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Expanding the use of Restorative Practices in Schools in Northern Ireland. Towards an 'All School' Model

Brian Payne, Graeme Young & Jonathan Hobson

Abstract

As in many other countries around the world in recent years, the knowledge of restorative practices in schools has grown in Northern Ireland, where there are growing calls from within the education sector to further embed restorative approaches in teaching practice and to include the knowledge of these approaches in teacher training. Whilst restorative practises are recognised as a proven structured approach for conflict resolution and the repairing of harm involving children and young people, its use in school settings remains intermittent in Northern Ireland, however an international evidence base increasingly identifies a range of positive outcomes and successes where restorative approaches have been embraced.

In Northern Ireland much of the growth in such practices to date has occurred within the integrated education sector, where an underlying compatibility between the transformative values and goals of integrated education and the approaches embraced by restorative practices has helped to bring about a greater embracing of restorative practices in some schools. We argue in this paper that, far from being restricted to a few areas, the challenges posed within integrated education are universal to all schools in Northern Ireland and consequently that an 'All School' restorative approach would help to address the broad spectrum of factors that can lead to relationship breakdown and the perpetuation of harm.

The paper considers several important developments that may lead to greater momentum for the growth of restorative practices across all schools in Northern Ireland, including the passing of the Integrated Education Bill (2022), the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, and the publication of the ground-breaking Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022-2027) that also incorporates proposals for a Centre of Restorative Excellence to support all restorative practice. We argue that each of these developments can provide real opportunities for mainstreaming restorative practises across all schools in Northern Ireland and help schools to forge stronger relationships with local communities and the broader institutions of society outside the school gates.

Key Words: Restorative Practice; Schools; human development; integrated education; bullying; Punishment.

Introduction

Restorative justice and its associated practices have become an important tool for conflict resolution within criminal justice and other formalised settings across many countries. This is particularly the case across the European Union, where there is an increasing focus on the integration of Restorative Justice into member states' policy, including mention of restorative justice in the EU's 2012 Victims' Rights Directive (Directive 2012/29/EU); the 2018 Council of Europe recommendation CM/Rec(2018) encouraging the 'development and use restorative justice with respect to their criminal justice systems'(Council of Europe, 2019); the 2020-25 EU-wide Strategy on victims' rights recognising Restorative justice as having a role in empowering victims of crime; and the 2021 Venice Declaration pushing for a greater role for restorative justice in Criminal Matters. Much of this policy work focuses on the contribution of restorative justice in addressing criminal behaviour in areas such as youth justice, policing, and probation (Rossner and Bruce, 2016; Kirkwood and Hamad 2019; Pali and

Maglione 2021). Restorative justice in its most conventional form normally involves a meeting between a victim and offender, often with support from within a community. The process emphasizes the responsibility and accountability of those implicated in some form of harm to make amends for their actions with a strong focus on providing support to the victims in order to heal the harm done and encourage the reintegration of both key actors back into their communities (Gal and Moyal, 2011).

Increasingly, however, restorative approaches have also been incorporated into education and other settings as an alternative to retributive systems for responding to perceived rule breaking, relationship breakdown and conflict (Song and Swearer, 2016). This will often include broader depictions of restorative 'practice' 'that are focused on relationship breakdown as well as cultural and organisational shifts in approaches to perceived rule breaking and harm (Wearmouth et al. 2007; Teasley 2014). The main premise here is that institutional frameworks such as those seen in schools can bring people together based on shared identities and collective goals, but they can also disenfranchise people to the extent that individuals feel left out and can even come to define themselves in terms of anti-institutional identities (Morrison et al. 2005).

Proponents of restorative practices in schools point to its ability to offer an effective alternative to the use of traditional discipline placing the emphasis on building social capital through collective dialogue to produce more socially cohesive and supportive environments (Morrison et al. 2005). The importance of building and maintaining positive relationships among members of the school community is therefore paramount, encouraging all members to adhere to school rules and norms in order to avoid violating these relationships with broad benefits for the school environment and student outcomes (Riestedenberg, 2012).

