



GUIDING PRINCIPLES TO FOSTER
**A RELATIONAL AND RESTORATIVE
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT**



EUROPEAN
FORUM FOR
RESTORATIVE
JUSTICE

Guiding Principles to Foster a Relational and Restorative School Environment

Produced by members of the EFRJ Restorative Schools Working Group 2022 – 2024

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Foreword

“Welcome to this publication by the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ) Restorative Schools Working Group. This resource is intended to engage those interested in the concept of relational and restorative schools, providing a bridge between practical experience and scholarly insight. While not an academic paper, it integrates the collective expertise of the working group with the latest research and theoretical advancements in the field of relational and restorative education.

Providing a bridge between practical experience and scholarly insight

This publication begins by offering a foundational understanding of relational and restorative schools, setting the stage for more in-depth exploration.

Section 1 provides practical guidelines, offering readers concrete strategies to implement within educational settings. These guidelines are rooted in the principles of relational and restorative practices, ensuring applicability in diverse school environments.

In **Section 2**, we share a series of restorative stories, contributed by current and former members of the European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ) Restorative Schools Working Group. This section begins with a thematic commentary, which provides critical reflections and insights on the shared experiences. The narratives themselves document the varied journeys toward creating relational and restorative schools in different countries, including Brazil, Georgia, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each story captures the unique socio-political and cultural contexts that shape the development of these practices, showcasing

the diversity in approaches and experiences. The stories reflect the contributors' ongoing efforts to build relational and restorative school communities and highlight the evolving nature of these initiatives.

Section 3 offers a list of recommended readings, ranging from scholarly articles and accessible summaries to children's literature, thus catering to a wide audience interested in further exploration of relational and restorative education.

The publication concludes with an **Afterword** from the chair of the EFRJ Restorative Schools Working Group, providing final reflections on the collective work and future directions for the development of relational and restorative school models.

1 Core Principles and Practical Guidelines for Relational and Restorative Schools

We use the term “*relational and restorative schools*,” because our experiences with implementing restorative practices has shown that focusing on building and maintaining strong relationships is essential in a school setting. Restorative practices not only help repair relationships but also foster meaningful connections with others. Additionally, developing social-emotional skills is a key component of creating a successful restorative school environment.

By using the phrase ‘relational and restorative practice,’ a recognition that there is so much more to restorative practice than ‘restoring’ or ‘repairing’ and that proactive relationship-building is in fact the most important part of the work.¹

Relational and restorative schools are supported by, and support, developments in the wider field of restorative justice. Sharing a deep understanding that we are all profoundly connected and that when something happens in a community it is the community that needs to be involved in finding ways to put things right. In the development of restorative cities, for instance, the development of relational and restorative schools are often seen as an important component of the community and citywide development of restorative justice.

1 Hopkins, B. (2023). *The restorative classroom: Using restorative approaches to foster effective learning*. Routledge.

Culture of a Relational and Restorative School

Relational and Restorative School culture comprises the learned and shared beliefs, values and practices of everyone in the school community. It is not something that can be created and then taken for granted. It is an explicit set of language and behaviours that everyone in the school community works hard to maintain, build and repair in their everyday actions.

Relational and Restorative School culture is made up of:

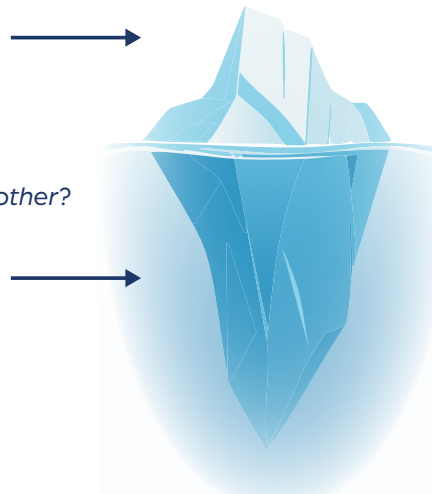
Things that we see and hear...

- *How do we talk to each other?*
- *How are classrooms arranged?*
- *How do we behave towards each other?*

And things we cannot see...

Core Beliefs and values

- *Why do we do what we do?*
- *What is important for us?*



We suggest that there are 5 core beliefs² underpinning relational and restorative schools.

2 Hopkins, B. (2023). The restorative classroom: Using restorative approaches to foster effective learning. Routledge.

Core Beliefs of a Relational and Restorative School

CORE BELIEF 1

Everyone has a unique perspective and deserves to be heard.

No one should impose their views without allowing others to share theirs. Respecting each person's perspective is crucial, especially in environments with unequal power.

CORE BELIEF 2

What we think shapes how we feel – and how we feel guides how we act.

Often, thoughts and feelings are hidden beneath the surface but are crucial for understanding behaviour. By openly sharing what's inside, we can foster deeper understanding and more genuine connections.

CORE BELIEF 3

Our actions impact those around us. It's helpful to reflect on their ripple effects.

When there are conflicts or disagreements harm can result – in terms of negative emotions such as anger, hurt, fear, frustration and confusion and in terms of damaged relationships and connections between people. Taking time to think about the ripple effects with empathy can help move the situation forward. Anticipating the impact of one's actions and seeking to minimise any harm in advance, is key to maintaining good relationships with others.

CORE BELIEF 4

When our needs are met, we are at our best. Our actions are simply strategies to meet our needs.

To make decisions or solve problems it helps to identify the needs of all concerned first. That makes it easier to identify appropriate strategies to address these needs.

CORE BELIEF 5

People most affected by an issue are best equipped to solve it – especially when working together.

People value being consulted and involved in decisions that affect them. In contrast, people tend to resist and resent decisions that are imposed upon them. Allowing individuals to take ownership of decision-making and problem-solving shows respect and trust, fosters pro-social skills and confidence and strengthens relationships.

Values of a Relational and Restorative School

Relational and Restorative schools aim to create a nurturing and supportive community where conflicts are seen as opportunities for growth and learning, rather than occasions for punishment and exclusion. When incidents occur, the focus is not just on resolving the immediate issue but on learning from the experience to improve the overall school environment.

CONNECTION, COMMUNITY AND COMMUNICATION

- **Open Communication:** Relational and Restorative practices emphasise open and honest communication among students, staff, and parents.

- **Focus on Relationships:** Relational and Restorative schools prioritise connecting with others in authentic ways and building and maintaining positive relationships among students, staff, and the community.
- **Circles:** Circles and other restorative processes are used to facilitate communication and understanding, allowing participants to share their perspectives.

DIVERSITY, FAIRNESS AND EQUITY

- **Relational and restorative practice honours diversity:** A core principle is that every human being has equal worth, and that their voice matters. This principle is foundational for social justice and preventing systemic, structural and cultural violence.
- **Equitable Treatment:** Relational and Restorative Schools strive to ensure fairness and equity in how disciplinary matters are handled, avoiding bias and stereotypes.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

- **Personal Responsibility:** All members of the school community are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, recognising the impact on others and the community.
- **Repairing Harm:** The focus is not on shame and blame, but instead on repairing the harm caused by the wrongdoing, both through direct amends and by fostering a sense of accountability.
- **Restorative Conversations:** school community members are taught restorative listening (e.g. reframing, active listening with an attitude towards curiosity and not judgement). As well as how to have restorative conversations (e.g. questions that build, maintain and repair relationships) to promote accountability and responsibility without shame or blame.

EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING

- **Empathy Development:** Relational and Restorative practices aim to develop empathy in the school community, helping to understand the perspectives and feelings of others.
- **Educational Opportunities:** Misbehaviour is seen as an opportunity for education and growth rather than solely as a rule violation.
- **Conflict Resolution:** Emphasis is placed on resolving conflicts in a way that promotes understanding, empathy, and reconciliation rather than punitive methods.

INCLUSION AND BELONGING

- **Community Involvement:** Relational and Restorative schools often involve the community in decision-making processes, seeking input from students, parents, and staff to create a sense of ownership and shared responsibility.
- **Preventive Measures:** Relational and Restorative schools often implement proactive measures to prevent conflicts and behavioural issues, fostering a positive and inclusive school culture such as community building circles, team building activities and expressing gratitude and appreciation towards other school community members.

EDUCATION AND LEARNING

- **Values Education:** Adults and students collaboratively explore the core values that create a safe, positive school environment. These values include respect, responsibility, accountability, inclusion, and kindness. The focus is on understanding and applying these values in daily interactions.
- **Effective Communication Skills:** Adults model and explicitly teach communication skills that foster relationship building, maintenance, and repair. Key skills include active, non-judgmental listening, conflict

resolution, and mediation. This is done both through example and dedicated class time.

- **Social and Emotional Skills:** Students are taught social and emotional skills through consistent, evidence-based curricula. This includes developing empathy, managing emotions, self-regulation, problem-solving, and expanding emotional vocabulary and understanding.
- **Trauma-Informed:** Professional development is provided on trauma including how trauma impacts behaviour and learning how to respond appropriately when someone is triggered or dysregulated.
- **Neurodiversity:** Professional development is provided on basic neuroscience and neurodiversity to create environments that minimise stress, enhance empathy, and apply appropriate strategies when responding to stress responses in colleagues, parents, or students.

SOCIAL JUSTICE & DIGNITY

- **Commitment to Human Rights:** Uphold human rights, with a particular focus on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).
- **Addressing Structural and Cultural Violence:** As a school community, actively work to confront the structural and cultural violence present in society, recognising that these issues can surface in schools in various forms.
- **Creating Safe Spaces:** Ensure safe spaces for individuals with lived experiences of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia to voice their concerns. Support them in making the school a safer, more equitable environment.
- **Needs-Awareness:** Embrace the dignity and value of each person, recognising that behaviours often labelled as 'challenging' or 'disruptive' are frequently expressions of unmet needs. Addressing these needs reduces such behaviours and fosters a deeper appreciation for the individual's well-being.

Mission Statement for a Relational and Restorative School

“In our school everyone matters, and everyone’s ideas are valued. We encourage authentic communication by talking about and listening for thoughts and feelings. We care about each other so we think before we speak or act. We consider everyone else’s needs as much as possible as we work together. It’s up to all of us to make this school function well, so we’ll plan together, make decisions together, solve problems together, and help each other out if things go wrong.”

How can we make this mission statement a reality?

