



# CDI Restorative Practices

## Case Study 10

### Restorative Practices in a democratic school





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Wicklow Sudbury School is the first democratic school in Ireland. It was set up in 2016 and follows the Sudbury Valley school model, created in Massachusetts in 1968. Activities or classes are organised following a timetable but, unlike traditional schools, students have decided which topics or activities will be offered. Classes can be run by students or staff and are optional although, when signing up for an activity, a commitment of several weeks can be required, and age-groups are mixed. The school also provides a wide range of resources for students to engage in individual or group self-directed learning, i.e. books, computers, musical instruments, arts and crafts material, outdoor spaces, and sport equipment. Any matter regarding the running of the school (house rules, activities, staffing, etc.) is voted on at school meetings held twice a week, with one vote per person, whether student or staff member, and this is the heart of the democratic structure. One of the students, Finn, explained: *“It’s all done with self-directed learning, so the students decide what they want to do and when they want to do it. No matter if you are 7 or 70, you have an equal vote on how your education is run.”*

### *Restorative Practices and the Justice Circle*

When the school was created, it strictly followed the Sudbury Model and its specific way of dealing with conflict and members breaking rules by way of a Judicial Committee (JC). If someone broke a rule, he/she could be reported (‘written up’) by someone else. The case would come in front of the Judicial Committee which would include two clerks and a jury of peers (staff and students). The purpose was to ensure that there was an impartial investigation of all charges, each of which was specific to the rule that was allegedly broken, a fair trial before a jury of peers and a fair system of reprimanding. The system was inspired by the penal system for adults with a focus on establishing if a rule had been broken and, if so, what the sentence would be; the format was similar to a trial.

However, as a staff member Ciara explained, *“from the very beginning, it felt just a little bit too black and white and a little bit heartless in just dealing with the facts. We all know in conflict there are always feelings. There is always a personal element to interpersonal conflict*

*in particular.*" Maya, a student, agreed that the system *"had no feelings, no reason, just what is the law broken here, ok, you broke that, you get a reminder and then out of the room."* Similarly, another student, Ed, said that *"In the past the JC was quite black and white and didn't really get to the deeper more interpersonal side of things, that what just what happened, a rule is broken, here is the sanction."*

A parent in the school suggested Restorative Practices as a way forward and the staff and students did a workshop with Michelle Stowe, ConnectRP. Some students also attended non-violent communication workshops. From there, the Restorative Questions were introduced in the Judicial Committee, was renamed the Justice Circle. Everybody was invited to use RP in dealing with interpersonal conflict, first on their own with the person involved and, if that did not work out, with someone invited to mediate. The Justice Circle would be reserved for conflict that could not be resolved in either of these ways.

For Ed, who was a JC clerk for a few years, the impact was tangible. *"What we found with using that, it just means people really get to hear all sides of the story, and also for the person who broke the rule, they get to fully hear how what they did affected the other person and, usually coming out at the other end of it, everyone has a better understanding of each other. There is not really any level of blame which there was at the time when we used to use the JC...it [is] a more caring and understanding way of approaching conflict."* According to Maya *"the questions really help, the JC is really based off the questions now, and how it functions is because of those questions. If we didn't have the RP questions it wouldn't work as well and there would just be a lot of upset and fights, people would just not be friends anymore."* Evie, who had only arrived in the school a couple of months before, noted that *"I think it really works, I actually really like just listening to how it all works and just listening to the questions, because it's nice to hear how you were feeling when you went through this, it's nice to hear all these questions being said instead of just fighting."* Ciara emphasised how hugely the JC had improved with the RP questions, mainly because they are *"going to the heart of the story ... to the heart of the real issue that is nearly always underlying"* what has happened. She thinks there is still room for improvement and hopes to keep reviewing the structure and the process of the JC.

### *A Justice Circle Story*

Ciara referred to one specific Justice Circle which had made her aware of the impact of the use of the RP questions. A bushcraft class takes place once a week and, one day, three of the younger boys decided to urinate on the fire to put it out at the end of the class. A complaint was written to the JC and, on the day it was brought in for discussion, a large number of people attended and there was a lot of giddiness in the room. The two clerks were students in their teenage years. They were going through the process and, when it came to the part when they ask the six questions, Ciara recalled that an external researcher who was observing

the process commented that *"there was an immediately perceptible shift in the room, in terms of the body language of the children involved, just everyone, the listening part kicked in, and the messing stopped. Each child, as they were asked the questions, immediately their body relaxed. She said their gaze went down and they became reflective. And they knew what to expect. (...) And she was blown away by that, you know, you could snap your fingers the minute the first question was asked, 'What happened?', everything shifted, everything changed."* This feedback from the researcher, an 'outside person' was a 'real moment' for Ciara and brought a realisation to her that *"this is really working"*

### *A restorative school*

Ciara noted that, progressively, RP had become business as usual. *"That has just become practice. Now, that's what we use. So, in every conflict it has helped, because people now feel that they are going to be heard, there will be an opportunity to tell their side of the story."* The RP training had a wider impact than just changing the format of the JC, because students and staff began to use RP informally with each other, and the older students model it for younger ones. Finn explained that *"It's also blended and incorporated into our culture as well, and that has a huge impact, it has significantly cut down on the amount of JC cases, because there is a culture of, you know, if I had a conflict with Ed, first I am going to try and solve it with Ed going through the questions, and then, if that isn't working, we might bring in a mediator, and if that still doesn't work, then it goes through the JC. That is engrained in our culture instead of the blame game of 'no, it was you', 'no, it was me'. It's 'what was going on for you?' and 'how is that making you feel?' and 'how do you generally feel?' and that in itself has been very restorative. Instead of putting other people down, there is more of a culture of putting people up."*

Students and staff agreed that RP was a good match for the school, which is very different to mainstream schools and needed a way of dealing with conflict that reflects the school focus on the freedom and well-being of each member of the community. Finn noted that RP helped them in creating that sense of community, while preserving each person's individuality: *"I think that RP for me is something that allows us to voice [what we want or need] and help us work together, because you might be hungry and I might be happy and you might be sleepy, what's the strategy that will work for all of us in a community?"*

### *Personal impact*

The students interviewed all noted that the RP training and the practice had an impact on them personally. For Finn, it's not just skills for school, *"it's something that I can bring with me in the world."* Maya emphasised that *"RP really opened my eyes on how people feel actually and how you can go about conflicts, and really resolve them, it really changed a lot in my mind about that."* She said she was interested in learning more about it and

developing her empathy. Ed also pointed out that it had improved his understanding of situations, "it has always given me that perspective of the bigger picture." Evie felt it helped her to be assertive and to say 'no' to people which she had found quite difficult before. Finn and Ed said that it was a great tool for getting to know themselves better, to solve their inner conflicts and understand better what they needed and wanted.

Both Finn and Ed noted that it could be challenging to use RP at home, when they are much more emotionally involved in the relationship, but. Finn reckons it had a great impact on his relationship with his family, especially with his siblings and his father. It changed his mindset and therefore his interactions with them. *'You know when there is a conflict, having that restorative approach, maybe not to necessarily resolve the conflict but really hear where everyone is coming from, because the majority of the time, when someone does something annoying, it's because they had a very bad day, they hate that day, or they are just tired or hungry, very simple things, usually.'*

Overall, the introduction of Restorative Practices in Wicklow Sudbury School is considered to have been meaningful at different levels: the running of the school, the quality of the relationships inside the school community, and the well-being and personal development of each member.