



Restorative Thinking

Restorative Practice and a return to the 'new normal'

A school perspective

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“When schools reopen, emotional contagion will occur there too – and it will facilitate recovery or impede it, depending on the measures put in place and the extent to which these are enacted with authenticity and commitment by the whole school community. Clarity around the evidence-base for emotional contagion will be critical in this because culturally, it is way too easy for ‘Brits’ to dismiss important, psychologically informed practice as touchy-feely mumbo-jumbo. Our most vulnerable pupils in particular rely on us opening up to somewhat more enlightened thinking.”

(Mary Meredith, Head of Inclusion, Lincolnshire County Council)

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We recommend that schools wishing to draw on restorative practice as part of the return to school undertake training/coaching with a recognised training provider.

Going back to school

When we start to return to 'normal', schools will have many things to do and important starting points will be (1) re-establishing relationships between individuals and groups; and (2) processing the experience young people, staff and parents will have gone through because of social distancing.

Both of these factors need to be addressed before many young people are able to re-engage with their learning. It is here that Restorative Practice can be an invaluable tool within schools: to revisit cultural norms and school processes and to allow the safe telling of stories by individuals, groups and the wider community.

The temptation to dive straight back into the structures and routines of school will be seen by many as a priority - and rightly so - but are we kidding ourselves if we think this will happen seamlessly after this long period of disruption to the lives of young people and families? What will make a difference is the deliberate use of Restorative Practice to bridge the transition.

Restorative Practice is too often seen as a process to deal reactively with behaviour (a justice model using language like 'harmed' and 'harmer'), but it is so much more than this; it creates a context for dialogue, reflection, expressions of concern, and the sharing of successes; as well as giving young people the skills to process their own and others' thoughts and feelings.

It is likely that everyone in the school community will have been affected by the isolation and claustrophobia that social distancing creates. But not everyone will have experienced it in the same way. A deliberate decision by schools to make a priority of social and relational interactions will help individuals and groups make the transition back to school, to safely talk about their experiences of the last few months: what they have learnt, and what they have found difficult. This will then create the context for the learning to develop.

Without this context we will see young people's 'traumas', fears, experiences communicated through challenging behaviours that schools will find difficult to manage at a time when teachers, themselves, and parents, also need to process their experiences. We believe we can use Restorative Practice to transition from 'social distancing' to an interconnected, healthy school community through the deliberate use of the restorative processes described below.

We use the word deliberate, intentionally. There must be a real purpose to the use of circles and wider restorative processes within schools, allowing the rebuilding and reframing of relationships that will be at the heart of a safe, healthy, nurturing school environment that supports a positive learning culture. It is not enough to hope that things will fall into place by some miraculous happenstance. All Restorative Practice work has to be explicitly planned for, with a clear understanding that the methods used must equal the goals that we want to achieve.

This should be a whole school implementation plan and not an ad hoc approach.

Restorative Practice

All of the processes described in this document can be delivered by tutors, year or house staff, curriculum staff and support staff. This work, delivered with young people, will start the process of addressing any underlying issues. This should not be seen as a 'one-off-approach' – that's relationships done! - but as a series of processes in a range of settings (pastoral and curriculum) that will see restorative practice become organic to the initial experiences of the young people, as they leave the isolation of social distancing and become engaged in their learning.

Circles

Well managed circle processes help create the transition back to school in a way that supports all interactions in the school and contributes to a return to learning. There is much to be said about the value of circle practices in themselves, and we believe that the more organic to the life of the school they can be made, the more effective they will be for the dual purpose of (1) bridging the transition and (2) preparing the foundations for learning. Staff will also get a sense of which students need more support (and what sort of support) during and after circle sessions; they can then direct support to those who need it in the way/s it is needed. Circle processes are varied and all have very specific purposes for the development of student and staff relationships and re-engagement with learning. Their delivery in isolation will have an impact but it is their interrelationship that makes the sum greater than the parts. We believe the processes below can all involve the use of circles – though some are more circular than others!

