



# CDI Restorative Practices

## Case Study 8

### Becoming a Restorative Primary School





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Anne Marie Moylan is the Principal of Scoil Mhuire Naofa in Carrigtwohill, County Cork. It is a large co-ed primary school, previously all boys, but mixed in the last few years, with around five hundred pupils. The school began its RP journey eight years previously. Anne Marie described several steps to becoming a restorative school.

### *Step 1: Conflict Resolution – A listening school*

When Anne Marie first heard about RP, she thought it aligned well with her own values and got trained, along with a few other staff, in using Restorative Questions. They started using the questions when conflict arose at the school and noticed changes immediately, with *“an instant reduction in the amount of reoffending”*. She explains that, as in many schools, most of the time it was the same few pupils who were involved in incidents in the yard or in class. Teachers were tired of it and would sometimes find it difficult to give an ear to what these students had to say. She notes, however, that *“With Restorative Questions, we would feel that immediately we began to become a listening school, and that immediately we had engaged with affording respect to the pupil’s voice. And I think the pupils reacted very positively to that.”*

Anne Marie remembers that, first, students were a bit suspicious when the adults asked the questions and explained the restorative approach, that they could be honest and wouldn’t be punished. However, with more and more exposure to the process, the students started engaging honestly. She expressed the view that *“the more exposure you have to that, the better, you know, and I like the phrase ‘practice makes permanent and not perfect.’”*

Anne Marie and another staff member went on to be trained as trainers and, in turn, they trained all the staff at the school with at least a first level workshop and, for some, a second level. Another staff member completed the process to become a trainer of trainers and, since then, every year, all new members of staff are trained. Anne Marie reckons *“it is a terrific investment in time and money to have a few trainers on staff”* and that *“training is really, really important”*.

### Step 2: Anti-bullying policy

The second step was to adapt RP to the anti-bullying procedures introduced by the Department of Education in 2013. Anne Marie wanted *"to create a system whereby [they] were really protecting pupils who were engaging in restoration of bullying situations."* They designed a process that involved (a) a series of individual meetings to prepare the children for a restorative meeting, (b) carrying out the restorative meeting, and (c) holding second-round individual meetings in order to ensure that action plans made during meetings were followed through. Sometimes they had to organise a full restorative conference with parents, other adults, and children to support the process. However, Anne Marie noted that this was quite rare because *"if one creates protection around restorative meetings, and creates a series of meetings and follow-through, usually our bullying situations remain sustainably resolved."*

### Step 3: Circle time

The third step was the introduction of restorative circles in the classroom to build good relationships, because *"they were really, really good for encouraging the teacher to develop their own relationship with the children."* For Anne-Marie, it's a crucial aspect of education. She explains: *"As I grow older and wiser and more experienced in this educational field, I know now that it is all about relationships. What saddens me sometimes is when a child comes to school, and the relationship is not there with the teacher, and sometimes you would find a child suffering from separation anxiety, or suffering from isolation from his peers, and issues with homework, etc. And usually everything can be fixed if we create a bond between the teacher and the child, and nothing saddens me more than when a teacher is flippant about a child's anxiety or a child's perception of their treatment of themselves by others because, personally, I believe that every situation needs to be taken extremely seriously."*

She sees circle times as a meaningful way *"to develop an understanding in relation to civic situations."* They provide a structure for discussions and explorations of the impact on people of different situations, which is essential when living in a community. She adds that *"it's always very enlightening also for teachers to see the depth of conviction and commitment that the children have."* She says that it is also a way for pupils to know themselves better and comments that *"deepening and developing your own personal identity and voice within your community is a great gift and a great skill, I think, to be able to develop in a child heading into secondary level where the entire peer influence and other influences can be very distracting for them."*



#### Step 4: Restorative Language

To complete the implementation of RP in the school, the aim is to develop the use of restorative language as common practice. Anne Marie says that it is the hardest part of the process since nobody “is well equipped in this area”. They introduced the children to non-violent communication in three stages. From Junior Infants to First Class, they encourage the children to identify their feelings. From Second to Third Class, they teach the children how to identify their feelings and express them in an ‘I statement’. This requires “a whole restructuring of sentence” and, to assist, they prepared sample statements for the children to fill out. Lastly, for the senior part of the school, they worked on identifying unmet needs.