Regular circle meetings in both classrooms and staff rooms provide the foundation on which relational and restorative practice evolves. They help to develop social and emotional skills, build trust, safety and a sense of belonging and build strong supportive relationships within the group. Participation in regular proactive circles also prepares groups for taking part in problem-solving circles if and when conflicts or challenges arise in a group.

The following checklist of activities will help guide you through establishing a relational and restorative school culture with consistent values and core beliefs as described above.

CHECKLIST FOR A RELATIONAL AND RESTORATIVE SCHOOL

- Regular team building activities that create a sense of belonging in classrooms and with staff.
- Restorative listening (e.g. reframing, active listening with an attitude towards curiosity and not judgement).
- Relational and restorative conversations (e.g. using questions that build, maintain and repair relationships).
- Relational pedagogy – integrating relational and restorative principles & language into curriculum delivery (e.g. cooperative learning, engagement strategies, voice and choice universal design so everyone feels safe and included).
- Social and emotional learning programmes to develop vocabulary and understanding.
- Supporting people with mentoring (e.g. peer mentoring, staff mentoring, teacher mentoring).
- Restorative brief chats to de-escalate situations in classrooms, corridors or outside.
- Problem-solving circles to respond to problems among students or staff.
- Mediation between any two people in the school community (facilitated by an adult or a student, as appropriate) (e.g. peer mediation, employee conflict, teacher-student).
- Formal restorative meetings with private preparation for serious disciplinary issues (many include parents and support people as appropriate).

Steps to Implementing a Relational and Restorative School

Becoming a relational and restorative school involves fostering a positive and supportive school culture where relationships are prioritised, conflicts are resolved peacefully, and a sense of belonging is promoted among all members of the school community.

1. **Promote Positive Relationships:** Encourage positive interactions among students, teachers, staff, and parents.
2. **Establish Clear Expectations:** Collaboratively develop clear expectations for behaviour and communication by involving students, teachers, staff, and parents in the process. When people have a voice in shaping expectations, they are more likely to understand, support, and follow them.
3. **Model Relational and Restorative Behaviour:** As school leaders, teachers, and staff, demonstrate empathy, active listening, and respect in all interactions with students, colleagues, and parents.
4. **Educate the School Community:** Offer training and workshops for the leadership team, teachers, and staff on relational and restorative practices, including how to facilitate circles and resolve conflict in their daily roles. Ensure that students, parents, and staff understand the importance of building strong relationships, resolving conflicts peacefully, and fostering a sense of belonging among all members of the school community. To sustain these practices, provide ongoing training for new staff and refresher training each year.
5. **Implement relational and restorative practices:** Use relational and restorative practices such as circles, mediation and restorative conferences to address conflicts and discipline issues. Focus on repairing

harm, building empathy, and restoring relationships rather than punitive measures.

6. **Provide Supportive Structures:** Build systems within the school – such as advisory programmes, counselling services, peer mediation opportunities, skills teaching and evidence-based behavioural supports – to help students succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Having these supports in place ensures that when students struggle, we can respond quickly and appropriately to meet their needs and help them grow.
7. **Evaluate and Adjust:** Regularly assess the effectiveness of your relational and restorative practices by gathering feedback from students, teachers, staff, and parents. Analyse school data, such as climate surveys, office referral records, and implementation reports, to evaluate if these practices are being fully implemented and achieving the desired outcomes. Make necessary adjustments to enhance the school culture and address any challenges.
8. **Build Community Partnerships:** Partner with community organisations, local businesses, and other schools to strengthen the school's support network and extend a sense of community beyond the school walls. Building these relationships can open the door to additional supports and services for students and families while also creating valuable connections when challenges arise.

Training from experienced practitioners will be needed, especially for the restorative interventions.

By following these steps and consistently prioritising relationships, empathy, and restorative approaches, your school can become a more relational and restorative environment where all members of the community feel valued and supported.

Step-by-Step Case Study: How One School Successfully Implemented Circles Across the Entire School

This case study – by Chris Straker – demonstrates how a school in the United Kingdom successfully implemented a regular circle practice. It serves as a model that can be adapted to your own school's needs. Adopting a relational and restorative approach is supported by circles, so having a clear plan and timeline, tailored to your school's context and challenges, is essential. The plan should address potential difficulties and include strategies to support and engage staff and students throughout the process.

Step	Description
Step 1 Start facilitating circles in leadership and staff meeting	<p>We began by incorporating a check-in at the start and a check-out at the end of all leadership meetings. Initially, these check-ins consisted of questions designed to help us get to know each other better and strengthen our professional and personal relationships. Over time, we refined this practice into check-ins that became a fundamental part of both our daily school routines and personal interactions.</p> <p>Introduce the talking piece and the circle protocols of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only speaking when you have the talking piece • Taking turns around the circle • Not interrupting or contradicting when not your turn • Having the right to pass if you do not want to say anything • Agreeing confidentiality when sharing personal issues
Step 2 Identify possible core leaders in facilitating circles.	We identified staff members who were already engaged in or had the potential to excel in facilitating circles. These staff later became models and supporters for other staff in the early stages of their development.
Step 3 Schedule consistent circles across the school starting with tutor groups.	<p>Once staff had built their confidence, we encouraged them to start facilitating circles during tutor time on Mondays. While using circles at other times was optional, Monday sessions were mandatory across the school, and we closely monitored these activities to ensure a good balance of support and challenge in the development process. This was to emphasise the importance of the practice.</p> <p>After about six weeks, we added Friday as an additional day for tutor group circles.</p>
Step 3a Establish circle norms and values with students.	The importance of establishing norms and values for the circles was the first activity in each classroom. These were written down on a large piece of paper and would be referred to at the start of each circle until they became a habit.

Step	Description
Step 3b Honouring class circles.	We created a symbol for classroom doors to indicate when circles were in session. If the symbol was displayed, no one could enter unless it was an emergency, to respect the circle activity.
Step 4 Develop more regular circles throughout the week.	It quickly became clear that most support staff were benefiting from circle practice. They began sharing their successes in staff meetings and encouraged others to increase the frequency of circles, leading many to hold a circle every morning to enhance student relationships.
Step 5 Develop circles in teaching and learning.	As most tutors were also subject teachers, we observed them using circles for instructional purposes, such as recapping learning and discussing successes and next steps at the end of lessons. Circles became integrated into teaching and learning rather than being seen as a separate activity.
Step 6 Encourage students to lead circles	<p>Initially teachers modelled circles but very quickly we began supporting students to lead tutor circles.</p> <p>Similarly, we asked non-managers such as teachers and support staff to help lead staff circles.</p>
Step 7 Use circles to process serious issues	For important matters, such as community events or school decisions, we used circles to discuss and process these issues. The school leadership frequently facilitated circles with support staff and students to involve them in finding solutions to school-related challenges.
Step 8 Innovations in staff circles – community building and problem solving.	<p>The staff requested a Friday morning circle before school. All staff members, including managers, teachers, support staff, caretakers, and cooks, participated in circles across the school. This time was used to celebrate weekly successes and address areas for improvement, ensuring that everyone was engaged in various aspects of school life.</p> <p>An outcome of the Friday whole school circles was the decisions by staff to facilitate problem solving circles on Wednesday mornings before school started to support individuals, or groups, on any issues raised in the Friday morning circle.</p>

Chris Straker, Hull, UK

Where do I start?

No matter your role at school, you have the ability to help build a restorative environment. Below are some suggested activities to guide you. While you can make a meaningful impact, it's important to focus on what's within your control and let go of what isn't. By doing your best with what you can influence, you'll stay energised and effective for the long term.

School leader / principal

Start with yourself – Are you a good role model for your team, your staff and your students? Are you 'being the change' you want to see? Is your practice informed by the 5 Core Beliefs?

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your colleagues, your staff team, the students and their families?

Invite feedback from your staff about how they experience your leadership – what do you need to change?

Invite your fellow senior team to share their vision for the school

Start to meet regularly in circle yourselves

Read as widely as you can about what becoming a relational and restorative school entails (see suggested reading below)

Link up with other schools who are also on their own relational and restorative journey

Apply for Erasmus grants to visit an RJ school

Be the change you want to see

Student

Start with yourself – Having read about the basic core beliefs of relational and restorative practice, reflect on how this may impact on you.

Talk to other students, teachers and parents – share what you have read or seen on video

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your fellow students and the people you engage with in schools? Remember that you still develop your skills.

Be the change you want to see

Teacher

Start with yourself – Are you a good role model for your team, your staff and your students? Are you 'being the change' you want to see? Is your practice informed by the 5 Core Beliefs?

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your colleagues, the students and their families?

Invite feedback from your colleagues and from your students about how they experience you as a teacher – what do you need to change?

Begin discussions with colleagues about their vision for the school

Start to meet regularly in circle in your department or faculty

Read as widely as you can about what becoming a relational and restorative school entails (see suggested reading below)

Strive to build relationships with each of your students – be curious about each one – show them you care

Be the change you want to see

Social worker

Start with yourself – Are you a good role model for your colleagues? Are you 'being the change' you want to see? Is your practice informed by the 5 Core Beliefs?

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your colleagues, the students and their families?

Invite feedback from your colleagues and from the families you support about how they experience you as a social worker – what do you need to change?

Begin discussions with colleagues about their vision for their work in school

Start to meet regularly in circle in your team

Learn as much as you can about trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice and make the links between this and your own social work model.

Reach out to the schools you work with and offer to explain the benefits to them, their students and the families of trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice.

Be the change you want to see – and use your example to be an agent of change

Parent

Start with yourself – Having read about the basic core beliefs of relational and restorative practice, reflect on how this may impact on you as a parent/carer.

Ask your child's school if they are using this practice and if they could lay on parenting classes

If not maybe talk to other parents – share what you have read or seen on video and create a group who want to see these ideas in the school

With your allies arrange a meeting with the school to explain why you think your children, and the staff, would benefit from a relational and restorative approach

Offer to fund-raise so that the school can take on the services of a trainer/consultant to help them move towards becoming a relational/restorative school

Be the change you want to see

Agencies that support schools

Start with yourself – Are you a good role model for your colleagues? Are you 'being the change' you want to see? Is your practice informed by the 5 Core Beliefs?

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your colleagues and the people you engage with in schools?

Invite feedback from your colleagues and from the schools you support about how they experience you professionally – what do you need to change?

Do you really listen to school professionals about what their key issues are? Do you work WITH them, as opposed to imposing ideas and policies on them?