Values exercise

A starting point for the whole school community (staff, students, parents) is a values exercise. This provides explicit language and behaviours to help the school move forward, a collective sense of 'how we work here'. This will be a chance to revisit existing school values/norms and reflect on how far they are appropriate in the 'new' conditions in which all schools find themselves. The values chosen will also underpin all of the exercises described in this document.

As a staff: collectively come up with the key value words that you feel the school should hold at the heart of all its business and relationships. Do this in small groups then feedback to the larger staff group. This will need to be facilitated and the word/values collected centrally.

There then needs to be a second exercise where staff reduce the number of words down to 5 or 6 – this will require cross-group discussions and will need to be carefully facilitated to encourage all the voices in the room and to manage the important areas of 'friction' that the distilling of values will undoubtedly engender.

Students, parents, governors: the same exercises. The management of this will be dependent on numbers, and class groups in primary schools or tutor groups in secondaries provide appropriate group sizes.

The school now has a small number of words that will become the central underpinning of all its activities. The important thing now is to describe each of the words as language and behaviours. For instance, if one of the value words is 'fairness', then the activity to explicitly define the language and behaviours that illustrate 'fairness' should be undertaken by the whole school community (there is of course a need for a facilitator to manage the work streams and act as secretariat during these phases).

What the school needs to do is describe the word so that it is clear as a way of being, rather than an abstract dictionary definition, something like:

“At X school we believe in ‘Fairness;’ in our school this looks like, feels like, sounds like ...”

Consideration will also need to be given to age and special needs issues in terms of how the exercises are conducted and how the words are brought to life.

This exercise is best done as a starting point, before the other activities take place, or could potentially run alongside them. In some of the schools we work, this process is a key part of PSHE for the first half term in September; or schools decide that it is so important to how they want to work with students and staff that it is built into the curriculum delivery model.

The process of reaching consensus, defining the words as language and behaviours, runs as a thread throughout the school, making dialogue around values explicit and concrete. Many of the schools we work in then display the words around the school building – in pupil displays and sometimes even painted onto walls. They also look to translate the words into the main ‘home’ languages spoken by students in the school. This allows everyone in the school to have visual prompts that feed into conversations about behaviour and relationships so that the values become part of the currency of language in the school.



Restorative enquiry/questions

Using the restorative questions provides a consistent structure for language across the school. The questions allow staff at all levels of competency and confidence to manage circles in a way that has coherence and is sympathetic within any other wider school initiatives regarding the return to school.

The questions allow students to explore the story of the last few months, for themselves as individuals, as well as learning about the stories of their peers. The structure allows them to explore thoughts and feelings in a safe way; to look at the affect on those around them, and the wider community; and, finally, to discuss any learning that they can take for themselves and others from the experience(s).

The questions:

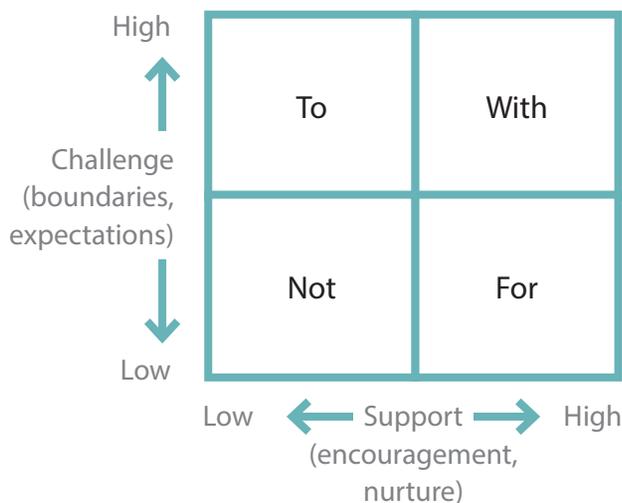
- What happened?
- What were your thoughts and feelings at the time (different points over the time)?
- What are your thoughts now and how do you feel about what has happened since?
- Who has been affected, and how, by the events of the last few months?
- What can you/we take from the experience to move forward?

