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Rose Short, Gill Case & Karen McKenzie

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ARTICLE



# The long-term impact of a whole school approach of restorative practice: the views of secondary school teachers

Rose Short, Gill Case and Karen McKenzie

Psychology Department, Northumbria University, Newcastle, UK

## ABSTRACT

Restorative practice (RP) is a behaviour management method that aims to help students develop conflict resolution and aggression management skills. This study aimed to explore the views of teaching professionals about the adoption of RP, as a whole school approach, over a five year period. Five staff (two females, three males) aged between 30 and 56, who worked within the school pastoral care team participated in individual interviews. A thematic analysis of the data identified four themes: the core of RP, restorative communication, learning opportunity, and the impact in practice. Participants' views about the core components of RP were consistent with those in the literature, with empathic, non-punitive communication being highlighted as essential. RP was seen as offering an important learning opportunity that shaped positive social relationships for both students and teachers, as well as being of benefit to behaviour and academic attainment.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

There has been increasing interest in the role of restorative practice (RP) in educational settings (McCluskey et al., 2008). This has been in a context of concern about pupil disengagement and associated poor behaviour (Webb & Vulliamy, 2004), school bullying (Rigby, 1998), and high levels of exclusions for physical violence against teachers (Department for Education, 2013). Schools are seen as places that can support young people to become individuals and RP aims to help shape behaviour by providing a compassionate approach that nevertheless holds the individual accountable for their behaviour (e.g. McCluskey et al., 2008).

RP has its origins in restorative justice and conceptualises wrongdoing as an infringement on other people and their relationships within the community rather than an infringement on the school institution (Hopkins, 2003). In the criminal justice context, it also gives victims of crime a voice so they feel

empowered and can help to generate an appropriate positive resolution that is satisfactory for all involved (Office for Criminal Justice Reform, 2005). In an educational context, RP aims to educate the students about their behaviour (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Morrison, 2002) to help them fully understand its impact and actively choose steps to make it better (Zehr, 1990).

These processes usually occur via a restorative meeting at which each person has an equal opportunity to express their own perspectives and listen to each other in a safe and equal environment (McCluskey et al., 2008). While some authors argue that the individual is more likely to be cooperative and adopt positive behaviour if they have a say in what the consequences for their actions will be (Wachtel & McCold, 2001), others are more sceptical. Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, and Platow (2008) argue that the individual can simply pretend to participate with the restorative process to reduce their punishment.

Early research on the initial impact of introducing RP in schools suggests that it can impact positively on the school environment, on student learning and behaviour, and was valued by students for the opportunity it gave them to be heard (e.g. McCluskey et al., 2008; Morrison, 2002). Later research (e.g. Fronius, Persson, Guckenburger, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2015) indicates that while the literature on outcome evaluation is limited, RP appears to have benefits in respect of discipline, school attendance, academic attainment and organisational culture.

Less is known about the longer-term impact of RP when adopted as a whole school approach and how it impacts on relationships between students and staff. The present study aimed to explore the views of staff working in a school which adopted a whole school approach to RP five years ago about the nature and impact of RP in practice.

## **Materials and method**

### ***Design***

The study adopted a qualitative approach. Data were collected using individual semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### ***Ethics***

Ethical approval was granted from the authors' educational establishment.

### ***Participants***

Five participants were recruited through purposive opportunity sampling. The inclusion criteria were that participants were members of the pastoral care

**Table 1.** Summary of participant characteristics and role within the school pastoral care system.

Pseudonym	Age	Role	Pastoral responsibilities	Time worked in participating school (years)
Emily	37	Year 11 leader	Involved in the pastoral care of all year 11 students	3
Linda	36	Year 10 leader	Involved in the pastoral care of all year 10 students	10
George	40	Head of School	Responsible for the pastoral care of students within all year groups	12
James	30	Head of Lower School	Responsible for the pastoral care of all year 7 and 8 students	5
Jasper	59	Form tutor	Involved in the pastoral care of a year 8 form class	23

team and used RP on a regular basis, as part of dealing with conflict and bullying within the school.

This number was sufficient to achieve theme saturation, as indicated by no new themes arising in later interviews, and no further participants were recruited. The participants worked within the pastoral care system of the participating school and actively used RP on a regular basis as a behaviour management tool. A brief summary of participant characteristics and roles within the pastoral care system is given in Table 1 below. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality. All but one participant (who had worked at the school for three years) had worked at the school throughout the period during which RP was used.

### **Context**

The school, which was located in an area of high deprivation in the North East of England, had self-financed RP training for the teaching staff and introduced RP as a whole school approach five years prior to the time of the study. The school was a large, state run secondary school in a deprived urban area accommodating around 2000 pupils aged 11–18.