Begin discussions with colleagues about their vision for their work in schools.

Start to meet regularly in circle in your team.

Learn as much as you can about trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice and make the links between this and your own social work model.

Reach out to the schools you work with and offer to explain the benefits to them, their students and the families of trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice.

Be the change you want to see – and use your example to be an agent of change

Government Officials

Start with yourself – Are you a good role model for your colleagues? Are you 'being the change' you want to see? Is your practice informed by the 5 Core Beliefs?

Reflect on your own relational skills – how do you 'show up' every day? Are you approachable? Do you listen with empathy, patience and understanding? Do you show care and understanding towards your colleagues and the people you engage with in schools?

Invite feedback from your colleagues and from the schools you support about how they experience you professionally – what do you need to change?

Do you really listen to school professionals about what their key issues are? Do you work WITH them, as opposed to imposing ideas and policies on them?

Reflect on how you can use your position to influence local and national policy in schools to support relational and restorative practice.

Look for opportunities to bring key stakeholders together to develop innovation.

You have the power to influence a local or national community!

2 Restorative Journeys

Restorative Journey Commentary

Restorative Practice “accepts ambiguity and paradox and requires diversity ... [and must be] rooted in its context. (Wonshé, 2004, p.258).

This commentary is not intended to be a thematic analysis of the type you would find in a more academic text. It wishes to honour the stories as each storyteller has told them; but also look to see if there are any particular aspects of their journeys that offer points of reflection.

Each storyteller speaks in their own voice, reflecting on their own experiences. Some are starting a journey, others are further down the line. *Story* here is used to denote a personal history, a narrative description of life events. The commentary tries to engage in a dialogue with the storyteller to elicit a deeper understanding of what a relational and restorative school is, or hopes to be. All of the storytellers are engaging in “an exercise in first stepping into a desired future in imagination, then consciously elaborating the structures needed to maintain it, and finally imagining the future history that would get [them] there, [it] is a very liberating experience for people who feel trapped in an unyielding present...” (Harris: 1991, p.92).

The nature of relational and restorative practice is to be transformational within its culture and community. Culture is found in the “complex relationships, knowledges, languages, social organisations and life experiences that bind diverse individuals and groups together. Culture is a living process. It changes over time to reflect the changed environments and social interactions of people living together.” (Atkinson, 2002, p.ix).

Community, for each storyteller, reflects their personal context but also the wider community of relational and restorative actors they are part of through

connections like the EFRJ working group for relational and restorative schools. The dialogue we are trying to develop in this collection is grounded in a belief that “Community is where I can share my innermost thoughts, bring out the depths of my own feelings, and know they will be understood... [and] Communication makes community.” (May R, 1976, pp.246–7).

All of the storytellers are grounded in their own context of socio-political, cultural and economic factors. Therefore, relational and restorative schools have to also develop in these contexts. Relational and restorative schools need to be clear on the values, principles, policies and practice that define them whilst being reflexive to the environment they are being nurtured in. There is a consistent message that all storytellers wish to see an existing paternalistic and punitive system be replaced by a relational and restorative system. How they are each trying to get there, and the place from which they are starting, is the thread across all of the stories.

Many of the storytellers talk about the educational landscape being challenging, especially in relation to the status of teachers. Shatberashvili, (Georgia) says, “We have both state and private schools... traditionally the focus has been on teaching and infrastructure development rather than non-academic[pastoral] components. Punitive measures are still in place. Relationship-oriented practices are not ingrained... teachers have less and less time to spend with children outside the classroom, as their salaries are not high enough to afford to work at just one school.”

This is similar to the context both Czajkowska and Dopierała (Poland) have experienced, where the “entire education system in Poland for many years was based on hierarchy and punishment. The situation was similar in systems designed to support children and young people from difficult environments... Currently, there is more talk about students' mental health and the importance of free time. The topic of students' rights also appears in public discussion... Inside the school, these changes are not very noticeable yet.”

Vieira Heerdts (Brazil) says, “I live in a country with great social inequality, where public school teachers earn an average of around US \$ 880... the realities of the North are very different from those of the South. There are places where children go to school just to have something to eat and many to escape the violence of drug trafficking. In Brazil, it is still common to talk about restorative justice and not restorative practices, which causes strangeness when we try to approach the school environment. I have been fighting for us to abandon this language, because the word justice is not well understood, because it presupposes judgement, authority, and coercion. This is due to the history of restorative justice in Brazil, which came here through the hands of the judiciary.”

Straker (United Kingdom) says, “When I made the decision for my school to become a restorative, it was with a sense of isolation. A sense that apart from the schools around my school who had pioneered restorative practice at a primary level – we were striking out alone. I am now aware that this was not the case... The educational environment in 2007, was not as hostile to the ideas behind restorative practice as it is now, in terms of the Department for Education and the control of powerful Trusts and Academies. Within these domains there is a clear belief in zero tolerance and behaviourist models, concepts which make it harder for restorative practice to develop and thrive.”

These contexts, though, contrast with Wroldsen (Norway) who says, “I was lucky in the sense that the restorative practices mindset lingers well with the principles and values governing and overarching the national curriculum in Norway. The principles and values of primary and secondary education in Norway are founded on human values and human rights, children's rights, and democracy. It entails respect for identity and cultural diversity, critical thinking and ethical consciousness, creativity, engagement and exploration, respect for nature and the environment, democracy, and participation. To me these values resonate well with restorative practices.” Stowe (Ireland)

describes a feeling of steady progress in Ireland over the last ten years that has seen traction gained in government circles.

So, we can see that the ground in which to grow relational and restorative schools is not equally fertile. This makes the intent to become a relational and restorative school a difficult task but also a courageous one. It requires leadership. Hopkins (United Kingdom) discusses this in more detail in her story, and we will look at this later in this commentary.

When relational and restorative schools are often being developed in isolation, within this hostile environment they risk being seen as 'maverick' or an outlier rather than part of a wider process that connects them to other relational and restorative practices that could be being developed in social care, criminal justice or community settings. The need to widen the understanding of what relational and restorative schools offer and the positive impact they can have on the present *status quo* is clearly important in setting an agenda that is more strategic and more widely understood by Headteachers, Principals and policy makers.

The inspiration for all of the journeys described in the stories has been different, reflecting both personal and community characteristics. Several storytellers talk about hearing about restorative justice and restorative practices from colleagues who had been on courses and came back enthused. Others came upon it from academic research in and around their own area of expertise.

Czajkowska's exposure to restorative practice made her want to broaden its use in Poland. To do that she felt the need to, "educate school staff (current and future) on the subject of restorative schools – teachers show enthusiasm, willingness – but they lack preparation, training and knowledge. This need to promote relational and restorative school concepts into the wider educational climate is very important."

Vieira Heerdt explained that he is inspired by the transformational possibilities in restorative practice despite the huge social issues faced by many Brazilian schools. He says, "we work on a community axis, with migrants, the homeless and, to a greater extent, with public schools... we are able, with effort, to serve a few public schools, in one of the largest capitals in Brazil. The issue is that, faced with such inequality, schools have demands that go far beyond violence, cyberbullying and isolation, but also many material and personal needs. Teachers are exhausted."

Dell'Anno (Italy) began her journey with a Family Group Conferencing background and looked to use some of that methodology in a school setting. She realised that the work in schools needed to be at a whole school level not an isolated project within a school system. The ideas of relational practice resonated with her work and a commitment to placing them at the heart of school culture.

Straker and Hopkins both describe dissatisfaction with an existing status quo within the English education system. Straker says, "I was looking for something that placed relationships at the heart of all we did but was also not just something we were going to do TO the students... Our existing protocols and policies did not, satisfactorily, change patterns of challenging, repeated, behaviours and low attendance." The disconnected strategy for the development of relational and restorative schools at a national level, at the time he started (in 2007), is exemplified by the fact that at a time he was struggling to find a methodology to move forward he was unaware of the pioneering work of Hopkins, only 200 miles away.

Stowe touches on a personal journey where professional and personal overlap: "I loved the alternative to the harsh punitive system that I could see was isolating our most vulnerable students and exhausting teachers who were cemented into this cycle of engagement. I felt it resonated with my own philosophy and if I am being honest, on a personal level it resonated with the spiritual journey I felt I was on my whole life."

These examples of inspiration that triggered a move towards developing the concept of the relational and restorative school are positive for the individual school setting but risk being isolated within a wider national educational context if we do not impact on a wider audience. This aspect of ensuring that the relational and restorative school's possibilities are better transmitted across influential players in education and social care is an aspect that needs attention. If not, relational and restorative schools will remain places that have positive impacts on the lives of everyone with a stake in them, but no further. It is hoped that these stories will add to the impetus and messaging relational and restorative schools need to embrace if they are to command attention.

The main learning individual storytellers took from their journey, again, reflects their starting point, context, and thinking around education and social welfare. Wroldsen says, "I treasure the skills that I learnt in restorative justice/restorative practice. I became much more aware of communication and how to listen actively to what the other person is saying. I take time to let the other person finish what they say before I reply... The restorative justice/restorative practice questions are key skills in conflict resolution. And last, but not least the power of the circle when people or students are simply seated in a circle."

De Vanna (Italy) adds to this when she says, "through the years I have established two main beliefs:

1. In order to create a restorative school it is important to work with the entire environment: teachers, parents, students and everyone else belonging to the school system.
2. A restorative school needs to be prepared and supported by developing projects and workshops about relational and emotional skills because where restorative values and culture are, it is possible to develop restorative practices for real.

She also comments on the need for relational and restorative schools to "develop a restorative mindset and a restorative culture [that] is a precondition for a school policy based on a restorative approach and the path to get there is never the same but depends on the specific identity of every situation."

Hopkins adds to this when she describes her journey. She says she "began to use the phrase 'whole-school restorative approach'... and this was the focus of my book *Just Schools* (2004)." She also stresses the need for leaders to be involved from the start and the importance of them modelling the language and behaviours they wish the school to develop.

Mooiman (United States of America) describes the importance of "clear and consistent training for all school leaders and teachers in Positive Behaviour Interventions & Supports and restorative practices for every new hire, every year. Our training wasn't just a 'lovely experience' but had actionable, clear expectations with it like implementing circles in classrooms, reducing shaming and punitive discipline practices, much of which we held school accountable for by collecting data." Straker echoes this when he says, "I decided we had to be very strategic in the way we would develop restorative practice in the school, it could not be left to chance."