This language structure gives teachers a way of working through the circle process. This is particularly useful for teachers who are unfamiliar with, or lack confidence in, their ability to run a more 'free-form' circle. It gives the school a real time snap shot of the places students may be with regard to their reactions to the isolation they have experienced and therefore schools can better target support. This in turn prepares students as individuals and groups for engaging with school at relational and learning levels.

Note: Before beginning circle work teachers and students need to establish the norms for their work in the circle and, on a more pragmatic level, discuss and establish the norms for setting the room up to allow the circle to be completed effectively.

The Relational Window

Teachers can use the Relational Window (Adapted from P. McCold and T. Wachtel, from Glazer 1969) to engage students immediately with an exploration of their own, and their peers', learning, whilst drawing on the thoughts and feelings they may have about being back at school. The process described below uses the construct of the Relational Window; it has been developed by staff to use as an organic part of creating context and review in subject lessons before the isolation period. In the schools we work in it is used flexibly as a planning tool, for target setting and in engagement with parents.



Using the Relational Window with a class to revisit norms and a culture for learning will, again, support the transition back to the more structured learning of school after a period of e-learning or no learning experiences. This exercise is supported by the explicit values exercise that will have been completed, as described previously.

This exercise looks to establish working in the WITH box not as a standalone way of being, but as a balanced consideration of each of the other boxes. By carefully exploring how to best work in the 'to', 'not' and 'for' boxes, we can avoid the behaviour/attitudinal traps that are prevalent in each of them (which is where many uses of the Relational Window end).

This means teachers and students can use the individual boxes and the relationships between the boxes to structure a discussion about establishing a WITH culture.

We shouldn't see the boxes TO, FOR, NOT as places to avoid at all costs; what we do want to avoid are the negative elements of each box. We also want to consider, and be explicit about, the positive aspects of working in each box as a means of creating the conditions for the behaviours and language etc. in the WITH box.

This stops discussion with students being just an abstract consideration of WITH; instead the discussion is grounded in the complex reality of the classroom with a wide range of students and the complexity of the different levels of understanding they bring.

This approach provides the building blocks for students to fully realise the benefits of working in an environment that has high expectations (challenge) and support. Thus an understanding of working WITH is achieved by having real clarity about how behaviours in the other three boxes can hinder or enhance us in establishing a culture of WITH for ourselves, teachers and peers. (This work is also done with parents using the same approach and adapting it to use in the home).

The approach described below draws heavily on the way we encourage teachers to use the Relational Window (and the restorative questions) as positive ways of developing student responses and skills.

The following exercise was designed as a starter and plenary process, and it will also make an excellent restart to the new school year.

Using a piece of flipchart paper, illustrated with the four boxes, the following steps should be followed:

1. Focusing on the WITH box: teachers ask students to describe what would be happening in their classroom if learning was really engaging and exciting. What would the teacher be doing? What would the students be doing? What would they both be doing? Elicit descriptions of active, exciting, effective learning in explicit language as to what the WITH classroom is like.
2. Turning to the TO box: the teacher sets the parameters for the tasks they are about to embark on, or the units of work they are to study: "This is what we have to do... and this is why?" The teacher asks, will the behaviours and attitudes within the WITH box support this? Do we have to add or change anything? Is what we are doing and the way we are going to do it, in the TO box, complimentary/supported or in conflict with working WITH?
3. Looking in the FOR box: we ask students to discuss the support that individuals and groups may need with this work. Who can provide it from within the peer group? Who gets extra support? How long is this support going on for? Will this support help produce the atmosphere/culture described in the WITH box?
4. Now the NOT box: let us deliberately and explicitly ask the students to describe the

behaviours that will be counterproductive to achieving the learning culture described in WITH; to allow the completion of tasks in the TO box; and the support described in the FOR box. This box is essentially giving the class and teacher the opportunity to discuss the behaviours that will be counterproductive for the whole group to meet its goals.

This exercise can be used to start any curriculum session and needs to be constantly reviewed by the teacher and the class. It also makes a well-structured plenary at the end of a lesson or a week: encouraging students to reflect on the goals they set out with, and any areas that may need to be changed to reach them, or acknowledging the areas where they are excelling.

