



# CDI Restorative Practices

## Case Study 12

### A restorative Secondary School





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Firhouse Educate Together Secondary School opened its doors in August 2018 and was set up from the beginning with a restorative ethos and vision. When appointed as Principal, before the opening of the school, Claire Matthews had a clear vision of what she wanted to achieve. Trained in RP by the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) in 2009, and having worked with CDI and ConnectRP, she already had broad experience in RP in various contexts, as a trainer, a teacher and a researcher. She wanted to set up a restorative school *“that supports everybody to be their best self and that strives for excellence in teaching and learning”* and to build a culture and an environment that was *‘all very supportive and necessary to developing a learning culture that allows each of the students to really engage in the kind of learning and the kind of education that our young people need.’*

The values of the school are articulated in the acronym ‘RESPECT’: Relationships, Empathy, Safety, Personal Accountability, Equity, Community and Trust – values that are all intertwined. The motto of the school is ‘Be your best self’.

### *Creating a culture*

For Claire, the first step to creating a culture for the school was to recruit a team that would support the process. The school was described as *‘restorative’* in all the positions advertised and interviews were held in a circle, as a *‘conversation’*. For Claire, even if applicants might not be trained in RP, *‘the most important thing is openness to feedback and wanting to be in a restorative school.’* She managed to recruit a team committed to the ethos and the past two years were spent building relationships and growing the restorative culture among staff members.

The second important step was training. Claire, as an RP trainer, delivered part of the training and Michelle Stowe from ConnectRP did the rest. They offered regular trainings to the staff, the students and the parents. After that, modelling and reflecting were the core practices for implementing the culture. Claire elaborates that *“I think what we model is hugely important*

*here. I mean, the students see how we are together as a team as well, and how we work together as a team, and how we actually live and walk our values every day here.'*

The Deputy Principal, Andrew Moloney, explains how he learned by making mistakes. Although he first focused on the teaching approaches, pedagogy and methodology, he quickly realised that he had to focus on RP and on building relationships with his students: *"You learn by being open about your mistakes, by going, 'Hey, I actually said this to a student. Do you think that was the right thing to say?' or 'The approach that I took was x, y, z? Would you recommend the same approach?' Those conversations are so, so useful. And I think, as we build a team moving forward, it's important that we have that open door culture, that people are allowed to see not only our successes with RP, but also the times where we might not be doing it justice and how we can do it justice in the future."*

Aisling, a Student Support Assistant who helps students with special needs and other students who may need help, had no experience of RP before starting in the school. She learned the skills by working with her colleagues who had more experience as well as attending a training course run by Michelle. Carol, the school Secretary, observed that the students learn by interacting with the staff who model respect: *"they learn the way through the team having the respect for the students, and then the students learn to come back with that respect. It works both ways and that's how boundaries are created because the respect is on both sides."*

Setting up a restorative school in a society that is not restorative implies challenges. It takes time to build trust with the students, who are often used to a retributive/punitive system and may not trust adults, as Andrew explains: *"That trust has to constantly be built, by honouring the relationship with a student, 'I'm not going to shout at you, I'm not going to shame you'. It takes a while to get that understanding going, even in your own mind as a teacher. But ultimately, what I've seen is that [for] the students, their long-term relationships over the six years here, I think are going to be really, really positive.'*

Claire insists on the necessity of being patient and aware of how restorative philosophy can be challenging for people who only have the experience of a punitive mindset, especially if they are the ones who have been harmed and are expecting punishment for the person who has harmed them. *"We are committed to every student here and we will support every student to be their best self. And that can be difficult for some people to get their head around when perhaps they have been harmed and we have to help them figure out what it is they need in terms of unmet needs and support through that process. So it definitely takes time when you are working restoratively. Communication is key. Developing an understanding for the whole school community is something that we will continue to work on, with parents evenings."*