A thread of learning through all of these stories is the need for consistency and to take everyone along with you; to be strategic in planning, before initiating training and practice; and to ensure relational and restorative practice permeates all aspects of the school: not just the pastoral elements. Relational and restorative training should not be isolated training events disconnected from the holistic life of the school. As Stowe emphasises, "I am learning that training isn't enough, and we need to move beyond a 'train and hope' model to navigate the challenges of implementing restorative practice in schools in a way that dismantles hierarchical structures and isn't tokenistic."

When the storytellers reflect on the elements that were successful for them there is a shared sense of relational and restorative schools being explicit about the need to have clear values and principles; and that these are reflected in the languages and behaviour that become part of the school. The positive impact from relational and restorative practice, for both adults and students in the school, is clearly something all writers hold central as an outcome of their journey. Wroldsen says restorative justice/restorative practice is grounded in academic fields and values [that] provides solid evidence that this is the way to make the world a better and safer place for everyone. Restorative justice/restorative practice is also about giving students a voice in school and honouring that voice."

Dopierala describes the success of relational and restorative school ideas in Poland when she says that they "[have] the potential to introduce more systemic changes at school. We published it as a book with the help of the university and guess what? It turned out to be a bestseller within a few weeks. This means for me that good ground for changes is slowly being made." Dell'Anno, whilst acknowledging the difficulties of developing relational and restorative schools in her context, also says, "it is possible to build positive relationships at school free from negative judgments but oriented towards real help and support." Rullan (Spain) says through "circles and other activities, we can cultivate a community atmosphere that acts as a powerful preventive tool against conflicts." This view about the importance of circles is further shared by Straker and Hopkins. (The importance of circles and a template for rolling them out in schools is contained in Section 1.)

Finally, Shatberashvili speaks of the importance of being seen, being heard and being known when she discusses a successful outcome she observed from introducing relational and restorative practices to schools in Georgia: "Children who were invisible became visible, those who had never been active became more involved. Some children who did not know they needed support began to talk to and know their teachers, psychologists and social workers. They saw these adults from a different perspective."

All of these stories contain examples of successful outcomes, even if the storyteller is still struggling day to day in the context in which they work. These struggles could be seen as constraining, but there are also examples where starting the journey in itself is enough and is liberating.

Without dwelling on barriers to progress it was also important for the storytellers to also reflect on any issues that they felt mitigated against their success. Again, this is obviously contextual to the setting they find themselves in. A key barrier, across a lot of the stories, is time. Wroldsen says, "I think time is a crucial factor, it takes time to get a grip of the mindset and how to put it to work in a school. We are so tuned into punitive responses in our school systems, that it takes a mind shift to grasp a restorative justice/restorative practice response." This is the case in most of the stories. Another factor mentioned by storytellers was that much of the academic and practitioner writing on this subject is in English. As a movement, restorative actors need to do as much as possible to make resources available to all in translation until each country develops its own national relational and restorative literature and resources for training and teaching.

Hopkins and Mooiman mention the importance of leaders being involved from the start so that they do not become detached from the holistic programme being implemented to develop practice. Hopkins says that it is her "strong view that leaders need to change school policy to enable teachers to use restorative practice at the level of behaviour management, including classroom management."

The prevalence and domination of existing punitive systems in education mean that the environment to develop relational and restorative schools can be toxic, and as such it needs to be planned for. This is mentioned by Vieira Heerdt, De Vanna and Rullan. Most of the storytellers work inside existing punitive systems and this must be planned for in envisioning the journey a school must make to become relational and restorative. But this need not be an insurmountable issue. As Stowe says, "The barriers for me is the challenge

of changing school systems [but] Dorothy Vaandering reminds me that 'people created systems and people can then change systems' but it is a long-term journey."

The status and pressures on teachers (and in some places the lowly status of teachers) is also identified as an issue by many of the storytellers. This was also accompanied by a feeling in existing school systems that relational and restorative approaches would be 'soft' on behaviour. This links back into the issue of leadership and clear messaging described by Hopkins. Straker reflected on how important it was getting "people to understand what we were doing and that we still had high expectations for behaviour... Staff also needed to feel confident that they would be supported and not left adrift by another 'new' idea. The same went for making sure parents and carers knew what we were doing and how they could use it in the home." Seeing relational and restorative practice as underpinning school systems and not being in conflict with them is a message that still needs to be consistently made to policy makers.

Storytellers also felt that a solution to embedding relational and restorative practice at a deep, whole school level, was the need to move from a restorative justice context (circles used solely for responding to negative behaviour) to it being a proactive process with relationships and dialogic skills for all parties given emphasis.

Finally, the storytellers also described the early signs of transformation within their contexts. Some of these are qualitative aspects: what it *feels* like to be *there*. That is an important aspect of measuring progress. As Shatberashvili says, some "sceptical teachers claimed that they saw no difference between the traditional methods of responding to problems and the newly introduced methods. However, they soon began asking my colleagues questions, naming problems, sharing their classroom experiences and expressing their admiration for the restorative processes they were trying to establish in their schools. That is a huge jump in perception from where the project started."

Mooiman recognises that *feeling* about a place and work is important and says, students reported that they "feel connected... I feel safe at my school... My teacher likes me." Dopierala goes further when she says we "implemented restorative practices in primary and secondary schools. Students like going to school, crisis situations are better managed and great emphasis is placed on teaching social-emotional competences. Students treat each other with respect and are able to seek mutual understanding. This makes a great impression on people who come to the school for internships or study visits."

Conclusion

‘The only power I have is to journey with those in the present’ (Atkinson, 2002, p266).

Relational and restorative schools should not be viewed in isolation – they sit within a complex web of contextual characteristics. By seeking to build cohesive, compassionate communities in schools, relational and restorative practices also address community cohesion in practical and pragmatic ways in the world beyond school. It is a positive ambition to become a restorative school and the journey has begun in many places across the world. The guidelines, resources and links that accompany these stories present the voices and lived experiences of a few people who have started their journey to becoming relational and restorative schools. We hope they inspire and offer models you can make your own.

No one within this collection claims to have reached their goal of becoming a completely relational and restorative school, but all aspire to becoming such a school or wider school community. The present reality is that schools may have to continue to develop in isolation, without national or regional or even city-wide strategies, for the short term. It is not unreasonable to say that that in itself is still a good thing: it is having a positive impact on the lives of all stakeholders in that school, or community. The next step though has to be the joined up roll out across more schools and communities. The building of a critical mass so that relational and restorative schools are not outliers but central to discussion on the direction education should take is essential.

Relational and restorative schools also have to ensure the means they use for relational and restorative school development match the ends they wish to achieve. Planning and activity needs to be guided by restorative values and principles that sees school culture change as being holistic and not piecemeal. The plan will take time to unfold but it must clearly see all aspects of the school being relational and restorative and not just a *bit over there*.

We believe that it will be a tough journey for all that embark on it but like the storytellers in this collection demonstrate, when relational and restorative practice is infused with humanity, and an optimism that the transformation that can be achieved, it is worth the struggle. Good luck. Remember you don't travel alone.

Restorative Journeys: Stories from Practitioners



Fábio Vieira Heerd

Brazil

I do not have the same experience as a teacher or principal as some of you in elementary and secondary schools. I'm a teacher but at an academic level. Even so, as a facilitator, I have noticed how the logic and mentality of the state penal punitive system (in which I have worked for over 26 years) is reproduced in schools, where punishments only bring isolation and suffering and are not effective.

I live in a country with great social inequality, where public school teachers earn an average of around US\$880.00, without forgetting that Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world, that is, the realities of the North are very different from those of the south. There are places where children go to school just to have something to eat and many to escape the violence of drug trafficking.

In Brazil, it is still common to talk about restorative justice and not restorative practices, which causes strangeness when we try to approach the school environment. I have been fighting for us to abandon this language, because the word justice is not well understood, because it presupposes judgement, authority, coercion. This is due to the history of in Brazil, which came here through the hands of the Judiciary.

I have worked for more than five years as coordinator of a restorative justice judicial centre, in which the actions are divided into three axes: institutional, in which we develop practices for work teams from the court itself, which has around a thousand judges and thousands of civil servants and other collaborators; in judicial, criminal and other cases, (now we are working on the Club Kiss case, perhaps you have already heard about it, in which almost 250 young people went to a party to have fun and died after inhaling toxic

fumes and many others face consequences to this day); finally, we work on a community axis, with migrants, the homeless and, to a greater extent, with public schools.

I need to explain this part: Brazil is one of the countries with the highest inequality in the world: that's why there are public schools, structured unevenly depending on the region of the country or even the city (near favelas or drug trafficking areas) and private schools, some of which cost more than two thousand dollars in tuition. Therefore, we are able, with effort, to serve a few public schools, in one of the largest capitals in Brazil. The issue is that, faced with such inequality, schools have demands that go far beyond violence, cyberbullying and isolation, but also many material and personal needs. Teachers are exhausted. Often, when we approach a school, we are very unwelcome, and it's not the teachers' fault. They earn poorly, work a lot, and are subject to violence from students and parents, especially after we spent four years under an extreme right-wing government that daily encouraged hatred and weapons among civilians.

We have faced episodes of shootings, knife attacks (I myself acted as a facilitator with groups of students where this happened) and other violence that we previously only saw in other countries. For all these reasons, I think that a broad approach to the entire school is appropriate, involving everyone, including parents, as young people have complained that they are not heard, not at home, at school or anywhere.

It's a difficult job, which requires a lot of energy, money and qualified people, but it needs to be done.

I started to admire you all more after knowing your stories, after all, that's what it's all about, right? Tell and listen to stories and thus weave a web of productive relationships that are good for us and good for everyone.



Nino Shatberashvili

Georgia

The first time I heard about restorative justice was during my course: “Human Rights in Transition Countries”. During the course, we discussed conflicts between countries as well as conflicts within the country. Some classmates were involved in these conflicts themselves, so the discussions were lively. Films were recommended as part of the course: some documentaries, some feature films. That’s how I got to know the concept of restorative justice. I started to get enthusiastic about the concept.

Later, while working at the United Nations Children’s Fund, I heard about restorative justice again. Later, I witnessed impressive changes in the relationships and attitudes of people in conflict with the law under the Ministry of Justice’s Diversion Program in Georgia. This was a newly introduced victim–offender mediation program in Georgia. At the time, I managed the Rehabilitation Services Division and witnessed impressive reconciliations conducted by my staff. I have been involved in several programs that focused on supporting youth either in the justice system or in, so-called, correctional schools.