### **Procedure**

An initial interview schedule was developed and used in a pilot interview by the first author to identify any areas for improvement. The final interview schedule explored the following areas: staff perceptions of the key aspects of RP, the role of RP as a behaviour management approach in practice, and the impact of RP. All participants, who had given written consent to take part, engaged in an individual semi-structured interview with the first author, lasting between 30 and 60 min. The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

### ***Analysis strategy***

An inductive approach was adopted to allow data driven analysis and flexibility for new ideas to emerge. The thematic analysis was informed by the analytic phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author listened to the recorded interviews several times before transcribing. Initial codes were identified by reading and re-reading the transcriptions. All data relevant to each code were then collated to develop potential themes that reflected coherent, meaningful data and were distinct from each other.

### ***The researchers***

The interviews were conducted by the first author, who had previously worked at the school as a teaching assistant, supporting the pastoral care of the students. She completed the research as part of a Masters degree in Psychology. The other members of the research team were a lecturer in Psychology and a Professor of Psychology/Chartered Clinical Psychologist. The latter had experience in approaches to managing behaviour that challenges, such as aggression. These researchers had no direct contact with the school and had the roles of helping the first author to ensure that the final themes were coherent and derived from the interview data.

### **Results and discussion**

Four principal themes were identified and are discussed further below: the core of RP, restorative communication, learning opportunity, and the impact in practice.

#### ***The core of RP***

This theme identified those aspects of RP which participants viewed as key when using this process to deal with situational conflict. Three fundamental components were highlighted, which are consistent with those found in the literature, in relation to creating a fair process through engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Hendry, 2009; Morrison, 2002). The importance of engaging all those concerned was highlighted; 'bringing together the person who is wronged and who feels wronged with the person who caused this wrong...to work together to find an amicable solution' (Jasper). As part of this process, the perspectives of all concerned were considered: 'I like to hear the professional side, but also the student's side...and give them [the students] the opportunity to put their point across' (George); 'I try and talk to the kid rather than just accusing them of something' (James). This is consistent with research that shows that the involvement and

active participation of all primary stakeholders is crucial to a successful restorative approach (Hendry, 2009).

In respect of the second key component – explanation – the participants stressed the need to ensure that all stakeholders understand the reasoning behind any decisions made. Understanding of, and empathy towards, the position of others is seen as an important step in this process (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001) and was also viewed as such by participants: 'I believe it is about getting the kids and staff to understand the issue and then deal with it by sort of empathy and understanding the problem and how it affects other people' (Linda); 'ensuring the perpetrator understands that the consequences of their actions affect not only themselves, the victim, but also the community surrounding them' (Emily).

The students were encouraged to explore the situation from different perspectives and consider alternative outcomes by 'asking them what has happened, why did it happen, what could have been done differently' (Linda). These mechanisms were thought to help all stakeholders reach a shared understanding: 'To work together to find an amicable solution and a way of moving forward together' (Jasper) and 'to try to come to a common conclusion or agreement or understanding' (George).

This lays the foundation for students to learn the form of behaviour that is expected from them in the future, which is the third principle of a fair process – expectation clarity (Wachtel & McCold, 2004). Placing the emphasis on educating acceptable behaviour, rather than imposing control, is argued to be more beneficial in achieving behavioural compliance (Morrison, 2002). The majority of participants in the present study felt that a supportive/nurturing environment, combined with limit setting and discipline, was optimal: 'I think that they go completely hand in hand. I think if kids understand that this is the line and this is what we expect then that in itself can be supportive and nurturing' (Linda); 'Kids need to know the limits so they can be supported properly' (Jasper); 'Support and nurturing. That is what we are here for. There is a place for limit setting and discipline though. There has to be, there has to be for a school like this' (James).

This theme indicated that staff who have been implementing RP over a period of years continue to place importance on concepts that are also seen as key in the research and practice literature in relation to creating a fair process. This allows the teacher to demonstrate their authority by completing the process with the student, rather than 'to or for' them (Hendry, 2009). Previous research by Wachtel and McCold (2004) suggests that students are more likely to cooperate and make positive changes to their behaviour when they perceive authority in this manner.

### ***Restorative communication***

This theme highlighted methods of communication used when applying RP. The language used during a restorative meeting or conversation is crucial to

achieving the end goal of resolving difficulties and restoring relationships (Morrison, 2002). All of the participants indicated the need for language used during a restorative meeting to be non-confrontational and non-blaming: 'Not you did this, you did that, but more sort of kind of like the coaching we do in school, getting the student to figure out what they may have done wrong' (Linda); 'I guess you have to make sure it is not language that promotes blame or anger. Keeping the language as non-threatening as possible' (Jasper). This was partly achieved by being enquiring and exploratory: 'So you are kind of asking questions, how do you feel? Not you did' (George). In contrast, a more traditional approach would discipline by seeking accountability; asking who is to blame, and what punishment is suited. Instead, RP aims to incorporate the sense of accountability through compassion and giving students the opportunity to learn and reflect (Morrison, 2002).

