

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS: TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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This presentation will give some findings from our evaluation of a pilot project funded by the government in Scotland. I will mainly talk in my presentation about some of the important themes, issues and challenges that have emerged from the project. If conference participants wish to know more, they can attend a workshop with two university colleagues and two staff from Scottish schools, one elementary and one high school, offering some real, detailed stories from their schools. My intention is to inform, stimulate and perhaps provoke you with some ideas and to tell (and show you) a little about Scotland.

I am an academic (yes, I know, entirely removed from the real world) but also a former practitioner. I have worked with young people in difficulty in a residential therapeutic community, and educational and community-based settings. I have



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been around for a long time and seen initiatives and “answers” come and go! Some of the particular methods used in restorative developments looked familiar to me, so I was perhaps rather doubtful, even cynical, about its representation as new and different. Was this yet another “answer”—until the next one—or just a new name for existing practices? Or did it offer something distinctive and with potential for really changing things in school? In this presentation I will discuss what we have concluded after two years of research into a pilot project funded by the government in Scotland.

SCOTLAND

Scotland, a small country with a population of 5,054,800, is a semi-autonomous part of the UK with its own parliament, responsible for policy on education, social welfare, justice and the environment. A third of Scottish children live in families whose average income is less than 50 percent of the British average income.

There are contradictions within Scottish approaches to justice with, for Europe, a relatively high level of adult prisoners, alongside more liberal policies of community service and restorative justice. The Scottish Children’s Hearing System provides a strong background to the development both of restorative youth justice and of restorative approaches in schools. This system deals with children and young people in terms of their identified need, rather than their actions—dealing with the “depraved and the deprived” together. The focus of decision making is clearly on the welfare of the child. This combined approach to welfare and offending remains strong in Scotland, in the face of what has been described as the international retreat from welfare (Hallett and Hazel, 1998).

A key finding from a range of research indicates a strong link and overlap in the lives of children between victimization/care issues and offending. This raises some issues for approaches to restorative practice that focus strongly on the idea of harm, concentrating practices on the idea of distinctively

separate victims and offenders (Lloyd, et al, forthcoming).

Most Scottish councils now have youth restorative justice projects; practices include restorative justice conferences, face-to-face meetings, shuttle dialogue, police restorative warnings, support for persons harmed, victim awareness and restorative conversations. (For further discussion of these practices see www.restorativejusticescotland.org.uk/practices.htm.)

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN SCOTTISH EDUCATION— THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Most children in Scotland attend neighborhood elementary and comprehensive (i.e., non-selective) high schools. Four percent attend private fee-paying schools. About two percent are educated in special schools and mainstream units for additional support for learning. This is a fairly constant figure despite policies of inclusion/mainstreaming. Compulsory schooling is from age 5 to 16, with a subsequent rate of about 15 percent of young people age 16-plus not in work, education or training.

Significant issues in recent years echo those in other countries, such as England and the USA, with a strong standards agenda, concerns about multiple policy innovation, about the impact on classrooms of policies of inclusion and over what are often perceived to be declining standards of students' behavior (Munn, 2004). The main education legislation emphasizes the right of students to a school education and an overall presumption of mainstream educational placement. Recent legislation uses a broad, functional and interactive definition of additional support needs, recognizing that these derive from barriers to learning that may be institutional and pedagogical, as well as individual. However, this policy move away from "deficit" models is paradoxically paralleled by an increasing move toward the medicalization of children's behavior, through growing diagnoses, for example, of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Lloyd, 2006). Recent curriculum

guidelines have moved toward a re-emphasis on teacher autonomy and curricular flexibility.

A survey of teachers' views in 2004 found the majority of students to be well-behaved, though an increasing number of teachers encountered a wide range of potentially disruptive behavior in the classroom and around the school. Low-level disruption continued to be the most wearing for teachers; growing numbers reported physical aggression by students but not a major problem of violence. Gender is a constant dimension, with teachers finding boys consistently more challenging (Munn, 2004; Lloyd, 2005).

Previous policy initiatives meant that schools already offered a range of supportive practices including:

- Classroom management initiatives
- Buddy/teacher support schemes
- Circle time
- Mediation/peer mediation
- Solution-focused interventions
- Counseling skills work
- Counseling groupwork/circles
- Social skills programs
- Anger/conflict management
- Staged intervention/support schemes
- Literacy/empathy development
- Person-centered planning

Not all of these are to be found in every school; indeed, there is very considerable variation in the degree and character of student support between schools and between local councils.

THE SCOTTISH PILOT PROJECTS ON RESTORATIVE PRACTICES/APPROACHES

The Scottish Executive (government) provided funding for a 30-month pilot project in three Scottish councils (recently extended by a further two years). The overall aim for the pilot projects was to learn more about restorative practices in school

settings and to look at whether there could be a distinctive Scottish approach, that is, an approach that both complemented and offered something additional to Scottish practice.