I started my career in the child welfare field and then got experience in the justice system. Within these systems and roles, I have met or been involved in the cases of many very unfortunate children and families. After listening to the stories of these children I began to think about how many problems faced by these children could be avoided or at least alleviated if the school, community and family were more responsive to their needs, supported them with their problems or shared in their successes. But for this to happen, people in these formal or informal systems needed to know what to do to avoid or notice or respond to problems of children who shout out their concerns through their behaviour and attitudes.

We have a national education system in which schools have the status of legal entities under public law, although they are still very much dependent on the central government. Schooling lasts 12 years and includes primary, secondary and high school. We have both state and private schools. The system is currently being reformed, but traditionally the focus has been on teaching and infrastructure development rather than non-academic components. Punitive measures are still in place. Relationship-oriented practices are not ingrained. Schools are still the most influential social institutions, although teachers have less and less time to spend with children outside the classroom, as their salaries are not high enough to afford to work at just one school and they are often in a hurry to fulfil their commitments at another school. Some children come from very difficult social backgrounds, from families with complex relationships, and school is the only safe environment for them, and if their expectations are not met, they will struggle.

All this prepared me for the contact I made in Leuven during my visit to the Don Bosco Groenveld School with the support of the EU support for the reform of the judiciary in Georgia. There I met my colleague Wim Hanssens, who fascinated me with his impressive presentation about working with children in their schools. Among other interesting details, I remember him telling me that even the receptionists in their school are trained to welcome the children, even if they are late for school unprepared and messy, to show them that they are welcome in the school and have to leave their problems behind as soon as they enter the school building. I began to think that we need this approach in Georgia.

Soon after, we invited Wim to our country to train the first cohort of social workers in the education system. Among other interesting topics and approaches, he introduced the idea of a proactive circle. Initially, some of my colleagues were sceptical whether the schools in Georgia were ready for it. But we nevertheless introduced it in some pilot schools and after some time they started to “reap the fruits”.

Later, with the support of my dear colleague Maia Chochua, we invited Heidi Defever to Georgia to train the first cohort of school mediators. From her I learned about Belinda Hopkins and her publications and read some of them. From the first pages I knew that we needed this approach here. Soon after, I became a member of the Restorative School Working Group, which works under the umbrella of the European Forum for Restorative Justice. I met with my wonderful colleagues and was determined to try it in Georgia. With the support of UNICEF, Belinda Hopkins and Christopher Straker, renowned UK experts in the field, were invited to work with the Georgian team to develop the relational and restorative school concept.

The basic program was introduced in 7 state schools. Some sceptical teachers claimed that they saw no difference between the traditional methods of responding to problems and the newly introduced methods. However, they soon began asking my colleagues questions, naming problems, sharing their classroom experiences and expressing their admiration for the restorative processes they were trying to establish in their schools. They are willing to improve their skills, knowledge and understanding of the relational practice that restorative practice develops.

We, as a psychosocial service, made up of administrators, psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists, providing psychosocial services for children, have tried to apply it in our daily lives. I myself, as the leader of this wonderful team, was able to observe the interesting effects of restorative practice in my team. We began to look at each other from different angles.

Children who were invisible became visible, those who had never been active became more involved. Some children who did not know they needed support began to talk to and know their teachers, psychologists and social workers. They saw these adults from a different perspective. They realised that teachers are not only the ones who teach, but also the ones who try to support them in different ways. But what impresses me most is the demonstration of the power of children, the ability to hear their voices and

communicate our care and love to them in a way that is easily understood and has the potential to be accepted. I firmly believe that school has not only an educational function but also a caring function, function of preparation children for life as adults.



Michelle Stowe

Ireland

My formal journey with restorative practice began as a teacher in a school in Dublin where restorative practice was introduced by a local link agency, Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), as a way to serve the conflict needs of the community. It was very new in an Irish context and CDI brought over the International Institute for Restorative Practices from the UK to deliver the training. With the exception on a few pockets of schools in Donegal Restorative Practice, had not been explored in the context of Irish schools at all. I later became a trainer and did some research in the area in my own school as part of a Masters in Education, which really shifted the trajectory of my career and the work I now commit to. I never imagined or planned to leave my happy classroom, but felt inspired to share what I was learning, and I am still learning, with others. Restorative practice has gained a lot of traction in Irish schools over the past ten years and now forms part of the Department of Education's national action plan. This, though, still needs a lot of investment to really, authentically, grow: but it is moving in the right direction.

When I initially started training, I felt very connected to this way of being and it resonated with how I felt I worked as a teacher but it also offered me a language and a framework to hook this on. It also validated the commitment to such a lens, especially when meeting challenging situations. I loved the alternative to the harsh punitive system that I could see was isolating our most vulnerable students and exhausting teachers who were cemented in this cycle of engagement. I felt it resonated with my own philosophy and, if I

am being honest, on a personal level it resonated with the spiritual journey I felt I was on my whole life. It seemed to offer a pathway to live these values of community, connection, seeking and finding the best in others within my professional life. It made sense of how I experienced the best way of teaching and learning but also connecting relationally and enabled me live my values more explicitly. My passion for this work grew and continues to do so.

I am still learning and also unlearning – I underestimated the paradigm shift needed and that I am still undergoing myself. I feel that we all need to reflect and grapple with what is most needed when seeking to move from a punitive to a restorative approach. Asking: How is this working? What does success look like? Who do I want to be in this situation? What is our intention here? What needs might be under that behaviour and my response to it etc.?

I am learning that training is not enough, and we need to move beyond a *train and hope* model to navigate the challenges of implementing relational and restorative practice in schools in a way that dismantles hierarchical structures and is not tokenistic. My initial research involved a ten week cycle that I thought I would iterate and work with a new community of teachers but, in actual fact, it evolved with the same group over four cycles as our practice and understanding kept deepening.

The most important elements for me are connecting restorative practice explicitly to values, philosophy, mindset and ways of thinking. There needs to be an understanding that it requires continuous commitment, reflection and support. Engaging with a professional learning community, having a community of practice for peer support, and intentional engagement and reflection are key for me.

The barriers for me are the challenges of changing school systems. Dorothy Vaandering reminds me that 'people created systems and people can then change systems' but it is a long-term journey. Another barrier is schools identifying as a relational and restorative school when they are only part way

through their journey. I feel it's healthier to identify as a school committed to or growing its commitment to restorative practice. Showing it understands that it is a long-term journey and one that requires working WITH people: bringing the community with us. This is difficult when schools largely depend on 'training days' as opposed to implementation models for the all day, every day. Another issue is when schools see restorative practice as an 'add on' and not a way of being and loving, teaching how we are and how we feel together.

I will outline the transformation from my research (Stowe 2012):

Positive relationships between young people and teachers

- promotes working WITH environment
- increases work ethic
- positive culture

Improves teacher well-being and reduces stress

- people taking responsibility for their actions
- being solution-focused
- greater staff awareness of interactions with young people – visible & connected

Staff feel more confident dealing with young people's needs/behaviours

- developing emotional literacy
- demonstrating empathy
- sharing and promoting ownership
- explicit skills – promotes reflective and sharing of best practice



Guendalina Dell'Anno

Italy

My journey into the world of restorative justice began in 2002 while I was attending the Master's program in Crime Deviance and Control in London. In 2006, upon returning to Italy, I began working in Child Protection Services. Specifically, I served as a facilitator for Family Group Conferences. This experience was crucial for my professional and personal growth. I understood how crucial the involvement of families is in decision-making processes concerning them. The families involved felt, for the first time, a lack of judgement from the Child Protection Services. Hence, there was the possibility of bringing about a change in the management of their children because they felt listened to.

Later, I participated in a project to evaluate the effectiveness of Family Group Conferences in the school environment. The objective was to use Family Group Conferences instead of traditional parent-teacher meetings to support students in overcoming academic difficulties. From this experience, I learned that solely relying on a tool aimed at a specific target did not produce the desired long-term change. On the contrary, involving only a certain group of students and a few teachers, the desired results were difficult to achieve. Thus, I began to educate myself. I read Belinda's book "Just a School: A Whole School Approach to Restorative Justice". It was a revelation for me. Finally, what I believed regarding school well-being, namely, the construction of positive relationships first and then the intervention for conflict resolution, was masterfully explained with clarity.

I began working on drafting projects to promote restorative schools with the association I was collaborating with. This experience was crucial in making me understand that it is necessary, first and foremost, to work on a cultural change regarding the school's view on the meaning of positive relationships. I learned that if we want to build a restorative school, the journey is long

and not without obstacles, and it cannot be tied to projects external to the school that have a duration insufficient to promote a restorative school and generate the desired change. Despite such difficulties, during my experience, I understood that if we try to change our perspective towards others, it is possible to build positive relationships at school free from negative judgments but oriented towards real help and support. A teacher, I collaborated with, told me that thanks to the activities promoted within the restorative school project, she began to look at one of her students, with whom she had a conflictual relationship, in a different way for the first time. The boy changed his behaviour, as he no longer felt like just the student with poor grades and inappropriate behaviour. The school must have an educational function above all and not just focus on teaching through the imparting of knowledge.

Ilaria De Vanna

Italy

It's wonderful to share our stories and this is mine. I was a little bit naive in the approach to the concept of relational and restorative schools. When I was eighteen I attended my first training course in Victim Offender Mediation and started falling in love with the idea of *another kind of justice*; and with the possibilities of restoring people through that. In 1996, CRISI, the Mediation Centre, I belong to, started the Local Mediation Office (now the Restorative Justice Centre); and in 2000, we had our first experience in a local school.

A few months earlier, in October 1999, the media, at a local and national level, reported the bullying events that occurred at a middle school in Bari. The violence of some students was affecting their peers, the teachers and caused serious damage to school furnishings. The school and the Juvenile Court asked us to try to do something. We were not prepared but we started introducing a different (non-punitive) approach.

It was a context in which the law of the strongest, the most violent, the most protected from the neighbourhood gangs was dominant: a context in which the rule for victims was silence, or the risk of retaliation. So, we started working in the school: listening and talking a lot with many teachers and students before proposing some restorative approaches. It was a very challenging experience, but since then I started wondering what the school needs to be a safe, inclusive, good and restorative place?

