

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN SCHOOLS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM ENGLAND

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This paper draws on my experience as a headteacher working in partnership with Thames Valley Police between 1999 and 2004 to implement restorative approaches to a secondary school. I will reflect on the conclusions of the Youth Justice Board evaluation report on the Restorative Justice (RJ) in Schools initiative and identify issues for developing restorative approaches in English schools.



Graham Robb

It was August 1999 and the third week of the summer vacation. I had been appointed as headteacher of Drayton School (for children aged 11–16 years, serving Banbury in Oxfordshire) starting in July, and I came in to a school in a category of ‘Special Measures’, which meant that inspectors had deemed the quality of leadership, achievement, teaching and learning as unsatisfactory.

I was in the school library with a police officer acting as facilitator, with two sets of parents, the acting head of the neighbouring primary school, the site manager of the two schools and two ten-year-old boys. I had never heard of RJ until a month before, and this was my first experience of it. The process resulted in:

- the boys accepting that they had caused a great deal of damage to both schools by breaking windows
- the boys and parents hearing the pain and emotion of school staff having to deal with damage to buildings and pupils' work
- the boys hearing the parents' pain
- the boys giving apologies, which were evidently heart-felt, and saying what they would do to make amends
- parents, who did not have much trust in schools, realizing that the two schools wanted to solve problems and not condemn and punish
- me deciding that RJ was something I wanted to see more widely used in Drayton school

This was for me what Sir Charles Pollard, chief constable of Thames Valley Police at the time, calls the 'wow' factor, when someone experiencing the RJ process makes a connection between the values underpinning RJ and their deep-rooted beliefs about themselves and how problems should be sorted out. Sir Charles had the insight and leadership to realize that placing police officers in schools and deploying RJ as a principled strategy would both help the school and reduce the chances of young people becoming involved in the criminal justice system. As head of a school in challenging circumstances, it would have been easy to adopt a punitive policy towards children displaying challenging behaviour. This would have led to exclusions from school, further corrosion of relationships between the school and the community, and an increased chance of excluded young people engaging in crime and anti-social behaviour. But it was clear to me that RJ processes actually meant that young people were undertaking positive learning—and that was my main concern.

Over the next five years, in collaboration with Thames Valley Police, the Youth Justice Board teams and Belinda Hopkins from Transforming Conflict, we undertook a significant amount of training and development work on restorative approaches. This term covers the range of restorative work from informal

enquiry and problem solving through to the full RJ conferences. This was a very difficult journey for the school. Over the years there were many challenges to the use of restorative approaches; there were failures and weaknesses but there were also stunning success stories for individual pupils and staff; there was transformational learning among many adults working as part of the Drayton community—and, crucially, some children whose lives might have been damaged because of a school incident achieved success in learning.

In this article I will put the Drayton experience in context and then use the evidence from the Youth Justice Board evaluation of RJ in schools to draw some pointers for future development.

RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN EDUCATION

RJ approaches started in schools in the Thames Valley and Nottinghamshire areas as a way to deal with minor offences such as theft or assault. The aim was to resolve such problems without the need to go through a criminal justice system, which could be unnecessarily time-consuming, not contribute to learning and might not address the needs of the victim.

Restorative approaches are about reducing bullying, improving behaviour and attitudes, and raising attainment. The fundamental principle is that effective learning cannot take place if relationships in a school are damaged. The restorative approach is designed to make sure that those involved in a conflict ‘own the solution’. No one else can solve a problem between two people—be they teacher and pupil, pupil and pupil, or school and parent. The process of asking restorative questions puts the onus for problem solving where it belongs—between the two or more people involved.

Restorative approaches are now being used in a range of primary and secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units to do the following:

- manage behaviour in classrooms
- deal with significant problems such as bullying, theft and damage

- resolve playground, social areas and school community issues
- resolve conflict between adults within the school community or conflict between the school and families
- inform circle time, PSHE (personal, social and health education), citizenship and other curriculum activities
- develop democratic processes of a school—e.g., school councils

RJ conferences can also be used in the most serious circumstances when a headteacher might consider an exclusion. An acceptable outcome through this can mean that the pupil stays in school and avoids the proven negative effects of exclusion on life chances. At the same time the school community is assured that pupils causing damage to relationships have been confronted about their behaviour and are less likely to cause offence again.

Facilitating an RJ conference is a highly skilled role that requires thorough training. However, restorative approaches can be used informally as a way of dealing constructively with problems, rather than purely applying sanctions to a young person for breaking rules or undermining the authority of a teacher.

Whole-school approaches to restorative approaches require a complex and thorough process of clarifying values, professional development, curriculum and organizational development.