The three pilot councils have developed their restorative projects in different ways, although they have worked with the Scottish Executive to develop a broadly common underpinning philosophy. The development of these projects reflects a political will to develop practical approaches, in partnership with practitioners in the field: to allow the pilots to be developmental, the national initiative to be highly participative and the evaluation to be formative. Eighteen schools were identified as pilot evaluation schools; these include ten high schools, seven elementary schools and one special school, in urban, suburban and rural areas and in areas of severe economic poverty as well as areas of relative economic wealth. They had varied histories in terms of existing approaches that could be described as restorative and had very varied expectations of the project. A two-year formative evaluation of the work was contracted, to be conducted by the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. This evaluation is now almost complete.

The pilot and the evaluation both began in 2004. The pilot sought to work with councils and schools in an iterative process over the more than two-year period of the evaluation. It involved working with staff in the three councils to clarify the nature and goals of the pilot initiatives and develop a methodology for the evaluation, in which participants as well as researchers played a critical part.

The evaluation involved the collection of a wide range of qualitative data through formal and informal interviews, focus groups, observation in classrooms and meetings, as well as more quantitative methods, such as staff and pupil surveys, and the collection of hard data, such as numbers of pupils expelled. At every stage we fed back and discussed with school managers, key personnel and council administrators, and so the evaluation process evolved in response to their concerns. We set out in each of the 18 schools to evaluate their own distinctive aims and to gather data common to all the schools.

THE SCOTTISH FRAMEWORK FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICES/APPROACHES

The terms “restorative practices” and “restorative approaches” are used in education to mean restoring good relationships when there has been conflict or harm *and* developing school ethos, policies and procedures that reduce the possibilities of such conflict and harm. They are approaches that acknowledge that schooling is an increasingly complex task, with increasingly wider demands on schools in a diverse and complex world and that teachers’ work can be challenging and stressful. The Scottish projects varied in their language, using restorative “practice,” “interventions” or “approaches.” We have argued elsewhere that the concept of restorative *approaches* can offer a much more relevant focus for thinking about conflict, about change and about schools as learning communities. From now on I am going to use restorative approaches; however, this should not obscure the fact that the terminology does vary in Scotland.

Both the Executive and the councils were keen to emphasize that restorative approaches should be seen, *not so much as an entirely new approach* for innovation-stressed schools, but as one which offers a *framework within which existing good practice* can build and develop; it also adds a new dimension to thinking and practice for *inclusion*.

Restorative approaches were seen to involve a set of principles, strategies and skills. The underpinning principles included:

- The importance of fostering social relationships in a school community of mutual engagement
- Responsibility and accountability for one’s own actions and their impact on others
- Respect for other people, their views and feelings
- Empathy with the feelings of others affected by one’s own actions
- Fairness
- Commitment to equitable process
- Active involvement of everyone in school with deci-

sions about their own lives

- Issues of conflict returned to the participants, rather than behavior pathologized
- A willingness to create opportunities for reflective change in students and staff

The Scottish approach acknowledges the theoretical framework underpinning other approaches to supporting children in schools. These include humanistic, person-centered psychology, cognitive-behavioral approaches, the “social model” and sociological perspectives on social and educational processes that recognize conflicting purposes of schooling. (Likewise the developing theoretical model on restorative justice in Scotland draws less on criminological perspectives on harm/shame and more on person-centered and cognitive perspectives. See www.restorativejusticescotland.org.uk.) Thus, restorative approaches recognize the human wish to feel safe, to belong, to be respected and to understand and have positive relationships with others. They acknowledge the potential of social and experiential learning approaches that enable students (and staff) to understand and learn to manage their own behavior. They recognize the fundamental importance of both effective support and clear control and boundaries in schools.

Practices seen in the pilot schools ranged on the continuum from whole-school approaches to those used in more challenging situations or with individual students. They included:

- Restorative ethos building
- Curriculum focus on relationship development/conflict prevention
- Restorative language
- Restorative conversations
- Checking-in circles
- Problem solving circles—small or whole-class
- Mediation, shuttle mediation and peer mediation
- Restorative meetings or small conferences
- Restorative management of exclusion/reintegration
- Few formal conferences

Related complementary developments, seen by schools to be part of their restorative approaches initiative, included:

- School playground activities/games
- Social skills/conflict-prevention programs, e.g., *Cool in School*

In Scotland there has been little emphasis on the use of external facilitators in schools, but rather a commitment to the training and skills development of school staff and students.