I have worked for many years as a mediator in the Restorative Justice Centre, but less effectively in schools where the focus is on performing in learning outcomes. The general perception was that any project about restorative justice was not needed, or it was like a waste of time, while students were busy with informatics, Olympic mathematics, oriental languages, and so on.

In recent years, though, schools have been facing a big crisis about education and respect for the rules. From 2016/2017, I began working with schools continuously, mostly with high schools. When it has been possible, I also included people from school, especially students, in restorative programmes.

Through the years I have established two main beliefs:

1. In order to create a relational and restorative school it is important to work with the entire environment: teachers, parents, students and everyone else belonging to the school system.
2. A relational and restorative school needs to be prepared and supported by developing projects and workshops about relational and emotional skills because where Restorative values and culture are, it is possible to develop restorative practices for real.

To develop a relational and restorative mindset, and a restorative culture, is a precondition for a school policy based on a restorative approach; and the

path to get there is never the same but depends on the specific identity of every situation.



Nina Wroldsen

Norway

I began my teaching career in a completely new secondary school. During my first year of teaching, two colleagues were sent on training in what I later understood to be restorative practices. My colleagues shared some games and activities with the teaching staff. Years later two things sprung to my mind; the games and activities were absolutely fine, but I felt a need for more in depth knowledge, a grounding of philosophy and theory in order to understand the context of where it came from, and why. I was in need of a clear expectation from my principal as to why I should use these games and activities in class.

So, in short my real journey in restorative justice started like this: I read a book called 'Touching Spirit Bear' by the American author, Ben Mikaelson, a novel about a teen in trouble and his inner and outer journey leading to his turning point. This made me search for information and do training in restorative practices. At the time more than 600 schools were involved in restorative practice projects initiated and supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and later the Ministry of Education. I went on training with 'Peer Mediation Oslo', an initiative by The Department of Education in Oslo, and The Norwegian Mediation Service. I became involved in 'Safe Learning, Norway' an NGO that promotes and trains people for restorative practices in schools, and where the well-known criminologist Professor Nils Christie served as one of the trustees.

I had fallen in love with the restorative practice way of thinking, it resonated so well with me, I felt I got answers to many questions or concerns that I had. For instance, I believed in dialogue with students and not reprimands or

marks for bad conduct and behaviour. Some of my students could say things like: 'Oh teachers enjoy giving students marks for bad behaviour!' My answer would be: 'No, I see that as my fault as a teacher, it means that I have let you down. I have not clearly explained to you and made you understand the expectations and how to meet those expectations'... Students did not expect this and were puzzled by my answer.

The mindset of restorative practices and my own values and beliefs were a great match. The strong and clear support from academic fields in addition to justice such as psychology, sociology, criminology, anthropology, and pedagogy, democracy and human rights was and still is a pillar in restorative practice. To me the fact that restorative practices is grounded in these academic fields and values, provides solid evidence that this is the way to make the world a better and safer place for everyone. Restorative practice is also about giving students a voice in school and honouring that voice. By giving students a voice, it provides students with skills that provide access and equity in education.

I treasure the skills that I learnt in restorative practices. I have become much more aware of communication and how to listen actively to what the other person is saying. I take time to let the other person finish what they say before I reply. I am conscious of non-violent communication and what words I use and how, my tone of voice and my body language. The restorative practices questions are key skills in conflict resolution. And last, but not least the power of the circle when people or students are simply seated in a circle. A circle can be used to discuss things that concerns everyone, (never personal or private matters), it could be used for many fun games to bond a group, address a concern, to let out steam, or to just have fun. Many of the games have questions for reflection, and so the games serve a purpose for the group to reflect on. The beauty of the circle is that you work with the whole group, but also empowering the individual participant.

I have later in my career been the project manager and leader of a new international public IB School (IB, The International Baccalaureate), and I decided that restorative practices would be our way to do things in the school. To have the leadership team onboard is the key factor for successfully becoming a restorative school. The next step is training the staff, I mean all staff including secretaries, janitors, custodians and so on. Remember to get new staff members onboard and keep the 'vibe' going. The vibe is first and foremost a mindset and once you 'crack the code', you will stick to it. It may be a good idea to have a group of staff members serve as a resource group that can hold a certain responsibility for training newcomers, setting up whole school activities throughout the year together with the leadership team, and provide support when needed. Communicating the restorative practices mindset with parents is essential. Parents will then know how you work with the school and class environment and how you solve conflicts and matters concerning the students.

I think time is a crucial factor, it takes time to get a grip of the mindset and how to put it to work in a school. We are so tuned into punitive responses in our school systems, that it takes a mind-shift to grasp what a restorative response would be. You need to spend time and be patient with staff to get a new mindset onboard. This goes for students too; they are also tuned into a punitive approach from an early childhood. A lot of support is needed from the leadership team, and small steps are necessary, you need time for changes to happen.

STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Above all, please keep in mind that students with special needs are as diverse as any group of people. The group of special needs students consists of students with physical mobility needs, social and emotional needs, and different learning challenges. Schools in Norway are inclusive in the sense that all students attend their local schools only with a few exceptions. Teachers

are therefore expected to accommodate their teaching to every student in class and have a universal design approach to their teaching.

How students respond to the use of restorative circles varies as special needs students are not alike. Responses may vary depending on students' past experiences and how well they have been informed about restorative practices and what, how and why. Clear and thorough instructions are important, as well as constant reminders so that all students feel safe and know what is going to happen and why. To my knowledge, special needs students handle restorative practices just as well as other students. Most students like routines, as it gives them predictability during the school day, which again gives a sense of belonging and feeling safe.

I think it is important to let teachers explore the restorative practice route, even if they are 'all alone' in their school. Students in a restorative practice class will benefit from a restorative environment and that can work wonders for the individual child or teenager. I was lucky in the sense that the restorative practices mindset lingers well with The Principles and values governing and overarching the national curriculum in Norway. The principles and values of primary and secondary education in Norway are founded on human values and human rights, the children's rights, and democracy. It entails respect for identity and cultural diversity, critical thinking and ethical consciousness, creativity, engagement and exploration, respect for nature and the environment, democracy, and participation. To me these values resonate well with restorative practices.

However, I am aware that this may differ from the context, country, and the school you work in, so it is important that as a teacher you check out with your head teacher or principal before you start. Hopefully, your head teacher will be interested and join your search for more information. The best of luck to you on your new endeavour!

Honorata Czajkowska

Poland

My "restorative story" will not refer to experiences from the perspective of an elementary or secondary school teacher. The same as Fabio, I am an academic teacher and that is mostly my field of restorative activities. I agree with Nina's opinion, that it is important to learn, get to know and observe any other perspective that could allow us to create a relational and restorative school environment.

What led me to my work focusing on relational and restorative schools was my interest in restorative justice in general. In 2019 I became a member of *Restorative Justice Strategies For Change*, which concentrated around restorative justice in criminal matters. The principles and values of restorative justice inspired me to look for them in other spaces of social life, including the school space.

As a probation officer working with juveniles, I maintained numerous contacts with schools in my city – I analysed the level of implementation of restorative practices, but there is a lack of knowledge in that field (within principals, teachers and students). I tried to combine my two professions – and decided to educate/familiarise young people at the University with restorative practices at school. I have been looking for opportunities to obtain a research grant related to the diagnosis of restorative justice in schools (I'm still trying). In addition, I made efforts to change the education programme for pedagogy students (future school educators) – I managed to introduce the subject "Methodology of peer mediation" (which I personally teach). My activity is also related to cooperation with NGOs that work with schools in the field of school and peer mediation.

During my journey I discovered the need to educate school staff (current and future) on the subject of restorative schools – teachers show enthusiasm, willingness – but they lack preparation, training and knowledge.

In Wrocław, there is favourable support from the city authorities – including the Department of Education – in implementing restorative practices in schools. We also have a base of NGOs that can support the implementation of restorative practices in schools. The political climate in Poland for such changes is now improving (restrictions in schools have been implemented for almost a decade – including difficulties for schools in terms of cooperation with non-governmental organisations).



Ola Aleksandra Dopierata

Poland

My journey with restorative practice began during my university years when I first learned about reconciliation centres addressing the Hutu and Tutsi conflict. Witnessing how people could coexist after inflicting deep wounds upon each other left a lasting impression on me.

Over the past 12 years, as both a psychologist and now as a deputy principal, I have dedicated myself to integrating restorative practices into our school culture. Despite initial challenges, I have seen its transformative impact first hand. However, broader adoption remains a hurdle, particularly within the prevailing educational and societal frameworks in Poland.

The traditional hierarchical and punitive structures deeply rooted in Polish education have made the introduction of restorative principles an uphill battle. Yet, amidst these challenges, our school has pioneered innovative approaches to behaviour assessment, emphasising relationship-building and the development of social and emotional competencies. The success of our method, culminating in a bestselling book, signals a growing appetite for change.

In parallel, my collaborations with the Mediation Centre and engagements at conferences have sparked interest in restorative practices, albeit tinged with

scepticism about its applicability in Polish schools. Nevertheless, I persist in my efforts to educate and inspire, conducting workshops and courses for psychologists and educators eager to embrace this paradigm shift.

The recent increase in teachers' wages, while a welcome development, underscores the pervasive lack of public trust in the education system. Discussions often revolve around bureaucratic compliance rather than the fundamental role of schools in nurturing holistic development.

Despite these systemic challenges, my journey illustrates the power of grassroots advocacy and community-building. By gradually garnering support within our school and demonstrating tangible outcomes, we've catalysed a broader movement towards restorative education. Our students now thrive in an environment where conflicts are resolved through dialogue, social-emotional learning is prioritised, and mutual respect is the norm.

The establishment of a peer mediation club and the growing interest from other schools affirm the ripple effect of our efforts. As we continue to expand our reach and influence, I remain hopeful that the principles of restorative practice in school will become an integral part of the educational landscape, fostering empathy, resilience, and understanding among future generations.



Vicenç Rul-lan

Spain

As an educator and psychologist, my career has spanned across various educational levels – from early childhood to secondary education, vocational training, and school counselling. My journey into mediation and restorative practices began in 2007 with an assignment from the Balearic Islands Local Authority. Tasked with implementing school mediation programmes, I ventured into a field that resonated with my intrinsic nature as a peace-maker and mediator.

