



# CDI Restorative Practices

## Case Study 9

Restorative Practices making a safer and happier school





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Scoil Mhuire Naofa in Carrigtwohill is a growing primary school of around 500 students, previously all boys but now with girls in junior levels. It has been implementing an RP strategy for a number of years – see Case Study 8 in this CDI series. In this case study, Special Needs Assistants Eithne Sheehan and Kate O’Riordan and 14 sixth-class students relate their experiences and provide an overview of how RP are used in the school and the impact they have.

RP are implemented throughout the school to deal with conflicts and incidents, through a systematic use of the Restorative Questions and use of restorative meetings or conferences, and to build community and solve problems in the classroom through use of circle times. RP are incorporated in the schools anti-bullying policy. The use of restorative language is encouraged in the school with an emphasis on identifying and expressing feelings and unmet needs.

### *Staff support*

Training is an important part of this implementation process and a specific role has been given to Eithne. She supports all staff in matters related to RP *“for example, being advisor to planning circle times and co-facilitating while new members are becoming confident and competent in their facilitating of meetings and circles. I have facilitated training to new members of staff over a period of eight hours after school hours ... In the case of a deep-rooted problem, I may also be brought in to support the teacher. I have facilitated fishbowl circles, circle times and restorative meetings, and sometimes where there may be a series of individual prep meetings, actual meetings, post meetings and follow-up meetings to make sure the restoration is sustained.”*

### *An adult perspective*

Kate was trained in Restorative Practices some years ago and she uses them every day in dealing with adults and children. She supervises children in the yard, twice a day for five days a week, and she finds RP to be a very valuable tool. The yard is a place where conflict can arise more frequently because the boundaries are not as defined as in the classroom. The school keeps a board in the yard showing the restorative questions and, when a conflict occurs, children are asked to answer them. She says the impact is very positive. First, the children are involved in a safe process: *"It's simple, there are defined steps and they feel safe. We've moved from the authoritarian approaches of 'someone must be blamed' and 'someone's going to get into trouble'. The children understand that these are the questions that we ask and that each person involved is going to be equally heard. There is going to be no final decision made until everybody is kind of happy to come to a conclusion together."*

Second, Kate says that it maintains their self-esteem and develops empathy: *"This allows children to return to the classroom 99% of times with their self-esteem intact and with a certain degree of empathy experienced and learned. They hear how their behaviour maybe has impacted on another person. And sometimes, when they are reminded of that, just a simple reminder, they remember a time when they too felt like that."* In her opinion, it makes everyone feel responsible for the atmosphere in the school. *"I think they're so involved that they feel a responsibility now towards maintaining our school community ... and being caring about each other."*

For the staff, Kate says it reduces stress: *"I know going out on the yard now, twice a day, isn't the same challenge as it has been some years ago. 'What would I say?' 'Would I say it right?' You know, I don't want to upset somebody, but now you follow the steps... It takes the personal pain out of it, we're all involved in the process."*

Kate tells the story of two boys who didn't get on well and had several conflicts but, by starting to hear each other's point of view, became friends. *"What better results, then, would you want than a friendship? I think it's like when you go through the wars with somebody, or when you've suffered with somebody, or whether you've empathised with somebody, that's a fantastic grounding for an amazing friendship."*

### *Students' perspective*

The students interviewed were all boys from sixth class who had been in the school since Junior Infants, except one who has done a couple of years of school in the US. The children had been exposed to RP from the beginning of their schooling.

Several of the children note that RP give them an opportunity to be heard, whether it's during circle time, when children can express feelings and opinions, or during the restorative process to deal with a conflict. John Paul said *"in our school, it's a big opportunity for your voice to be heard, for your part to be understood."* Kilian said *"it's all about letting children's voices be heard."* and Fionn said *'I like the Restorative Practices in school, because I get to speak my mind'.* Fionn added that, regarding circle time, *"to be fair, a teacher does leave us get away with some things that we couldn't say outside of school, or like in school but not in the circle. We can say more things in the circle."*

In dealing with conflict, the children noted the fairness of the process, when each side of the story is taken in account. John said that *"if there is a fight or you get an argument and someone is doing the RP questions, it gives them both an equal say in the story."* Brian commented on the difference when he is not dealt with restoratively: *"When people aren't using Restorative Practice it makes me feel unfair because they're not hearing both sides of the story. They only hear the victim. And they think the suspect is the 'baddy baddy'. You haven't been treated fair. That's what you feel like."* John Paul said *"so we give everyone a chance to speak, you know, everybody's voice will be heard. And just ask a few questions. 'What's your side of the story?' ... And, at the end of the day, the two halves make a whole story, and then we understand both sides of the story."* The fairness also comes from the fact that the process takes account of people's needs. Another student, Esdras, gives the example that, if ever a child is coming from *'an abusive home'* and has *'anger issues'*, RP will *"make him calm down and they can understand his side of the story"* and it will *"make school happier for him."*

The importance of honesty is highlighted by a few of the children who said honesty is necessary for the process to be fair. John Paul noted that if a student lies during a restorative process, the outcome won't be fair, and he also explains that honesty came from the way the process was explained to him and that it was a necessary step for him to feel safer and to answer honestly. Therefore, honesty is also a consequence of the fairness of the process, as Colm explained about the time he had to speak to the Principal. *"It was just the fact that you got to speak in your own words, that you were able to tell the people without having to lie. And you just had the space and the relaxation to just open up about it."*

The children shared how RP helps them to solve the conflicts with their friends. Declan, for example, stated that he gets on better with his friends thanks to RP. Kilian recalled that *"I had a disagreement with my friend. I think it was in fourth class. It was a couple of words going around. And then our teacher also took us out and used the Restorative Practices questions. And now we are best friends again. So it's very nice."* Noah shared another story. *"My experience with RP questions is that it calms a lot of self-doubt, because I got in a fight with one of my friends and we didn't use RP and we were fighting for a long time. But, when we*

*told the teachers they asked us to use RP and, when we did it, it resolved the situation a lot quicker."*

The impact of circle time as a community builder that improves relationships and creates trust was mentioned by the children a few times. Luke shared that *"I find that really helpful to get to know each other in the class better like, especially for anyone new who comes in."* Kilian said *"I like Restorative Practices because I can talk to my friend. I can express my feelings or what I'm like that day in the circle with all my friends."* Esdras explained about circle time *'that everyone just talks honestly, honest about themselves and, you know, just about what happened and how we can make the school a better place.'* "John likes circle time *"because it gets you to say a lot more about yourself. And, you know, you can trust everybody around you. You know they're, like, your friends in the circle, they can't judge you or what you say."*

The children reflected on the fact that they were developing their personal life skills through RP. Luke stated that *"in a way, it kind of improves a lot of your skills in life, because I know sometimes some people find it hard to listen, but like this circle time really makes it easier to try listen and respect people."* Jayden sees the calming effect of RP for building confidence. He said *"it helps people calm down and it builds your confidence, because when someone shouts at you, you get scared and you get intimidated, but then when they speak to you calmly, you start to feel yourself again."* He added that he has the questions in his head and they help him to think before reacting. *"I would use them in my head, I'll think about it in my head instead of saying it out loud, and then I feel calm. So it prevents me from doing a lot of stuff, from doing something silly like answering back, because then you think about it and you know what the consequence could be."* He concluded *"so RP helps you even at home or anywhere else or any other situation."*