## Circles

A set of practices have been put in place to help the school community to live by its restorative values. First, circles are central and they are used in various contexts. Every Monday to Thursday morning, a 15-minute 'Check & Connect' circle time gathers students and staff in a few circles, mixing age groups and classes. It allows them to build relationships and to create a sense of community. The students enjoy that time, as one second-year student, Millie, explains: *"I like Check & Connect in the morning. I look forward to it every morning because you got to learn stuff about people, their hobbies and their interests, every morning so that's good."*

Some classes are held in a circle. Another second-year student, Maïssa, explains: *"It's more equal for everyone because we're in a circle. There's no start or end and we got to see everyone and it's not just us looking at the teacher."* The use of a talking piece is seen as a way to promote equity. Amy, also a student, comments that: *'the talking piece helps for equity, it's not just the person who puts their hand up the fastest, because some people might not want to put their hand up, even if they know.'*

Andrew emphasises the power of the circles to create equity and community: *"If we're talking about community, and we're serious about building a community, what the circles do in the classroom context, it's really psychologically fascinating. What it does is it reminds students that they are in a community ... they're looking at each other, they're looking at everybody, it's equity of place in the circle. And that's really strong to remind the students that there is a community around them. It's very powerful to see their eyes moving around the circle.'*

Claire highlights the benefits of the circle for the learning process: *"If you're looking at a dialogic model or a Socratic way of developing students' understanding and thinking processes, and helping them to learn from each other, and to develop their critical thinking skills, it's massively powerful."*

Restorative or problem-solving circles are also used to deal with problems, conflicts or incidents with the use of the Restorative Questions. Maïssa recalled a time she took part in a 'relationship circle' to successfully solve a conflict she had with her friends. Claire gave an example of how a facilitated circle helped to deal with a problem a teacher had with a specific class. By using a circle, the students were given ownership of how things could be improved in the classroom and the teacher felt supported. They agreed on the way they were going to work together and the atmosphere and the dynamic in the class improved.

A student's mother, Charlene, shared her experience of the impact of a relationship circle that her son Rory, who has an Autism Spectrum Disorder, was involved in. Very shortly after starting in first year, he got into a fight. Charlene and Rory were not used to RP and were



expecting a different process to deal with the incident. They were both disappointed that this kind of incident had happened so quickly in the year and very anxious about how it was going to be dealt with. On the day of the incident, they were told about the process of the restorative circle that would take place the following day. Charlene said that, at the circle the next day: *"they both apologised to each other. They both realised that [each had] experienced an unhappy thing at the hands of the other. Nobody was really blamed, there was no blame put on us. It was just, 'this is what I thought happened', 'Well, I thought this happened', 'Okay, I'm really sorry. Let's just move on'. And 'when this happens again, if it happens again, it might happen again, then we'll talk again, and everything will be okay'."* Rory was reassured and much happier after the meeting and even built a positive relationship with the other student later in the year. It was a very new experience for both Charlene and her son.

Circles are a regular feature in the school, used at morning check-ins, in classes, and at assembly and also at staff meetings, board of management meetings, and interviews of new staff.

### *Relationship keepers*

The first value of the school is 'relationships' and some students have a specific role in the school as 'relationship keepers'. All the students do an RP course as part of their ethical education curriculum in first year, and some of them are trained as relationship keepers. To be selected as relationship keepers, they must submit an application stating their motivation and take part in an interview. Their role is broad, as Claire explains: *"they would have ownership over sharing the ethos of the school, and helping other students with issues. But, first and foremost, to be there proactively building relationships, for them to realise actually, well, first and foremost, that's what we do here. As a restorative school, we build relationships. We try and minimise the potential for conflicts and then we respond to them with a particular set of practices. So they're basically ambassadors for the school culture really, and they do practical things to support the community."* The different actions include presenting the ethos and values of the school during parent evenings, running circles with the students in the nearby primary school and organising events like 'Love Bomb Week' during Valentine's week when the students put hearts up all over the school and give chocolates and compliments to people.

