



CDI Restorative Practices

Case Study 11

Restorative Practices in a Primary School:
a Teacher's Perspective





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John Madigan is a Primary School Teacher in Bishop Gavin National School in Templeogue, Dublin. He is also a trainer in Restorative Practices for CDI and a former Youth Worker in Tallaght West. He began his journey with RP ten years ago.

From community health to primary teaching

John studied Public Health and Epidemiology in University College Cork and ended up being recruited as a Youth Worker in Tallaght West at 21 years old. Adapting to this new role, coming from a rural part of Kilkenny, was very challenging for him: *“My confidence was low, and I struggled trying to assert myself as a facilitator, particularly in group work, and I was feeling stressed and that maybe, like a lot of people starting out in their careers, that this might not have been the right path for me. And so I really had to go on a journey inward of finding out who I was, what my values were, and how that could fit with the work that I was doing.”*

At the time, CDI was piloting the Restorative Practices Programme in Tallaght West. John undertook the initial training and the impact was very positive. *“It really helped me to build connections and facilitate young people’s needs in both an assertive and sensitive way. And I actually really grew to love the work that I was doing and the amazing people I was meeting along the way. In terms of the day-to-day facilitation, I really began to own confidence and I was changing my practice to fit better with my values, I suppose values such as fairness, respect, honesty, empathy, safety, trust. And a real major piece of the puzzle was actually beginning to use circles to facilitate group work and using the talking piece.”*

John completed the RP training programme and was part of the first cohort of local trainers who developed a support network and also great friendships. He worked closely with Jean Gilmore, the school completion Programme Coordinator in Fettercairn and facilitated numerous groups with her. He remembers the first time they used the Restorative Questions to facilitate a meeting after a physical fight had happened between girls in the group they were working with. *“I think we were able to repair the harm there and give guarantees that*

we could move forward together (...) it strengthened their bond and we went on to work really well together as a group."

After six years as a Youth Worker, John went back to education and trained as a Primary School Teacher. Very early in his training he realised how RP were going to support his new teaching role. He says that his commitment to restorative approaches helped him secure a permanent position in the school he is currently working in. The Principal and his colleagues were interested in RP and in a few years, most of the staff at the school were trained. *"So we were really able to build quite a sustainable model of RP in the school, which is still ongoing to this day."*

Restorative Teaching

John's teaching practice focuses on building good relationships and sincere connections with his students. Before offering tools for responding to conflict or harm done, RP help him to build a social capital and a positive climate in his classroom that make addressing eventual incidents of harm much easier. John tries to model as much as he can the attitude and behaviours that will help build connections. *"I think the children need to know who you really are, what your values are, your hobbies, your interests, your personality, maybe some things you're afraid of. And all that might go against some of the old teaching advice of 'don't smile before Christmas', which I don't think will fly if you're trying to be a restorative teacher. And I know this is a challenge and it's something that people can find difficult, you know, entering into that vulnerable space, and you can be out of your comfort zone. And I think it's just really essential to give what you expect of the children themselves."*

The teachers in his school have a goal of sending a positive note home with each child in the class during the first two weeks and regularly after that. *"And with lots of things like that you can build up this kind of currency almost in the room that, when things go wrong, which they inevitably will, you have all this connection and all these relationships built up. There's a desire there for people to want to repair. And I just think that's so important."* John also practices the skill of being fair by engaging with the children when he has to make a decision and explaining the reasons clearly to them.

Restorative circles are held at least twice a week in his class and have proven to be really meaningful and safe for the children, to a point that even children with special needs in the area of communication skills have felt comfortable to take part and share.

A restorative meeting

Restorative questions and meetings are used to deal with challenging behaviours. John states that *"I've seen first-hand the impact it can have on helping a child to learn social responsibility and build empathy, and understand the impacts that behaviour might have on others."*

John tells the story of a time when he facilitated a restorative meeting between a sixth-class student and another child whom he had made a very hurtful remark to. It was an opportunity for the harmed child to express his hurt and for the other child to understand how hurtful this remark was. *"And it was just such a wonderful moment for that young person to see the child that had been harmed say to him, 'I don't think you're a terrible person. I do accept your apology. I just think what you said was terrible. And I would like to know that that's not going to happen again.' It was just such a profound moment to see that coming back together and that restoration of the relationship, and how grateful the person was who caused the harm, and also how grateful the harmed person in this case was to be able to have an opportunity to express that."*

Learning path

John says that RP open and maintain a safe and meaningful learning path both for the children in his class and himself. During circle times children learn how to express themselves and how to debate, and topics can cover a wide range of interesting questions. He adds that *"sometime people might argue that it's very time consuming to embed Restorative Practices as a teacher, but I guess a lot of us would argue that you can't afford not to spend the time doing it because it has such a positive impact on the overall environment and the learning of the children."* As for himself, John sees how his practice can improve along the way: *"I don't get it perfect and there are certainly days that don't go right for me. And, as we know, when working with young people, the best laid plans can go out the window after five minutes. But I certainly think Restorative Practices have given me a great roadmap, a compass and a way of being that I know can work really well."*

Implementing RP in schools

John gives some ideas of the steps a school can take to implement RP. He notes first that it requires time, between 3 to 5 years, and it can start small with 1 or 2 classrooms. It's essential in his opinion that the leadership of the school is fully on board to support the staff. He observes in particular that implementation requires a paradigm change, away from a retributive/punitive thinking, and says *"Schools may need to become more open to the idea of building social responsibility and looking towards repairing relationships when harm occurs and focusing on reintegration as opposed to stigmatisation or blaming and punishing."* Training and support are essential to achieve the change and he would encourage teachers

to first focus on using RP to build positive relationships in the school rather than begin with the tools to address harm or deal with conflict. Circle times in the classroom and community of practices meetings for the staff help to achieve this. He emphasises that adapting the school policies and continued communication with all the stakeholders are the next key stages, He suggests, lastly, that little practical things can make the day-to-day implementation much easier, like having special restorative space or an easy way to make circles in the classroom.

RP and Covid 19

John suggests that the RP approach could help schools and teachers to move forward after the Covid 19 situation. *"I think it really helps to build empathy and compassion and give people an opportunity to process any trauma that may have been experienced during these times, and, you know, really rebuild and reconnect the relationships between key stakeholders in the school and give us a shared vision of how to move forward together post Covid 19."*

RP as a way of living in the community

John sees his personal and professional journeys as intertwined. He says that RP had an impact on his relationships with others by giving him ways of communicating in accordance with his values: it developed his empathy, his patience, and his understanding of others. It also reinforced his attachment to community and 'human connection'. He sees RP as a way of reconnecting people with each other at a time when most of the community life that used to be at the heart of life in Ireland has been lost.

John is very grateful for the impact RP have had on his life and the community of people he got to meet through RP. He expressed his thanks to CDI and the community of practitioners he is a part of. He concludes that *"Little did I know walking into another training course in City West in 2010 that it was going to have such an indelible impact on my life. And I'm certainly still finding my way and learning and growing with it every day. And I feel like it will be for life. I can honestly say it's just really enriched my life and helped me to look inwards, and to turn towards people in my life, making stronger connections and building positive relationships."*