going back to an initial project of Health Education, HSE in 2004; others came to the concept with little or no understanding of restorative practice.

The report confines itself to a small number of measurable responses to student misbehaviour rather than taking a holistic overview of the impact of restorative practice on the school community.

In Spring 2012 participant schools were asked in a questionnaire to enumerate their responses to student misbehaviour under these headings:

- Teacher warnings - formal and informal
- On Report
- Detention
- Time Out
- Suspension
- Expulsion

Following a year in which training could be accessed and the school would undertake to work in restorative ways, a second questionnaire was circulated to ascertain changes in student behaviour.

Teacher Warnings

The initial response to misbehaviour is either a formal response -written and recorded - or an informal warning by the teacher. The research showed that formal warnings usually issued from Year



Heads and Assistant/Principals as part of the school disciplinary system and incurring sanctions. The report found that *“it was positive that there appeared to be a relational culture in many of the descriptions that saw the relationship between teacher and student capable of resolving many behavioural challenges before they progressed to a formal situation”* (Campbell et al., 2013).

On Report

Over the year there was a decrease of On Report usage for low level disruption and for persistent behaviour, suggesting an improvement in teacher-student relationships.

Detentions

The report noted no change in the detention system in use, inferring a lack of change in policy or approach.

Time Out

The number of Time Out sanctions showed significant decreases over the year:

- Disruptive Behaviour from 176 to 31
- Physical Horseplay from 58 to 4
- Verbally Demeaning other students from 57 to 8
- Verbally Demeaning staff from 40 to 20
- Relationally Diminishing other students from 45 to 0
- Challenging Teacher Authority from 99 to 12
- Cyber Bullying, first offence from 17 to 9
- Smoking from 17 to 0
- Other from 10 to 0

There was an 83.8% overall decline in incidents leading to Time Out over the year of the project.

Use of 1-3 Day Suspension

Overall the total number of suspensions went from 186 to 140, a decrease of almost 25%

Use of Suspensions for 4+ days

This reduced from 11 incidences to 9

Expulsion

No schools used this sanction during the period of the study.



Although the scope of the research is narrow geographically, and it confines itself to measuring outcomes in student behaviour, nonetheless there are significant pointers to the positive role restorative practices can play in Irish schools. The report concludes:

“Specific restorative practices such as mediation and conferences are important but should not be the primary focus of a whole organisation approach. They are effective ways of addressing harm when values and skills are used to guide them. They give voice to individuals who are listened to. The whole story of what went wrong can then be addressed and when required, amends can be made, an apology offered and accepted. Through these processes lessons on how to get on with people are learnt and the connections between people are strengthened.” Campbell, et al., 2013

Implementation and sustainability of a restorative approach in schools

Often there is a sense in education that there is a need to do things differently, not just better, but about changing the way we do things here. To create a sense of real change when introducing RP, Blood and Thorsborne (2005) suggest that even though *‘the implementation of carefully thought out strategy is vital, one of the critical issues for successful implementation and sustainability of a restorative philosophy is the realisation that this means organisational and cultural change’*. One of the main challenges facing schools is to be open to the change needed in their specific context of history, geographical situation, school traditions, ethos, and to realise that this openness demands reflection, planning, review, evaluation and an ongoing commitment. Successful implementation is not about transferring a justice model of conferencing and expecting it to work in a school setting. Restorative Practice in schools is about much more than conferencing incidents of serious misconduct. It requires a range of proactive and responsive processes which strengthen relationships and assumes a relational approach to problem solving. The implementation of RP risks the fate of many other well intentioned programs –ending in disillusionment and failure - unless we understand what it takes to change the hearts and minds of our school communities and are prepared to learn from our past.

Changing the culture of a school community to a restorative ethos can take a period of up to five years or more (Blood & Thorsborne 2005) In order to bring this about some of the essential elements are:

- Leadership that understands the philosophy and leads restoratively. This is in essence the one element that cannot be absent.
 - Adults who communicate positively and are open to the challenge of change, who model positive communication and conflict resolution.
 - School seen as a learning institution embedded in a local community, where parents especially are a vibrant component of school life and development.
 - Reflection on issues that create disadvantage, inequality for students, and awareness of development issues that can impact behaviour, relationships and learning.
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- High expectations of academic achievement and behaviour. This high expectation is matched by sensitive differentiation.
- Restorative principles influence all planning and programmes.
- Understanding that becoming a restorative school is a process not a goal. It will take time - time for innovation, time for reflection and time for consolidation and the cycle continues!

Our vision for the future

The writers have worked as restorative trainers in Irish schools – primary and second-level – for over ten years. Both of us came to this work from a background in education, holding senior management posts in schools. We have been privileged to see at first hand the transformative outcomes when school communities commit to building, managing and repairing relationships. How the restorative message can be progressed and extended to more Irish schools is the next challenge? We suggest:

- There is a small but growing cohort of dynamic and committed restorative trainers emerging which needs to be resourced and supported
- It is essential that each school's unique personality and ethos is respected in taking the restorative journey. We question the compulsory imposition of RP such as is the practice in some UK education areas. We are hesitant to support a one size fits all approach to training and development in schools. The core value of RP is invitation and voluntary participation. This is also central to successful implementation.
- We recognise that many of the practices we have described in this article already exist in schools where the term RP has never even been mentioned. Already existing good practice must be acknowledged and built upon when moving forward into a restorative ethos.

The initial phase of seed-scattering has taken place across many school communities in Ireland and restorative shoots are growing into saplings. Now we need to build the sturdy restorative oak forests of the future.



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Margaret McGarrigle is a former school principal who is passionate about Restorative Practices, working as both practitioner and trainer. In recent years, Margaret has worked throughout Ireland in Schools, Education Organisations, Youth Groups and communities – training in either Restorative Practices /Conflict Management /Mediation. She is involved in delivery of modules on Restorative Practice in Schools and on NUIM Masters programmes in Mediation and Conflict Intervention. Margaret is passionate about the potential for a transformation in School/Youth Communities using a Restorative Approach.

Paddy O'Connor

Having worked in education, Paddy O'Connor is convinced of the benefits of managing conflicts by supporting people in their journey towards devising their own resolutions. He believes in the potential of a restorative approach to build strong connections between people, and to contribute to the growth of supportive communities be they schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces or families. Paddy's experiences range across the practitioner (Northwest Mediation Services) and academia, through his experiences as a school principal and lecturer in NUIM.