EVALUATION EVIDENCE

In May 2000, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) launched an initial pilot initiative in two schools in London. This was extended to other Local Authority area schools in May 2001. A further seven Youth Offending Teams established projects in schools in their areas in October 2002. The Restorative Justice in Schools programme (RJIS) covered schools in 9 local YOT areas, and included work across 26 schools (20 secondary and 6 primary

schools), using a range of different approaches to managing restorative development. The results were published on the YJB website in March 2005.

KEY FINDINGS

Out of 625 formal conferences that took place in the schools during the programme:

- 92 per cent resulted in successful agreements between parties.
- Of these, 96 per cent of the agreements made were being sustained after three months.
- All but three staff (all in one school) in the project schools believed that the school had benefited from having restorative approaches used.
- Staff perceived an improvement in behaviour where restorative approaches were being used in a whole-school framework.

The evaluation report from Partners in Education also set out a best practice checklist for introducing restorative justice. The key headings are summarized as:

School leadership

- a shared vision
- developing a whole-school approach
- building relationships (within and external to the school)

Information for teachers

- continuing professional development for staff
- notice board in staff room to ensure information flows
- access to other training opportunities

Information to pupils and parents

- written information
- include in newsletters

Range of approaches

- choice about what to offer and when (conferences, circle time, mediation, peer mediation)
- driven by pupil, parent and teacher choice

Clear agreements about contributions and expectations between the schools and the agencies introducing restorative justice approaches

- what schools can expect to be delivered and offered from the agency introducing restorative approaches to the school
- what commitments the agency introducing restorative approaches into the school will need from the school

Integration of restorative justice approaches into the school behaviour policy

- clear procedures
- clear processes for referral
- triage system that decides what is the best intervention for the situation (which one/s is/are most likely to work)

Formal links between restorative approaches and elements of the school curriculum especially citizenship and personal, social and health education.

Preparation for conferences

- time
- contact with all who will be involved prior to the conference

Structure for the conferences

- script or a loose framework, depending on the skills and confidence of the facilitator

Range of facilitators

- well-trained facilitators
- trained school staff
- neutral person can help in pupil-teacher conflicts

- police in most serious cases
- joint training/interagency opportunities/extended schools
- good relations between the school and facilitators
- support for staff delivering RJ conferences

Swift response

- conferences need to be as timely as possible after the incident
- involvement of supporters and parents in conferences

Engaging parents

- home-school liaison (phone calls and/or home visits)
- keep parents informed and involved

Monitoring and formal feedback

- written agreements
- clearly defined checking-back procedures

Exit strategies

- clear idea of how the initiative will develop and become integrated and sustainable

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF RJ IN SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

A significant number of schools and Local Authorities are now promoting the use of restorative approaches using training methodologies drawn from both English and international experience. Similar developments are taking place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A key player in managing the successful implementation of restorative approaches is the headteacher. In a school culture in England that gives substantial and increasing autonomy to heads, there are a number of dimensions to leading a school for implementing restorative approaches:

- a) How to judge school readiness for implementing RA—emotionally, morally, organizationally, structurally.

- b) Trojan Mouse or whole-school transformation? Some schools have grown restorative practices from small-scale pilots that prove the effectiveness of the strategy to the community—others have gone for wholesale structural coordinated change.
- c) Use of restorative approaches as part of the national training strategies in improving behaviour in schools. In England national strategies are supporting whole-staff professional development supported by consultants. Schools can manage the support that these strategies provide to integrate restorative approaches development.
- d) How to build acknowledgement of restorative approaches through quality frameworks such as inspection criteria and school self-evaluation frameworks.
- e) Access to continuing universal and targeted training resources for all staff and pupils, especially those taking on restorative roles.
- f) Availability of impartial facilitators when needed so that there are not confusions of role or process.
- g) Planning for the time resource to enable effective restorative processes, such as using the current re-modelling of the workforce processes to deploy more restoratively trained support staff.
- h) Managing the learning and emotions of staff and parents when introducing restorative approaches. This is about giving space, information and support—and it is about continually telling the story of why restorative approaches are right for our school.

SCHOOLS COULD GET RA WRONG!

- Schools could perceive it as just about RJ conferences rather than a range of strategies.
- Schools might not realize, or want to recognize, the change RA requires in all members of the community.
- Schools might not recognize the essentially demo-

cratic nature of RA processes—and the implications for school culture.

- Schools might not make the link between the principles of restorative approaches and the leadership styles needed, at all levels in the organization.
- Schools that introduce RA under one headteacher need to ensure that subsequent headteachers are recruited who will build on the RA developments.

But despite these possible pitfalls, the experience of a significant and growing number of colleagues working in schools of all sorts, supported by Local Authority partners, is that restorative approaches is a strategy that is making a significant difference to pupil achievement, school effectiveness and adult learning.