The participants also considered ways to use communication, verbal and non-verbal, to promote a sense of equality and safety in the meeting: 'At the same height as the kid and at the same level and then just sitting and getting them to talk about it' (Linda); 'Like I say, just try and talk to them like they are human beings. Don't talk down to them. Talk to them at their level' (James). This sense of being at the same level as the student was seen as one way to acknowledge and begin to address the power relations that exist in the school environment (McCluskey et al., 2008).

It is recommended that the facilitator of a restorative meeting adopts a neutral stance to ensure an atmosphere of impartiality and security (Wachtel & McCold, 2001). This was supported by all but one of the participants, who felt the need to take a more positive stance:

'It has to be as positive as possible, has to be as positive as possible. You have to talk as much about the good things that they do as well as trying to sort of get to the bottom of what they have done.' (James)

Overall, this theme illustrated the way that verbal and non-verbal communication can create a supportive, non-judgemental atmosphere and promote open, exploratory dialogue between all stakeholders.

### ***Learning opportunity***

This theme highlights the aspects of a restorative approach that provide an opportunity to learn or develop new skills. It is argued that adopting a restorative approach gives students the opportunity to reflect upon their behaviour, problem solve, correct mistakes and learn about the kind of behaviour that will be observed as acceptable in the future (Macready, 2009). A number of the participants shared this view of the role of RP in facilitating reflection and student learning: 'It's sort of "alright, so they have made a

mistake”, so it’s how can we help them stop making that mistake again. By getting them to understand the impact it has had’ (James).

The mechanism for this learning was seen as occurring through the student developing an internalised value system that comprises socially acceptable standards and helps them choose acceptable behaviour in the future (Rokeach, 1973). This process was seen as being developmental for both students – ‘Restorative practice is initiating that next stage of development in that they are part of society and what you do does impact on others’ (Emily) – and teachers – ‘Because it helps you understand why students have done certain things...sometimes the behaviours that people exhibit are because of deeper issues’ (Emily). Understanding the reasons for behaviour was regarded as core for both groups: ‘If you don’t know why someone has done something then it is easier to be angry at someone and to not care and be less accepting’ (Jasper).

It was seen as important that the teachers modelled the process of translating this increased understanding into socially acceptable, non-punitive behaviour: ‘Yes, they learn. Certainly my year 10’s in the last 6 months have learnt a lot, I think. Certainly about me and how I deal with their behaviour’ (Linda).

The emphasis was on positive approaches: ‘It’s a great, non-threatening way to do it [behaviour management]’ (Jasper), ‘dealing with it by sort of empathy and understanding’ (Linda). By contrast, authoritarian discipline was not seen as providing an occasion for self-reflection and development; instead the discipline occurs through punishment and aims to prevent further wrongdoing by threatening additional punishment (Morrison, 2002). James reflected that prior to the introduction of a restorative method, some teachers would adopt an approach that did not improve the situation: ‘I think it was more for teachers than pastoral staff because teachers weren’t dealing with things. Or they were dealing with things in the wrong way’ (James).

In general, the participants viewed RP as creating positive learning opportunities for themselves and their students.

### ***The impact in practice***

This theme explored the wider impact and influence of RP, in particular in relation to creating a positive atmosphere and building relationships, as well as the challenges of implementing RP.

#### ***Creating a positive atmosphere***

Research has shown that by focussing on behavioural education, rather than behavioural control, students are more likely to comply with expectations (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001). Using a restorative approach was seen by participants to have improved the atmosphere and climate within the school: ‘You can see the atmosphere in those particular people who use it in their

classrooms...a good learning environment' (George); 'I do think that since teachers have become more that way and pastoral staff have developed their skills on it, that the school's climate has improved massively in that aspect' (Jasper).

In terms of the positive impact on the school environment more generally, participants felt a difference had been made for all members of the school community: 'I think it is definitely a different place...my god, it was crazy down there. Up here it is definitely a lot calmer; sometimes I am not sure it is even the same school' (Linda). As such, RP was also seen as increasing the safety of students, partly because 'if they are coming to school, at least it is a safe place for them where they can thrive' (Emily), and partly due to shifts in student behaviours: 'So, there was a bit of conflict. On the few occasions I found out about it afterwards and I spoke to them and said "well, why didn't you come to me", they said "ahh, we just sat and sorted it ourselves"' (James).