The initial phase of the project was transformative. We created a trainer's community and started training teams with students, teachers, and parents. Meanwhile, I was very intrigued with the concept of circles: how did people communicate in circles, without interrupting each other? I had my question answered in 2010 after attending Dominic Barter's course on restorative circles, which profoundly altered my perspective. I began to view mediation not just as a process, but as a tool to humanise and foster genuine dialogue. I went to learn about circles and I ended up finding restorative practices.

Eager to share this newfound approach, I introduced restorative practices to our team of mediation trainers. The response was overwhelmingly positive, recognising that this approach transcended traditional mediation. By 2010, collaboration with Chris Straker initiated a European programme, bringing insights from the city of Hull's restorative practices to our community. Between 2011 and 2013, this partnership solidified our group's commitment to spreading these ideas, leading to the formation of a dedicated association in the Balearic Islands in 2013. This group remains active, growing both in membership and outreach.

Our efforts extended the reach of restorative practices across Spain. This journey was not just external but internal as well. My personal transformation was profound – from the way I approached conflicts to my faith in the power of circle conversations. The art of facilitating circles, creating insightful questions, and fostering community agreements became one of my strengths.

A key realisation was the importance of proactive measures. Too often, the focus is on responding to conflicts rather than preventing them. Through circles and other activities, we can cultivate a community atmosphere that acts as a powerful preventive tool against conflicts.

As one of the founders of the Balearic association of restorative justice and practice, I take pride in our contributions to spreading these practices within our community and beyond. Collaborations with esteemed colleagues, such

as Dominic Barter, Duke Duchscherer, Jean Schmitz, Ted Wachtel, Belinda Hopkins, and Terence Bevington, among others, have been crucial. My guiding principle has always been to create sustainable, lasting projects rather than isolated activities. This philosophy led to the establishment of a thriving community of trainers, with whom I maintain close ties, continually working on new projects.

One significant challenge remains – altering deep-rooted punitive mindsets, particularly in Spain, where the notion of punishment is ingrained in the societal psyche. Changing this perception is an ongoing struggle, but one that we are committed to addressing through our continued advocacy and practice of restorative justice and dialogue.



Belinda Hopkins

United Kingdom

When I first began, the concept of Restorative Practice in Schools did not exist in the UK or Europe, and was only just beginning in Australia and the US. I knew nothing about the work of early Australian pioneers (Marg Thorsborne) or North American pioneers like Nancy Riestenberg, Kay Pranis and Brenda Morrison.

My first experience of teaching (in the 1970's) was in the field of English as a foreign language (TEFL as it was called in those days), in which there had been radical developments in the areas of adult learning and the rights of students to take responsibility for their own learning. Having subsequently trained as a modern language teacher, I found the authoritarian, relatively uninspiring regime of school difficult to accept. I was inspired by educational pioneers like Luke Reimer (1971), Postman and Weingartner (1971), John Holt (1966) and Paolo Freire (1982), and books on non-violence and conflict resolution (Isaacson and Lamont 1982; Judson 1982).

My teaching style was informed by a desire to create a democratic classroom, and I often used a format which is now called classroom conferencing (Thorsborne and Vinegrad 2004) – resolving differences and problems by sitting in a circle, actively listening to each other and finding ways forward together. I based much of my modern languages teaching around the social goal of creating community and trust in the group, and aimed to develop self-esteem, communication skills and cooperation.

I received training to develop circle time as a way of teaching young people conflict management skills. The fundamental building blocks were, once again, self-esteem, communication and cooperation. I decided to leave teaching and become a freelance trainer in the field of conflict management, nonviolence and mediation. I developed my work in conflict management and peer mediation in schools. Meanwhile I had also begun to run courses for trainee teachers on a postgraduate course at Reading University on managing conflicts in the classroom. These courses drew on all the influences previously mentioned and formed the basis of my later restorative course development and publications.

It is important to recognise that restorative work had been taking place in the UK for many years under the guise of victim–offender mediation, and indeed community mediation. Services offering both were scattered around the country, relying on statutory funding and intermittent government support. Peer mediation was, similarly, being developed in piecemeal way around the country, but it was not having a major impact on the way in which schools managed behaviour.

In 1997 Terry O’Connell, a police officer from New South Wales Police Force was invited over to the UK by the then Chief Constable of the Thames Valley Police Force, Sir Charles Pollard to talk about his innovative work in Australia.

Listening to O’Connell talk about the potential of restorative conferencing for addressing youth offending, many people present at the meeting saw

the links between school settings and youth justice settings. It seemed likely that restorative approaches could also address issues such as disruption, aggressive behaviour, bullying, petty crime and disaffection. It was possible that they may hold the key to reducing the need for exclusions or at least make reintegration meetings post exclusion more productive.

O’Connell’s first visit in the mid–90s led to training being arranged for key police personnel and then later for multi–agency staff, and gradually policy began to develop, driven by Pollard. In the Thames Valley a restorative justice consultancy was established to roll out training, principally to police officers initially.

Hearing O’Connell speak I saw the relationship between work I had been doing in schools for many years and the potential of restorative justice philosophy to provide an overarching framework for this work. I was invited to be involved with the Thames Valley Police to develop work in schools, and I began to write about the connections between restorative philosophy, conflict management, mediation and circle time, urging people to consider restorative justice more as a whole–school approach than a discrete intervention (Hopkins 1999a; 1999c; 2002b; 2003a). I did not realise at the time that, simultaneously in other countries, others were coming to similar conclusions (Cameron and Thorsborne 2001; Claasen 2000a; 2000b; 2001; Morrison 2001b; Riestenberg 2000).

Later I was involved in developing National Practice Standards for restorative justice practice in general in the UK. I was then invited to work as the consultant with the Restorative Justice Council to adapt their national Practice Standards for use in the school context (RJC 2004a). I began to use the phrase ‘whole–school restorative approach’ (Hopkins 1999a; 1999b) and this was the focus of my book *Just Schools* (2004) – the first book ever to be written about a whole–school restorative approach

When I first started in the UK back in the late 1990's the emphasis was on introducing the formal restorative justice conference as a process into schools to reduce exclusions. This created a lack of consistency between how a school might deal with a serious behavioural incident and the mindset informing the punitive behaviour management policy in place for classroom disruption and other 'misbehaviours'. This initially influenced my emphasis on encouraging staff to use a range of restorative interventions and develop training for day-to-day practice.

In most cases an individual teacher would be unable to use any of these restorative interventions without the written agreement of senior management because they would be acting in contravention to the school behaviour policy. This is a serious issue – if a parent ever complained about something a teacher did and it could be shown that they were in breach of the school behaviour management policy they would be in big trouble and could lose their job. Thus my strong view that leaders need to change school policy to enable teachers to use restorative practice at the level of behaviour management, including classroom management.

As the years went on I came to realise that what individual teachers did inside their classrooms was going to be the key to transforming school culture. In my book *The Restorative Classroom* (2014) I wrote that a school is only as restorative as every classroom in the school. (I would now write 'relational and restorative' – as in the past I used to describe pro-active approaches as 'restorative' as well, which I now think is confusing since nothing is being repaired!) So I really do believe that every individual classroom teacher has a huge responsibility in transforming the culture of their class.

However, even in the classroom a teacher, at least in the UK, needs to adhere to certain policies (the school behaviour management policy, its teaching and learning policy etc) . If they 'waste' time with pro-active circles or take time away from the delivery of the curriculum they could find themselves in trouble. I have known teachers leave the profession because they are no

longer allowed to spend time getting to know children and showing they care about them as people.

There is also the challenge if one lone teacher starts to change their practice along relational and restorative lines and yet their colleagues are still punitive and authoritarian. The students may be encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning and for their class norms with Mr or Mrs 'Restorative', and know they will get a listening ear if they make mistakes, but then have to conform to other teachers' expectations and sanctions in other classes. They may start to complain to these teachers, or to their parents at home and this may cause conflicts between the lone restorative teacher and her/his colleagues.

I am wary of recommending that individual teachers can begin to be relational/restorative on their own. Over the years I have had individual teachers attend my courses and get discouraged because it is just too difficult to make changes if they do not have the total support and endorsement of their leadership team – and can trust that these people too are 'walking the talk'. I know from personal experience as well that 'going it alone' can lead to 'burn out'.



Chris Straker

United Kingdom

My restorative journey started in December 2006 when I visited a local primary school that had been using restorative practice across the whole school and in staff meetings. I was, at that time, the headteacher of a secondary school (mixed 11–16 years) in Hull which I had just taken out of special measures. I was, though, still unsatisfied with the, often, negative engagement between students and teachers in our day-to-day community experience. My belief was that when we were at our best as teachers and

students it was the result of deep and rich relationships; but I was struggling to make this a default state, a shared community culture.

I was looking for something that placed relationships at the heart of all we did but was also not just something we were going to do TO the students. It had to include all the adults in the building: something that was deliberate, not accidental. Something that was about cultural change, whilst celebrating the wide range of cultures of the students and staff within our community. It had to be replicable across all years; it had to be done as a strategy that embedded itself in every aspect of school life regardless of the role you had; and it had to be able to penetrate the home life of our students. Our existing protocols and policies did not, satisfactorily, change patterns of challenging, repeated, behaviours and low attendance. It was going to be a whole school change and there were not, to my knowledge at that time, any models at a secondary school level that we could look to in England.

When I made the decision to become a restorative school, it was with a sense of isolation. A sense that apart from the school around my school who had pioneered restorative practices at a primary level – we were striking out alone. I am now aware that this was not the case. The educational environment was not as hostile to the ideas behind restorative practice as it is now, in terms of the Department for Education and the control of powerful Trusts and Academies. Within these domains there is a clear belief in zero tolerance and behaviourist models, within which it is harder for restorative practice to develop and thrive. So there was risk in terms of going down the restorative path we went. This meant that our messaging had to be clear and explicit to avoid confusion in staff, parents and students, and the authorities. Data became our friend in terms of showing impact.

I had a whole litany of reasons for not doing restorative practice: my own as well as those of the advisers that circle schools with paternalistic, behaviourist, status quo agendas. *These kids won't sit in circles*, I could hear myself

saying. What I meant was I was not sure I was ready to do so, or that my staff were ready to do so. Yet, still my dissatisfaction grew.

I called a meeting in the spring of 2007 and asked the whole staff body (teachers, support staff, catering staff, caretaking staff, as well as the local police and other social care agencies involved in the school three provocative questions:

1. Put your hand up if you like working here?
2. Put your hand up if you think the students like us?
3. Put your hands up if you think we like the students?