These perceived benefits from implementing restorative approaches have led to growth in its use in schools in diverse countries across the world including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, USA, Hong Kong, England and Wales, and across Europe. However, despite the recent popularity of restorative practices in schools, its use is still relatively uncommon in schools in Northern Ireland, with much of the growth occurring within the integrated education sector. The integrated sector in Northern Ireland is viewed as an alternative to the two separate, religiously based education systems that are largely (but not exclusively) composed along the lines of the preferred social and political identities (Catholic/Irish and Protestant/British) of the jurisdiction (McGlynn, 2011). A synergy between the transformative values and goals of integrated education and the dialogue-based accountability approaches that underpin restorative practices may have helped to bring about a greater embracing of restorative approaches in integrated schools as well as associated forms of cultural change in such school settings.

in large part driven by the success of restorative approaches in the integrated education sector, the growing international evidence base, and policy movements in Northern Ireland, interest in the use of restorative practice across all schools in Northern Ireland has grown. Most recently there has been a series of conversations between teachers, restorative practice advocates, academics, and policy makers on the potential for expanding the use of restorative practice in the school setting. These include a major Knowledge exchange at Ulster University (see. Hobson et al, 2022); two major public webinars facilitated by Restorative Practices Forum NI's Education Sub-Group which together attracted over a hundred and fifty participants; and most recently, an evidence gathering seminar on the use of restorative practice in education, health and social care hosted at Ulster University on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Restorative Justice to support their work on 'Implementing restorative practices in education, health and social care' (APPG, 2022). These public forums identified a series of inter-connected challenges that are universal to all schools in Northern Ireland, with most problems arising from a broad spectrum of factors linked to breakdown in relationships. These include issues such as problems at home, the challenges of moving from school to adulthood, the impact of

power imbalances and barriers to effective communication, as well as the impact of retributive approaches to behaviour management in the school setting. While those present were keen to draw upon their experience to highlight how restorative practices had impacted positively on these issues, it was also frequently acknowledged that any attempts to integrate restorative practice into existing school systems will meet a range of institutional, cultural, and practical difficulties, and without adequate resourcing would risk adding to the already difficult working pressures placed on school staff.

This paper draws on these debates to consider the prospects for expanding the use of restorative practises in schools in Northern Ireland. It begins by considering current evidence for its use, including key indicators of success. It then examines several important developments that may lead to greater momentum for the growth of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland including the passing of the Integrated Education Bill (2022), the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, and the publication of the ground-breaking Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022-2027) which incorporates proposals for a Centre of Restorative Excellence to support all restorative practice. Each of these areas has the potential to provide real opportunities for mainstreaming restorative practises across all schools in Northern Ireland, and in doing so can also help to forge new relationships with communities and the broader institutions of society outside the school gates. To make these changes sustainable, however, schools must receive extensive support and direction .

Restorative Justice in Schools

There is a growing body of research on the use of restorative justice in schools. Some of the most in-depth research to date is centred in Australia and New Zealand where advocates have sought to integrate approaches to restorative practice in schools that build on thousands of years of traditional indigenous practice (Drewery, 2016). The focus here is on maintaining meaningful and just relationships based on respect for tradition, customs and culture and by empowering communities to resolve issues themselves (Dyson et al, 2022). In implementing restorative practice, school communities seek to bring about better outcomes by promoting and recognising the intricate connections between individuals and their communities with a strong emphasis on building good relationships between students, their teachers, schools, and communities rather than the maintenance of hierarchical systems, traditionally based on prescriptive and punitive behaviour management methods (Lodi, et al., 2021).

Across Australia and New Zealand, formal restorative justice initiatives were initially incorporated into the educational system as an effective means for behaviour control and management. The conferencing approach was initially considered to be the most successful method in education settings, however as practice and research developed, a wide range of pro-active and preventative methods were subsequently introduced to respond to difficult behaviours and disruption (Blood, 2005).