Anne Marie observed that “...interestingly enough, there is very little out there in the SPHE [Social Personal and Health Education ] programme on needs. It’s all about feelings, which is good, but finding and sourcing the feelings was extremely revealing for the children and actually also for the staff. So, we discovered that the four most common unmet needs in our school were safety, honesty, belonging and being heard, or having a voice, and usually all conflict, and all nasty feelings, erupt and evolve from these four things” She emphasised that identifying unmet needs in any conflict is extremely helpful and “the starting point, before any conversations need to be had.”

It has proven to be very relevant for the adults working in the school as well. The staff are currently developing their dignity-at-work policy. She commented that “It’s a brave piece for staff to work on. Because it means that we need to go into that uncomfortable area where we acknowledge that yes, we do have conflicts with each other, whether they’re voiced, whether they’re not voiced. We do have biases. Sometimes they’re conscious, sometimes they’re unconscious. I’m really looking forward to completing the work so that we might have a policy that we can lean into when we have conflict or when we need to have difficult conversations.”

#### Flexible code of behaviour

In line with restorative thinking, and from the beginning of the process, the school had to reflect on their house rules and code of behaviour. “I think what we have achieved in our school is a flexible code of discipline, which means that it is flexible enough to cater for differentiation. I believe passionately in differentiation for behaviour and emotional challenges. Sometimes these challenges are temporary, sometimes they’re permanent. For example, children may have adverse childhood experiences, and they need to be differentiated for, sometimes a child might have a frontal lobe brain injury – they need to be differentiated for, and sometimes the child is going through a horrific domestic situation, and they need to be differentiated for. So context is very important.”

In developing a flexible code of discipline, they began by creating an *'individual behaviour list'*, introduced eight years ago. Any child with a specific educational or behavioural need may be put on the list. In the event that they break a rule, only their class teacher can intervene or sanction them. The rationale for this is that the class teacher is aware of the challenges they are facing that day or week and the efforts they are making. For Anne Marie, this avoids a lot of potential damage. *"A child who's clawing their way slowly back into good behaviour can be annihilated by a cross teacher over a small misdemeanour. And it can undo weeks of work."* She added that *"there were lots of little initiatives that we would have put in place that would have protected us and help these children to co-create their own environments of self-regulation, in tandem with whatever the individual behavioural plan was."* For example, a child who is struggling may choose to stay inside, listen to music or do art work, instead of going to the yard if he/she doesn't feel in a good mood.

Although there are lots of steps to avoid suspension, sometimes it had to happen, but the focus then was on providing as much support for the child in their reintegration following suspension, to avoid them being labelled or expected to *'live up to their reputation.'* Anne Marie acknowledged that creating support for children who break the rules can be challenging, especially from the perspective of parents of children who have been harmed. Dealing with incidents in this way could involve a lot of meetings and communication to convince the parents it was in the best interest of the whole school community to proceed that way. However, in the end, they were convinced. She said that *'It was an uphill struggle but, actually, now that I look at my parent body, they are a remarkable bunch of people. They get what we're doing and they understand us, and they support us.'* The school is now looking at training parents in Restorative Practices by providing a level one workshop.

### *A restorative meeting*

Anne Marie gave an example of a restorative meeting. The parents of a fourth-class student came to her and said their child was being bullied by a sixth-class student. She explained to them the process that would take place – individual meetings with the two boys to prepare for a restorative meeting between them where an action plan would be agreed and followed through. Individual meetings with the boys then took place. The sixth-class student was very cooperative, being used to RP, and soon acknowledged he was wrong. It took a bit more time for the fourth-class student to feel safe, as he was less used to the process but, in the end, they were both ready to meet.

The mother of the fourth-class child was adamantly against the idea of the restorative meeting but the following day, the child knocked at Anne Marie's door and asked her to hold the joint meeting. He said he had talked to his parents and wanted to take part in the restorative process. So, the meeting was organised for the afternoon and the fourth-class student was to speak first. Surprisingly, he began by apologising to the sixth-class student

and, as Anne Marie asked for clarification, he said he was sorry because his mum had insulted the other boy and his mum. *"So, interestingly enough, my sixth-class ... guy started crying, and he started saying 'I'm sorry'. Then my fourth-class boy started to cry, [saying] 'I'm sorry'. And I'm sitting there feeling very redundant, and I feel like crying too. It was a beautiful moment. The questions weren't needed but, because of process and fairness and the way we had it planned, we still went through the questions which we had prepared. And, at the end of it, the two boys decided that they had a plan for how they would deal with this."* Anne-Marie described it as her *'favourite restorative meeting story'.*