



CDI Restorative Practices

Case Study 13

Restorative Practices in a Youth Detention Campus





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Oberstown Children Detention Campus provides a safe and secure environment for young people sentenced or remanded by the Courts. The process of implementing Restorative Practices started in 2014, before the amalgamation of all children detention schools in one campus in Oberstown. In 2017–2018, a full implementation in two units was piloted, with training provided to both young people and staff members. It was then identified that a holistic approach involving all staff in the organisation, including senior management, as well as the young people, would be the best way forward. Since then, most of the staff were trained and the implementation is ongoing.

Brian Hogan, Deputy Director presented the vision for campus: *“We need to have a commitment, all of us, to work with restorative practice principles, to listen to one another, to be inclusive with one another, and to work together, to work out when something goes wrong: ‘What has gone wrong? And how can we fix it? And how can we make things better for young people but also for ourselves?’ And I think restorative practices, techniques, ideas and ethos are an ideal way to work and live together.”*

Informal use of RP to build relationships

Building positive relationships with the young people is seen as being at the core of their work. Selena Reilly, Young Person Programme Manager, explained: *“It’s very important when you’re trying to help a young person address their offending behaviour that you have that relationship with them, because you need to be able to challenge them around certain thinking that they have. And if you don’t have that relationship with them, it’s very hard to challenge them in an appropriate way.”* Sam, a Residential Care Worker, added: *“Obviously once you’ve got good connections and a relationship built with these lads, then you can do the work that we would aspire to do in terms of rehabilitation or improving coping mechanisms and coping skills. But that’s all secondary to having built a relationship.”*

To build and maintain these relationships, staff mostly use the informal pro-active elements of RP: treating the young people with respect, connecting with them with empathetic language, talking about feelings, and using restorative language and conversations. The RP training resonated with other trainings that the staff had done in the past, and all acknowledged the importance of modelling a way of interacting with people. Oisín, another Residential Care Worker, says: *“That’s the kind of right way to speak to somebody, if you want them to respect*

you, you have to role model it yourself. Getting some training helped the staff name and extend what they had been doing before and build their confidence."

In the specific context of Oberstown, where young people have their freedom taken away from them, where parents and young people may be vulnerable or have experienced trauma, and where also a lot of different external stakeholders are involved, Restorative Practices offer a very helpful structure to deal with difficult situations. Selena emphasised *"not only do we use it with the young people, and our staff teams, we use it in our dealings with parents, external agencies, and anybody else who we come in contact with."* Brian explained: *"A lot of the people that we work with here, both young people and parents, have experienced considerable trauma in their lives. They have experienced abuse including institutional abuse. The system sometimes doesn't work well for them. So, we work with people that are feeling a lot of pain, and hurt people hurt [other] people ...I do find Restorative Practices to be extremely helpful."*

Restorative meetings

When dealing with behavioural challenges, staff use the Restorative Questions. Young people are invited to a conversation, away from the rest of the group, and it is structured by the RP questions. These have proven to be *'very helpful'* and *'perfect for the organisation'*. Oisín gave one example of a meeting he had with a young person who was experiencing bullying from others. The conversation enabled them to find a solution: the young person was to say a specific phrase that the staff would know when he felt threatened by others. The other staff member who attended the meeting with him for child protection purposes, while very experienced in his field of work, was impressed by the outcome of the meeting. Pauline, another Residential Care Worker, commented that the use of the verb *'thinking'* instead of *'feeling'* in the restorative questions during these meetings has proven to really help the young people who might not be able to identify their feelings.

Selena also described how the Restorative Questions support her in helping young people when they are away from the campus on authorised absences. She recalled a time when, using the restorative structure, managed to support a young person in deciding to come back voluntarily before his situation got worse.

Weekly meetings

Oisín explained how the RP training had an impact on the way the weekly meetings with young people in the unit are run. The purpose of the meetings is to discuss life on the unit, the organisation, and the care plan. Young people are invited to have a say in the decisions that are made, and the training has helped Oisín to structure the meetings: they use a talking piece and there are rules that have been agreed on and are read out each time. Participants check in at the beginning with an opening circle and are allowed to leave the meeting if they are not comfortable. RP also allow for lightening the mood with the use of humour. He recalled a time when his attempt to suggest that participants use an accent when checking in didn't go to plan; he said that his confidence was a bit undermined, that, but on the plus side, it provided an opportunity to show some vulnerability, which registered with the young people.

The impact on the young people

Implementing Restorative Practices along with other processes has reinforced young people's ownership of their lives and care plans during their time on the campus. Pauline said that she could see the difference: *"So, for a long time, it was, you know, you got a sentence you did your sentence you came in, and you left on the day you're supposed to. Now there's much more drive towards: 'Well, when do you want to go? How are you going to get there? And what are you going to do to achieve this?'"*. Pro-active elements of RP have also improved the sense of belonging in their unit young people can experience.

The group acknowledged it might be difficult to measure the impact of their Restorative dealings but they have the hope that young people carry with them this experience of having been treated with respect and given a voice. Sam explained: *"If they get some impression for six, nine or twelve months that they were part of this, this was their life, they got involved in the decisions, in the discussions and the conversations about them, then they can carry that somewhere else, whatever institution they end up in at some stage, then there is a value in what we've done with them restoratively, it doesn't need to be a magic wand that fixes them. They can carry the emotional maturity from being treated with respect here on to wherever it takes them ..."*

As part of the implementation of RP, CDI and the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) together piloted an experiential peer-led RP training programme for the young people. During the training participants share skills and stories, build a sense of belonging in their community and learn conflict resolution skills. First AVP delivered training for young people in two units and then CDI delivered the ART programme – Anti Violence Restorative Programme. Both experiences were deemed successful. The young people really enjoyed the programme and committed to the long 2–3 hour sessions, when it can be a challenge for other programmes to retain their attention for 45 minutes. According to Selena: *"they started using the language on the unit more ... in the beginning when they were doing the AVP. And if something would come up, they would say 'let's AVP it'"*. The training of the young people helped the staff appreciate the benefits of a full implementation of RP and it led to a new set of training for the staff.

Outcomes

All interviewees acknowledged the value of a whole campus implementation, at each level of the organisation, and in all interactions. Brian, for example, explained how already he was trying to interact restoratively with everybody, *"and interestingly enough, even in interactions with people outside of the work areas. Now I just think of it as a way of being and a way of doing things."* Sam expressed the view that staff need to be treated restoratively as well in order to communicate the values to the young people. Pauline commented on how the young people can learn from everyone: *"If the whole staff and the whole management and all on campus are constantly using those practices and become comfortable with them and confident, the young people will just follow through modelling, they'll just pick it up from us"*.