



CDI Restorative Practices

Case Study 6

Restorative Practices helping to build strong relationships in a training centre for young people





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Kim Brown is a social education and French teacher in Céim ar Chéim, Limerick. It is a training centre providing programmes for young people aged 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. Kim has been working there for the past 17 years.

A natural path to Restorative Practices

Kim began by saying that she has always been inclined to work restoratively. Even when she did not know what RP were, she would try to resolve issues and move forward by talking to her students. She reckons that the centre had always promoted a non-punitive and non-authoritarian way. *“We meet the young people where they are, which can be challenging sometimes, and give them the space to grow into cooperation, and to own that growth because it was not imposed on them. We’ve always liked to work like that.”* So, getting trained in RP *“seems a good fit ... it gave a bit of structure to how we worked and a bit of consistency.”*

Restorative language and circles

Kim uses RP informally in her language and by running circles twice a day. The first one, before starting the class is to connect with each other through low-level simple questions. She observes that *“Some days there is good engagement, others there is not. We just allow it to be what it is, but even lack of engagement shows you where a young person is at.”* RP allow the teachers to know how the young people are feeling and to respond accordingly. Kim has noticed that, since RP has been implemented, *“there were fewer and fewer critical incidents when we needed to call on the upper level of RP, like the facilitated meetings or conferences, because we just didn’t have the same amount of incidents really. Once we started operating like that, you could gauge where people were at, so you weren’t challenging them inappropriately. It worked really well that way.”*

Restorative meetings

Kim's most striking moment using RP happened about two years ago. One young person came into her class ranting and very angry. She suggested that he go out and have a cup of tea or a cigarette and to come back when he was ready. But he took it as her trying to exclude him from the class and got even more angry. He then left the room and, since the soft-close hinge didn't work, he thought she had slammed the door behind him, so he returned and things escalated. He was abusive, she shouted at him and he became even more angry and she finally did slam the door behind him. When the incident was over, she knew there was a need for a meeting, especially because the young person was at Leaving Cert Applied level and would have to do a lot of work with her in the future, and there was a risk he would stop coming to class. They had a meeting the following day.

She described it as "We just literally spoke. We went through the RP questions. It was facilitated by the manager and we spoke about the different things he had said, where I was at, what led me to slam the door. I owned that it was completely unprofessional, obviously, but at the end of the day, everyone has their limit, and he got very emotional and said that he had no problem with me, that he got on really well with me and that he respected me, and that he hated the fact that he spoke like that to me, which was lovely for me to hear, but, that he does this in his life as well, and that he frightens himself when he gets to that. So, he was very emotional. Because he has been through huge trauma in his life, I could understand why he got so badly triggered, but he couldn't understand it."

The young person agreed to try some exercises around anger management and identifying feelings and, after that, to link in with a counsellor. *"It was a fantastic meeting and a fantastic outcome. For him, it meant we were able to draw a line under the behaviour and the incident. He knew I wasn't judging him on that, I knew that he didn't disrespect me, I wasn't holding a grudge against him when he came in, and we weren't both sort of doing a dance around each other waiting for someone to strike a blow."*

Kim says she cannot emphasise enough how beneficial the RP meetings are. *"It clears the air and it's beneficial for both student and teacher. I do think, yes, the young people benefit from it. It clears the path for future learning purely from a professional teacher-pupil point of view. It gets rid of these obstacles that they might carry over from an incident but, from a personal point of view, for me as a teacher, it just allows me to leave stuff behind. I love it. I don't know how much the kids benefit from it, but I know I get huge benefit from it personally. It stops me bringing stuff home, it stops me judging myself as a professional, too harshly sometimes."*

She also tells about her experience of facilitating a more informal meeting after a fight between her kids and their cousin, when they were around four and five years old. *"It worked*

very well for the kids, and it worked very well with my sister-in-law and mother-in-law as well, because they weren't keeping all this in and trying to parent for my benefit."

According to Kim, RP meetings have a very positive impact. "[RP] definitely builds relationships. I find the kids you have a meeting with, you usually end up having a much closer bond with them, because something very real has happened and it's not just a superficial encounter of me walking into a classroom and saying 'ok, do your work' and then leaving. We both expressed feelings and showed vulnerability and we got to know each other a bit better. You can't help connect with someone when you do that, so it forms very strong connections, very lasting connections. You see that when you meet them years later, or when they come back in when they have babies and they bring them in, that's nice."