Jasper's comment that 'not only did behaviour improve, but also results' is consistent with the findings of research by McCluskey et al. (2008) that academic attainment had risen and exclusion had fallen in some schools which were using RP.

### *Building relationships*

This sub-theme encapsulates a crucial aspect of RP – its ability to restore and develop positive relationships between all stakeholders. Providing an opportunity for students to restore relationships with others is an important lesson for successful integration into society. Issues between peers are common within the school context (Cowie, 1998) and RP aims to develop the skills necessary to develop stronger partnerships (McCluskey et al., 2008). The participants gave examples of where this appeared to have been effective in practice:

'There was another situation I got involved with where two boys had actually had a fight and one of them decided that actually the best thing he could do after we had a talk about it was to go ahead and apologise...the other kid was like, "wow, I wasn't expecting that"' (Emily)

'We have a persistent girl group that fall in and out of friendships and there has been lots of peer issues and we decided to do a little bit of circle time. We heard everybody's views and how they impacted upon each other. In the immediate aftermath it had quite a positive impact.' (George)

The relationships between students and teaching professionals have been identified as a critical factor in ensuring an effective school environment, student behaviour, and student achievement (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber, & Hillman, 1996). RP was seen by participants as having a positive impact on their own relationships with students:

'Definitely students with staff. It definitely helps build positive relationships there because if the kids can understand why the member of staff is not happy with their behaviour...it is about their learning about their progress, then the student often does come round.' (Linda)

'I think you can see the members of staff that do apply it and the relationship they have with students appear, I might be wrong, but they appear to be stronger...I think it helps relationships in their classrooms as well.' (George)

### *The challenges of implementing RP*

While RP was seen as resulting in a number of benefits, the participants also highlighted a number of challenges they had experienced with its implementation. A key challenge was achieving consistency throughout the school, a factor which impacts on the effectiveness of RP (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001): 'I think in order for restorative practice to have a full impact on the school and atmosphere it needs to be something that absolutely everyone is doing' (Emily); 'I think it is just something that we need to keep reminding staff to do and to try and work at' (Linda).

A number of possible reasons for an inconsistent approach were identified, including staffing issues: 'Because there is a lot of turnover of staff at the minute, I think as a school we need to [pause] give it another injection of life, shall we say' (James); 'Again, I don't think people fully understand what restorative practice is' (Linda). Other demands, including external pressures, were identified: 'I think probably because of all the different initiatives that it has probably got pushed to the back of people's minds' (Emily); 'I think we are restricted by this bloody national curriculum and the exams. We have to do this, we have to do that' (Linda).

While wider policies and initiatives can impact negatively on true culture shifts in the ways that schools manage behaviour (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001), RP is a long-term process which once embedded in the institution should be resilient to policy changes (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005). It is also acknowledged that restorative meetings can be time consuming and some authors suggest that a less resource intensive and more informal approach may still provide opportunities for students to think about their behaviour and methods for improving it in the future (Morrison, 2002; Wachtel & McCold, 2001).

The participants also acknowledged the challenges associated with individual differences between students: 'Some of them will be more mature, some of them will be [pause] brighter. Some will understand it better' (George); 'Some children...can quite easily sit with others and speak their mind, whereas other students might struggle to say their thoughts' (Jasper).

These concerns are shared by researchers who suggest that active participation from all stakeholders is necessary for the restorative process (McCluskey

et al., 2008; Wachtel & McCold, 2001) and that a degree of maturity and empathy are crucial to effective participation (Daly, 2003). One of the aims of RP is, however, to help students develop these skills in the longer term (Hendry, 2009) and it is argued that the more they experience the process, the better they will become adapted to it (Wachtel & McCold, 2004).

### **Implications and conclusion**

The present study adds to the limited evidence base that evaluates RP by exploring teachers' perceptions of its influence over a longer-term period and when implemented as a whole school approach. The research suggests that participants' views about the core components of RP, at the end of a five year implementation period, are consistent with those in the literature, in terms of creating a fair process through the mechanisms of engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity.

The importance of empathic, non-punitive communication was also highlighted as a means of resolving conflict and repairing relationships in a positive, constructive way. RP, implemented correctly, was seen as an important learning opportunity for students and teachers alike that shaped positive social relationships. RP was also seen as having wider benefits in terms of behaviour and academic attainment and, importantly, in creating an educational environment that was perceived emotionally and physically 'safe'.

The participants also identified a number of challenges to consistently implementing RP over a longer period, including staff, student and policy factors. This identified the need for refresher training in RP for staff, commitment from the whole staff team and the need to highlight the benefits of RP in the face of multiple other demands on staff time. Overall, however, the study suggests that making a shift towards a restorative culture was viewed by participants as providing an opportunity for students to thrive, achieve, and be successful.

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