Amy describes her role as a relationship keeper: *"We try to break down the barriers because a lot of the time first years might be terrified of the years ahead of them. So we try to not intimidate them, to tell them that we're the same age as them pretty much so they don't have to fear us. So we try to make the relationship between the years just better."*

## Relationships

When asked to define their relationships with each other and in the school community, interviewees highlighted a few key elements in common: respect, trust and equality. For Millie *"the teachers never shout at us, they just talk to us rationally and treat us on the same level as them, they treat us with respect."* Aisling defined her relationship with the students she supports in the following terms: *"The relationship that you build is phenomenal. They trust you 110%. And, you know there is respect there and they know the expectations. And, obviously, if that respect is lost, rather than have been held in a punitive way, the discussion takes place, the understanding is there."*

Carol explained how trust is built: *"I think the students gain confidence from the fact that they have a voice, and they know that they have a voice. So they don't feel that they are not being heard. And they don't feel that they can't say how they feel, they know they can discuss things, or, if they're worried about something, there's always someone to listen to them. This echoes what Charlene says about her son and his relationships with his teachers: "It's about mutual respect. And yes, of course, we know that they're still young adults, they're not fully fledged adults. But they're dealt with as young adults, not as children. That's a big bonus for Rory. He loves that. He loves people considering his opinion, and taking it on board and listening to him and that's what I would say about the relationship with the teachers. I mean, they've just been fantastic."*

The sense of community, after just two years, is very strong among students and staff. However, it took some time to build the trust, especially for students who were not used to having this type of relationship with their teachers before. As Andrew explains: *"I can think of various students who have finished their first year with us now who may, at the beginning, have had that distrust and it was uncomfortable for them and they were going 'but I can't have an argument with the teacher here because they're not bringing the argument or the drama with them.' But then, by the end of first year, the relationships are strong between the team members and those students who might have found it difficult at the beginning."*

Claire emphasises how much adults are investing in their relationships with students, and how much they are inspired by the research of Dorothy Vaandering, a Canadian expert on RP in education, on the importance of relationships, *'seeing the inherent worthiness in the other person'*, *'seeing yourself in the other'*, and *'working with people'*. For example, for Claire, this starts with *"no matter what happens every morning, my first thing is to smile to the student and say, it's great to see you."*

This mindset results in an overall sense of safety and happiness in the school. As the students shared: *"you feel really safe because you know you can trust everyone"* and *"I think everyone in our school can express themselves the way they want and not feel judged at all. I think you*

*could show up wearing, I don't know, pyjamas and people wouldn't judge, I guess. It's more community-based, basically everyone's kind of linked together and we're all a strong bond between everyone."* Carol said that: *"they're really genuinely happy coming to school."*

### *Being your best self*

The school motto is 'Be your best self'. Andrew stated that the restorative model is a high accountability model and that, after a restorative circle has happened, there is follow-up on the agreements that have been discussed and decided during the circle. For him, when dealing with an issue or an incident, the restorative conversations teachers and students are engaged in, and the restorative process and follow-up, are in many ways much more challenging and productive than detentions or punishment that don't address the roots of the problem.

To explore the impact of the motto, interviewees were asked if their restorative experience in the school had changed them. The students noted how their restorative experience helped them to build better relationships with their family and friends and to respond to conflict in a better way. Carol mentioned that she is far less '*confrontational*' and communicates better. RP enhanced her ability to use positive language and to be positive herself. She also noted that they helped her to parent her 5-year-old son, to gain in patience and to improve her communication skills. Aisling shared a similar experience, that *"it's definitely opened those kind of communication channels with my two children"*. She can see how communication and trust have improved in this area and how she has *"learned the tools to be clearer"*. For Andrew: *"I'm a lot calmer, just about how I see the world, how I see me in the world, an awful lot calmer."* He says he learned to *"respond to people rather than reacting"*. One of the main learnings for him was also to become restorative with himself and *'become comfortable with [his] own ideas of vulnerability, and sharing mistakes and shame.'*

Charlene noticed how her son has become aware of equity and of people's different needs and how he *"has learned to stop blaming and judging."* She adds: *'I could talk for hours about the change that this has made to my son's life to be honest. Really and truly, it has just been phenomenal. I could get emotional about it.'*