These activities are designed to create a context for the return to school and how to re-establish relationships and also provide pupils with skills in dialogue and reflection. This work was organic to 'what we did' within my school, (and the schools we work in), because the relational window was/is used in a variety of contexts by staff and students.

Walk the talk

Individuals are supported by students/colleagues in its use when they actually walk round the boxes drawn on the floor to explore a problem, a relationship or a success:

Which box are you in with this situation?
How did you arrive in there?
What does it feel like in there for you?
Where do you want to be?
How can you/we get you in there?
What will the impact on others be?

Problem Solving Circles

These are sometimes called 'Fish Bowl Circles'. They follow a very clear structure that enables students and staff to support and challenge one another in a very solution focused way to deal with a problem or an issue. How schools incorporate them into their routines will vary, dependent on numbers of staff, the geography of buildings and other factors. This process can also be used with staff and students throughout the year, and not just to support the back to school protocols.

This process can also be used within curriculum time as a way to discuss issues arising from topics, characters, or even learning or behavioural issues that arise in the classroom.

As a staff, at my school (Chris Straker), all staff were part of a circle before school started on a Friday. This was a staff of 100 plus so we were divided into cross-curricular, and mixed hierarchy groups. All staff, myself (Head Teacher) and SLT were included, as well as the caretakers and support staff. This allowed us to review the week, discuss matters that had arisen, celebrate success and explore problems that we needed to address. As an outcome of the sessions a topic would come up that someone needed support to resolve.

A meeting space was open on Wednesday mornings before school for staff to run the process described below. This was a voluntary session and staff attended if it was an issue they were interested in or thought they could support.

This process was also used with staff around issues across the school; and with students around issues they had, or ones that I wanted them to support and challenge me in addressing, possibly around the way things were running in the school.

The process was always the same:

The room is set up with a chair for the person with the situation/problem to sit in. Opposite that chair are two chairs for the 'active'

listeners. Everyone else sits in a circle or horseshoe around the triad.

A facilitator explains that (name) will have up to 5 uninterrupted minutes to tell about the situation/problem and can tell whatever s/he wants, without any questions or interruptions from anyone.

There are then up to 2 minutes for the two 'active' listeners (only) to ask clarifying questions.

The two listeners then have up to 7 minutes to tell (name) what s/he should/has to do to sort the problem out. They have to make very direct and solution focused suggestions for what the person must do. Frequently, because we want to be respectful, we say things like "Did you speak to the other person?" Today, we're going to ask you to say, "Speak to the other person."

If the two listeners 'dry up', members of the outer circle can come forward and suggest ideas (this will be done in an agreed way). Usually a tap on one of the 'active' listeners' shoulders sees someone from the outer ring swap seats and make their suggestion. They then stay there until the time runs out or they are 'tapped' out.

(Name) may not respond, but should sit quietly and take notes of everything that is said.

When time is out (Name) should say two or three things that s/he is going to do. They do not have to justify why they have chosen the actions they have selected. Agree a time line for this and a return to check on what has happened as a result.

This must stay inside the 15 minutes allocated so that it remains focused and participants know it will not be like so many other meetings that meander on and on!

Teachers

The ideas for teachers run parallel to the ones described for the students. We cannot anticipate how far schools have kept in touch with teachers during the period of isolation and the same principles apply here as to why it will be important to rebuild relationships across and within staff teams. All staff will have experienced the shut down in different ways and will need time to readjust to life in the school.

In smaller schools whole staff meetings, run as circles and using the restorative questions, will be easier to manage than in bigger schools. Processing the experiences of the period the school has been closed will allow leadership teams to target support proportionately and in ways that staff need.

The values exercise will provide a context for all of the work taking place in the school and should be used as a litmus test for all the actions decided by the staff group: do they fit within the values we have espoused?

The Relational Window

The WITH box: used to get staff to describe the way they will work to meet the focus the school is going to take.

What will SLT, staff, students and parents be doing?