Both the Executive and the councils recognized the need for staff development and continuing support for practice. Early in the pilots a number of staff from two of the councils visited the IIRP, and colleagues from Bethlehem have subsequently delivered a range of courses for council staff. The English organization Transforming Conflict has been heavily involved in council staff development; Marg Thorsborne and Peta Blood from Australia have given a range of seminars. So there has been an international influence on practice within the context of a distinctively Scottish framework! Some staff from the pilot schools were clearly inspired and enthused by their training. Several school principals described their training as transformational and were sustaining their enthusiasm in the process of developing their schools.

OVERALL FINDINGS—DID IT WORK?

The 18 schools progressed at different speeds, elementary schools in general finding it easier to develop whole-school approaches. In every school, as expected, staff were at different stages of knowledge and commitment; in some most were strongly involved and there was a sense of critical mass, of changing culture and ethos. However, the evaluation was able to identify real strengths and achievements across *all* councils and schools.

In all schools there was evidence of strong enthusiasm and commitment on the part of key staff and, in some, of real transformation of thinking and practice. Visible commitment on the part of school managers and key enthusiasts was highly

significant in promoting changing practice—other interviewees identified modeling by senior and key staff as central to their own development.

Students and staff, particularly in elementary schools, identified measurable improvements in school climate and student behavior. They described restorative language in use by staff and students. In one school, visitors commented on the air of calmness. Students felt valued by staff and were able to identify restorative elements in their teachers' actions. In elementary schools where there had been a focus on conflict prevention and mediation, students had a clear understanding of how these processes worked and talked of applying the principles in their families and peer groups. In elementary schools, students spoke of being listened to by staff. Students were enthusiastic about the use of circles and restorative meetings in helping to resolve conflict.

Elementary schools had not made much use of disciplinary expulsion, but where they had this was eliminated or significantly reduced, and there was clear evidence of reduction in referrals to managers for discipline and in some cases a reduction of the need for external behavior support.

“Now it’s OK to be seen (by other staff), to be talking things through—not necessary to be seen to punish” (a teacher).

The high schools were more diverse in their achievements. Several had recently critical external evaluation and changes in principals that slowed the process of change. However, here, too, there was clear evidence of changing cultures and practice. In some there was still a significant challenge from a minority of resistant staff; in one school there were strong feelings by a vocal minority that this kind of approach represented an undermining of proper discipline. In others, however, there was clear evidence of a school “turning around,” with significant reduction in use of punishments and of expulsion. In most high schools, staff had substituted restorative processes for more traditional punishments such as “lines,” although in some, former punishment processes still remained alongside them.

FROM CONFERENCES TO CONVERSATIONS—MOVES TOWARD A BROADER APPROACH IN SCOTLAND

There were a number of significant issues identified, including the questions of consistency and sustainability.

“There’s always the risk that when the going gets tough, restorative is an easy target in any school. ... You’ve got a kind of default setting among teachers saying ‘well that’s all very well but we’re not punitive enough, we’re not scary enough. The kids aren’t frightened of us’” (a staff member).

Important questions were also raised about the balance and relationship between restorative approaches and punishment, including the recognition that interventions intended to be restorative may be experienced as punitive. In some schools, particularly but not exclusively in disadvantaged areas, the culture of the neighborhood promoted “fighting back.” Some schools were working hard to involve parents. In high schools there were issues about the involvement of subject teachers in restorative processes. In elementary schools there was wide recognition that restorative approaches were for everyone—staff and all students—whereas in high schools some subject staff needed to be convinced that they should be involved and that this was not simply a matter for guidance personnel and staff with discipline responsibilities.

THE FUTURE OF RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN SCOTLAND

Our evaluation provides evidence of real transformation of thinking and practice in some schools and significant change across all the schools, albeit at varying pace and with resistance to a greater or less extent. Enthusiasm and commitment was apparent in all the schools and councils involved. The Scottish education minister has given public support. He has visited a range of schools and gave a recent talk to a national seminar without notes, indicating a real knowledge of restorative approaches. Of course in politics, education ministers change, and new ministers often wish to make their mark. However, there is significant policy support at the moment, with continued

funding for the pilot schools. Other councils are developing their own approaches.

This may not be the only “answer” to issues of relationships and discipline in schools, and some of the elements may not be entirely new. However, our evaluation indicates that it has a great deal to offer. Restorative approaches can be seen to work at all levels of the school, with all students, including those in trouble or conflict. It can be seen to support staff as well as students and is non-pathologizing—students do not need to be labeled. It promotes student and staff participation in school processes, promoting the student voice. It includes elements of practice that are familiar to those of us who have been involved in educational communities, who have done circle time or social group work, and this is a strength in that some of the skills and strategies are already in use in schools. However, the new overall concept, the structuring of the skills and strategies into a coherent framework underpinned by a strong value base clearly offers something distinctive that schools can be enthusiastic about and can use as a basis to renew and develop their culture and relationships.

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