



CDI Restorative Practices

Case Study 5

Adopting a holistic restorative approach in a training centre for young people





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Jeffrey Fitzgerald is Assistant Manager in Céim ar Chéim in Limerick, a training centre providing programmes for young people from 15–25 years who may be at risk of offending. The centre offers a safe environment for participants to explore their potential and provides appropriate training for their lives and future education. Jeffrey has been working there for the past 19 years, initially as a gym instructor and an outdoor activities teacher. He now supports a team of six key workers and helps run the organisation.

From a caring approach to Restorative Practices

Before being formally trained in RP, Jeffrey recalls that the staff in Céim ar Chéim already had a caring, fair, respectful and understanding approach when dealing with challenging behaviours of the young boys and girls they were supporting. He summarises their perspective as *“The problem is the problem, not the person. We’d rather lose the arguments than lose the individual.”*

These were the type of statements already at the heart of their ethos. However, the staff members were using a mix of different approaches and were looking for more consistency. They worked with an organisation helping communities and agencies adopt a strength-based approach to dealing with challenges. The idea was to focus on the skills, potential and all the positive attributes of the young people they were working with. They were looking for an approach *“that would help them in their day-to-day work, trying to deliver an education, but also supporting youngsters that have difficulties with managing their days, managing family conflicts, managing conflicts in the area, managing conflicts with their friends, or just day-to-day living or different issues that they’d meet.”* When they came across RP, it seemed to be *‘a really good fit’* and provided the tools they were looking for.

Getting started with Restorative Practices

In the beginning, Jeffrey found using the restorative questions a bit difficult. *“I would have found them too inquisitive but, when I learned how they operate and how they work in*

conversation, I found them very easy to talk to teenagers, being non-judgemental, very empathetic, but also being sympathetic to the situation.” An important step for him was when he started using them at home with his own children. “It might sound funny but, when my youngest son was born, I could remember him being 18 months or 19 months and I am taking him through the steps on the stairs and I am going through the questions. That, for me, solidified that it would really work, that it wasn’t just a tool for work. So I was able to bring it into my own life and, to this day, when I talk to my sons, I have a very restorative approach. Using it in a professional capacity and in a personal capacity just went hand-in-hand and I really enjoyed that. And because it was working for me, in my home life and real life, I had a bigger trust in using it in a professional capacity.”

Impromptu and formal situations

Jeffrey uses RP on a daily basis, informally, in what he calls ‘impromptu situations’, such as “If I saw or spotted a situation that happened in the public area, the café where kids might have had a negative interaction, or if I was passing in a class where kids might have had a negative interaction, or with a staff member, I am able to ... just go to them ... and say ‘what was going on for you this morning when you spoke like this? What have your thoughts been since this morning? Are you still upset or annoyed about a certain situation?’

Even on the rare occasions of physical fights between two people “it does really work, people are upset, tempers are high, emotions are high. It’s a very gentle tool to be able to talk people down because the questions are open-ended, they are not accusations like when you go to the usual teacher’s office, ‘what did you do that for, why did you do this?’ It’s a very empathetic approach and I really like it because it’s open-ended.”

He says that the team also use RP in more formal contexts, when they are dealing with challenging behaviours. “So, if something happened in a class and two individuals have gotten in an altercation, or somebody’s feelings are hurt or somebody said something, then participants are called to an office, they’re dealt with, the RP questions are read out to them. But it’s done in a non-prescriptive way. Because we’ve been reading them for so long, it’s a natural part of our conversations, and I find that very, very supportive for the participants. I find that a fantastic tool for the professional to use.”

Jeffrey emphasises how the questions prevent the ‘critical parent’s’ voice taking over from that of ‘the nurturing parent’. He points out that “When you come to RP, the individuals are listened to, they are heard, their side of the story is given, they don’t feel judged. It’s not an implementation of who’s right or wrong, it’s about supporting what’s going on for you here and then.”

According to him, they are especially useful for quieter men and boys. He calls them the 'girly questions', thinking of the ability of his wife to ask open questions and get people to talk. The questions offer a structure for people who are not used to expressing their emotions or reflecting on a conflict that they are involved in.

"It's a very good conversation piece when working with youngsters and with someone who has difficulties in regulating their emotions, who might be upset at the time, especially males, who would hold on to their stress and anger a little bit longer than most."

Jeffrey points out that RP had a huge impact on his life because they open a new process. *"It gives you a good platform to draw from if you are struggling with somebody, and to just go at the pace of the individual. It is what I like about RP, it's not about you, it's about the other person. It's not a contract, but it's a very supportive conversation that you have with somebody."*

Consistency and modelling

Jeffrey recognises that RP works very well in their Centre because they are consistent. *"I think that's a very important message, that it's a tool that has to be used collectively. It should be used as a whole because if it's done in small pockets, it's not going to work. You're not going to have the consistency and individuals are going to get mixed messages. I think that's important, because our youngsters need to be shown that adults, as carers, are on their side but we have structures and boundaries in place."*

The young people Jeffrey and the team work with do not train formally in RP but, by being constantly exposed to adults modelling a restorative approach, the young people become restorative themselves. *"The profound thing is that some of the kids who would have been in a RP meeting with a professional on their own trying to support them and regulate them, when they are involved with another participant you're nearly excluded from the conversation, because that individual has had so many interactions with RP that they can nearly run the conversation, in their own words, to support the individual who they are actually meeting with. It works subconsciously I think."*

Experience of a restorative conference

Jeffrey took part in a very formal restorative conference. One of the young people they were supporting had to go to court because he had been breaking into houses and causing harm. Jeffrey and his team managed to convince his Social Worker and his Solicitor to try and set up a more restorative approach and the judge agreed, along with the person who had been harmed. First, the young man was very resistant and didn't want to engage in the process but, after several conversations and the support of another organisation working in that area, he agreed to try it. He was talked through the process and Jeffrey supported him while he was preparing his answers to the questions. Both participants had support during the

conference which was attended by the different stakeholders. Jeffrey reflected that *"I can still feel the emotion to this day. It was very emotional for the participant and his mum. It was also very emotional for the victim, the person who was harmed. But for me, listening to the victim talking to the participant across the table in a very non-judgmental, open and honest conversation piece, and letting him know how their life was impacted and how upset they were for those few weeks, but not pointing a finger at him, it gave me a different outlook on how RP works. I found it was very beneficial for the participant. He got emotional, he got upset and he cried, because I think it was the first time that anybody, if you want to call it that way, was chastising him in a very empathetic way, a supported and supervised way. It probably gave him a lot more outlook on life and probably would make him think about re-doing some of these offences again. The conversations I had with him after that were very different."* Jeffrey noted how much more aware the young man was of the consequences of his actions on other people and how they might be affected.