How will they be behaving in ways that achieve a school/ classroom culture of engagement between all parties for the development of a learning culture?

This can be done with the whole staff group together or with each group working through their own window separately from the others but then synthesising them in a second exercise.

The TO box: clarity about what needs to be done and by whom and when to get the first term underway and to be successful.

The FOR box: what support is needed for individuals and groups? How will this be provided, and by whom? And for how long?

The NOT box: what are the barriers that individuals and groups might face, in the short and medium term? Let us deliberately and explicitly get the staff to describe the behaviours that will be counterproductive to achieving the learning culture described in WITH.

This can be reviewed at appropriate times.

The structure encourages non-linear dialogue and invites all parties to see their own role in relation to the role played by others.

Concluding remarks

All of these activities are designed to focus all members of the school community on the transition to a positive return to school, and all encourage, in a structured way, a wide range of participants to have a voice.

They can each be done as stand-alone activities, and the interconnection of them all as a set of processes that support, and are supported by, the other processes mean that the school builds a repertoire of ways of building relationships at the heart of learning.

This can be carried forward into the rest of the year. The intention is to make Restorative Practice part of a repertoire of practices that students and staff can draw on, transferable to teaching and learning. The threading of Restorative Practice as a language and set of behaviours that sits within the pastoral and curriculum systems of the school and is not 'bolted-on' means that it becomes embedded.

Restorative Practice creates the conditions to promote the development of self-managing behaviours and positive attitudes to learning. Teachers engage disruptive students to help them understand how they are affecting their own and others' learning. Students are encouraged to develop an understanding of social responsibility, and are given the responsibility to make things right. Where a student changes their behaviour in this context, it isn't because of the threat of punishment; it is because they are buying into the relationships they have with other students and teachers. This develops students who can make good choices regardless of whether a teacher, and the accompanying menu of sanctions, is present. These are transferable skills that students can take with them throughout their lives.

Restorative behaviours based on dialogue are already happening in many schools, with great success. It is time to ensure that such practices are explicit and not couched in apology or misconceptions of what Restorative Practice is.

Restorative Practice is not the 'soft' alternative to strict disciplinary regimes. Instead, it emphasises social learning over social compliance, responsibility over conformity and engagement over passivity. It is because Restorative Practice offers an engagement with self and others that it allows schools to develop a culture for learning that is a product of both the students and the staff.

Restorative Practice aims to build up communities through developing strong relationships. Its focus on empathy – understanding the 'other' – challenges the divisive rhetoric we often see elsewhere, where difference is seen as a thing to be feared. Restorative Practice sees communities as inclusive, a series of overlapping, shifting groupings where fragmentation into cliques around sexuality, gender, class, race and religion is reduced. This encourages dialogue that leads to understanding which focuses on solutions rather than barriers. It opens up the space, where necessary, for conflict to be dealt with in positive ways.

Restorative Practice also emphasises the importance of balancing power relationships in any dialogue. It develops skills in individuals and groups that allow them to engage in purposeful and deliberate dialogue about the issues that concern them. It gives them the ability to then go forward and speak authentically for their communities, at a local and national level. In short, it changes the passive nature of the relationship between the individual and the state.

Restorative Practice develops peoples' capacity to tell their own story and reclaim their sense of community. It rejects the paternalistic models of politics and social care – the 'we know what is best for you' approach. Self-management and self-government are important skills that should be explicitly fostered in democratic societies. This means rethinking the roles of government and professional organisations that too often speak for communities.

Finally, Restorative Practice helps to connect the individual to their community, at a local and national level. This allows the individual to understand the patterns of society and therefore the importance of engagement with it. The challenge for those advocating for Restorative Practice is to place it in the centre of the debate around developing communities and developing democratic involvement; not just position it as a reactive process or an adjunct to the criminal justice system.

Restorative Practice has a role to play in developing individual and community voice and enabling self-regulating, consciously empathetic action within the democratic process. Now we need to get back out there and keep making the case.

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Restorative Thinking is offering zoom and face to face training and coaching sessions to support schools during their phased return. Please get in touch if you'd like to learn more.