None of these questions were to point blame, they were to try to trigger a new way of thinking about a preferred future: a new paradigm for what a school could be. I believed we could only get to this new place by breaking out of a straitjacket which, though we all felt was unsatisfactory, and was also a safety blanket that we had gripped close for a long time.

The School was a 'tough' school. I know such a statement is subjective but, believe me, the staff employed there really cared for our students whilst at the same time being frustrated by the disciplinary issues we faced daily, many of which travelled in from our local community through the school gates, like dark clouds, every morning.

So, we set about our journey to embrace restorative practice and to make relationships our super power. We were lucky that at the exact same time we had a Director of Children's Services who also saw the potential for restorative practice, not just in schools but also across all Children's Services. He provided some funding and, along with Estelle MacDonald, head teacher of that first school I went to and got the bug for restorative practice (Collingwood). Paul Carlile and Mark Finnis established the Hull Centre for Restorative Practice in 2007. We got our initial school training from IIRP. The intention was to roll out training across schools and social care settings.

We had staff from Collingwood who could lead on some of the training, at the start, but we also needed to quickly get staff able to train in secondary schools and social care settings.

I decided we had to be very strategic in the way we would develop restorative practice in the school, it could not be left to chance. The first step was a one-day whole school training. I felt, as a staff, we needed to have a shared understanding of the language and behaviours of restorative practice. That meant that even if a member of staff was not involved in any initial developments, they would understand what we were trying to do and why.

After the training I called a voluntary staff meeting the following week and was not sure how many would turn up. Well, the whole staff turned up and we had to relocate from the staffroom to the hall. This was our first circle. From this circle we took a list of our existing strengths and also the areas we were unhappy with. This formed the basis of our planning. We also tried to draw a picture of the future we wanted to achieve if this restorative practice stuff worked. That gave us a place to plan towards and measure our journey against.

I then selected six staff who would become our guiding team. This group comprised: a member of the senior leadership team, a couple of heads of department, a new teacher, a support teacher and one of the dinner ladies. The only criteria for this group was that I knew them to be relational at their cores, but they were also *doers* and had the confidence of staff. Hierarchical status was irrelevant.

I deliberately did not get involved in the direct work of this group, though they reported to me regularly. This showed the staff that this was theirs and my role was one of validating and modelling. I was certain that it could not be a top-down process. My role was to offer permissions to act, but also to challenge and make sure our means to achieve our ends was guided by

values and the principles from restorative practices. Means and ends had to be enmeshed.

This group then sought out as much training and observations of restorative practices wherever they could find it. There seemed to be no whole school, United Kingdom, training programmes to buy into, well there were but they tended to be grounded in restorative justice and had a feel and language that was drawn from the criminal justice system: which to us felt reactive, NOT proactive like the restorative practice we were trying to build. At this point we also looked to develop skills in circles by using them in my senior leadership meetings, in staff meetings, and in safe, low-level, circle processes involving staff. The aim was to develop the skills we would need before unleashing ourselves on unsuspecting students.

The guiding team in parallel to this were also trying to develop circles with students they worked with as class teachers, tutors or mentors. This meant that when we started the roll out of whole class circles in tutor times we had staff who could support those struggling, or could offer modelled circles to learn from. (A more detailed breakdown of the roll out of circles can be found elsewhere).

We used the summer term to develop these skills and at the start of the new school year in September 2007, we started Monday morning circles across the whole school. These were compulsory but we recognised that there would be a need to support staff in these early days. We had a clear plan for the different levels of support that we anticipated different groups of staff, or individuals, would be needed. After six or seven weeks of the Monday circles we added a Friday circle. But, the reality was that without direction from anyone, some teachers and departments were using circles for teaching and learning as well. What we thought might be a pastoral tool was developing as a way to think about student learning; and especially student dialogic skills.

We immediately built upon this 'accident' by making it part of the direction of the whole school. We were growing our own models and capacity. We tried, at every eventuality, to capture the stories as we developed. To not let anything go unnoticed. To be deliberate in getting the dialogue of restorative practice to permeate staff and student life. The 'live' restorative practice boards in the staff room and in student corridors allowed anyone to add their story or raise questions. The guiding team used these to follow up with staff, focus training and support but, more than anything – CELEBRATE.

We also developed our skills in using the restorative questions to run meetings related to behaviour issues: student/student; student/teacher; and slowly, with discussion with the trade unions: staff/staff issues. Restorative meetings were used to support decisions that would be made about negative behaviour incidents; and in meetings where we would bring parents into school to discuss an individual student's issues or issues between students. We quickly learnt about the importance of preparation, BUT even more importantly, that the same questions and processes could be used to work with SUCCESS.

The idea that restorative practice was a way to resolve and repair was important to us, but increasingly important to us was the idea that the language of the questions (which we saw as an enquiry process) allowed us to also celebrate and learn from student and staff successes.

Getting people to understand what we were doing and that we still had high expectations for behaviour – that restorative practice was high support but also high challenge was very important. Staff also needed to feel confident that they would be supported and not left adrift of another 'new' idea. The same went for making sure parents and carers knew what we were doing and how they could use it in the home.

Another barrier was moving from a restorative justice context (circles used solely for responding to negative behaviour) to it being a proactive process

with relationships and dialogic skills for all parties given emphasis. Again, data helped us get this message over by being able to show impact.

From being a school with high levels of fixed term and permanent exclusions we had clear impacts on these two aspects. We saw fifty percent reduction in fixed term exclusions in the first year, and this continued. We also saw an increase in attendance as long-term absentees returned because the school felt a safer place for them to be. Staff sickness absence also improved and we saved a lot of money in no longer using agency staff to fill vacancies.

Students and staff started growing in confidence in themselves and in their peers. Relationships and trust flourished. Eventually students were trained as peer mentors, and students ran specific circles around issues and developments that grew from the life of the school but that is another chapter...and funnily enough those kids could sit in circles...and so could the staff. As one 15 year old girl said, in one of the many films we made as we progressed: "its funny, innit, how summat as simple as sittin' in a circle could sort summat as complicated as that out!"



Laura Mooiman

USA

In the early days of being a school social worker in the US, I had a deep desire for children to be in loving, predictable and caring classrooms, and schools. I couldn't stomach having even one child yelled at, pushed aside, or misunderstood. When I became a school district director in a large California school district of 30 schools and 17,000 students, my job was to implement student wellbeing programmes that focused on improving student behaviour and school climate. At the time, discipline systems that we depended upon were being dismantled – and rightly so. They were wrong. They hurt kids. They hurt our communities. And they didn't work. Exclusionary practices like suspension, detention and expulsion were being systematically limited to only

extreme cases and we needed to learn to use alternative strategies to manage behaviour and school culture issues. We implemented evidence based PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports)¹ and quickly experienced a reduction in challenging behaviour simply by creating consistent, proactive and positive schools with PBIS. However, school principals were still choosing to send students away from school with suspensions and detentions for misbehaviour.

To answer this need for school leaders to have more tools in responding to harmful behaviour at school, we implemented Restorative Practices. We began implementation by re-working our very punitive and exclusionary discipline system. After about two years of RESPONSIVE work, we had enough buy-in from principals and teachers to bring the PROACTIVE and relational part of Restorative Practices to our schools by training teachers in the use of classroom circles. While this approach is not recommended by most Restorative Practices trainers and is considered "backwards" by starting with the RESPONSIVE part of Restorative Practices, it worked well for us.

Over a period of 10 years, because of training all 30 of our schools, our out-of-school suspensions dropped by 75%, our expulsions dropped by 90%, and we earned the highest school climate scores in the state of California. On the annual school climate survey students reported: "I feel connected," "I feel safe at my school," "My teacher likes me." At the same time, juvenile arrests in our city dropped so dramatically that we closed half of the juvenile hall (where we incarcerated children) and recently there is talk of closing the facility all together because there are not enough youth to fill it!

As a large school district, we developed clear and consistent onboarding training for all school leaders and teachers in *both* PBIS and restorative practices. Without exception this training was provided to EVERY NEW

HIRE, EVERY YEAR. Our training wasn't just a 'lovely experience' but had actionable, clear expectations with it like establishing a representative team at each school composed of school administrator, teachers, classroom aids and parents to implement positive culture and climate practices, consistently running circles in classrooms, and reducing shaming and punitive discipline practices. Schools were held accountable with annual school climate surveys and data collection on discipline practices.

Our restorative transformation came in pieces, in cycles, and as we learned more, it went deeper and deeper until the fabric of the whole school district and city changed. True culture shift in a school can take 3 to 5 years of diligent effort – not just training but having difficult conversations challenging beliefs about what discipline and community mean, as well as holding everyone accountable to live out the values we all agree to in a school.

Bringing restorative practices to a school works best when it is both top down AND bottom up. It's not one or the other. In other words, it needs to be both a grassroots swell of support (from teachers, parents) *and* a school leader who is passionate and determined to create a school that is a healing safe place for students and staff alike: one full of impact, relationships, and even fun. Leaders need to have some tough conversations, reaching out and connecting more while still standing their ground, and leading teachers and even parents toward becoming a restorative school. We have an opportunity to help grow young people into citizens who know how to manage conflict, to take responsibility, and to make things right when harm occurs. We can create schools that promote equity and student voice. We can help create strong children who grow into adults who speak peace and create kindness wherever they go.

1 https://youtu.be/x_KDFb_SS0?si=dpaXH-HmRUBLTsUy

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Afterword

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.” (Plutarch, philosopher)

The contributors to these pages are enthusiasts and passionate about relational and restorative schools. Our hope is that the texts will give you, who read this, ideas about what a relational and restorative school may look like. We hope that by sharing our stories we inspire you to find your way in this field. No journey is alike, and contexts differ. There is not just one way to build a restorative school and several different routes that can be taken. We hope the information shared here will inspire you with new ideas and strategies to guide your journey toward building relational and restorative school environments.

As contributors, we present knowledge and evidence demonstrating the positive impact relational and restorative schools have on individual students, teachers, staff, the broader learning community, and ultimately, the local community. Our passion for this work stems from a shared belief that, through these efforts, we can contribute to creating a safer, better world for all.

Nina Wroldsen

Chair 2022–2024

3 Recommended Reading

WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

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TRAUMA INFORMED

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EXTENDED READING

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