In Australia now, the State Governments of New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and Victoria all have dedicated resources for state education institutions. One of the most prominent success stories from this work which also features prominently in broader Australian restorative discourse is that of Fairholme College Toowoomba, Queensland. An independent All-Girls school with approximately 700 students (Restorative Justice for Schools Australia, 2022). Fairholme has been using restorative practices for 15 years; embedded throughout the schools learning culture, it aims to provide an inclusive learning and teaching environment, and to develop the skills of students to collaboratively resolve conflict. Restorative practices at the school have removed the punitive element

to resolving problems, instead, staff and students work together to listen, learn, and grow. As a boarding institution, practices form part of the wider culture in the living and social environment and restorative conversations are led by older students who mediate minor conflicts.

A 2009 Australian study on restorative practices in schools by Suvall (2009) was the largest ever conducted in Australia to date. Initial findings at the time described how School administrators dealing with relationship breakdowns and disciplinary violations through conferences felt safer and more empowered and that conferences themselves were seen as an opportunity to “reinforce school values” and embed them across all conflict resolution processes.

In New Zealand, restorative practices are used more commonly as an instrument in the social development of young people than a tool for behaviour management (Drewery, 2016). According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE, 2014), schools who take a whole-school approach were found to have better outcomes with regards to suspensions and exclusions, and the overall achievement levels of pupils. As of 2017, 174 Schools across the Country were using restorative practices all with positive indicators of success in line with the Positive Behaviours for Life programme (MOE, 2018).

Although the roots of the restorative justice practices adapted in New Zealand are from indigenous culture, there are concerns over the social development, health, and wellbeing of Māori and indigenous populations. Māori students comprise 15% of the school population yet are more than twice likely to be excluded or suspended than those from non-Māori descentance (MOE, 2014). The New Zealand Ministry of Education recognises the need to improve learning outcomes for Māori students and has committed to doing so through its ‘Positive Behaviour for Learning’ programme. This programme has demonstrated a seismic shift in power relations between students and staff, empowering young people in schools to resolve the conflicts that affect the complex interconnected social relations (Drewery, 2016).

In Asia, the Hong Kong Centre for the Restoration of Human Relations, headed by Dr Dennis Wong, has been the prominent driving force behind the implementation of restorative justice in Education and legal systems as well as the work environment. Wong’s research focused particularly on addressing widespread issues with bullying and breaking the cycle of bullying within schools, most of which was seen to stem from the social attitudes towards success and social life. Wong drew on Braithwaite, et al’s (2003) Restorative Whole-School Approach (RWsA) which focuses on overcoming power imbalances that affect social relations, the prevention of bullying, reconciliation of student orientated conflicts, and promoting reintegrative shaming of those implicated in bullying.

Since 2003, the Centre for the Restoration of Human Relations in Hong Kong has trained over 1000 teachers, senior official, social workers, law enforcement personnel and students in restorative practices including conferencing facilitation. Within these cohorts, over 160 of those trained were senior grade students whose role is to facilitate peer conferences with a view to assisting teachers in building a ‘harmonious school life’ (Wong et al, 2009). Baseline statistics obtained after the implementation of the RWsA program in Hong Kong schools showed that approx. 36% of students displayed some level of bullying behaviours prior to the programme; the most common form of bullying was verbal (56%) with physical bullying at 28% and some form of social exclusion at 29% (Wong et al, 2011). Post-program data showed almost half (49%) of students subject to the programme had reduced their bullying behaviours in schools and bullying dropped significantly in the school. For schools who did not use the RWsA, bullying remained consistently high across all categories with more than half (51%) even increasing their bullying behaviours.

In South Korea, the Korean Peacebuilding Institute (KOPI) is an educational organisation that delivers lectures and workshops and provides restorative practice training to enable schools to apply restorative approaches in their teaching and daily practice (Kopi 2016). KOPI works with a number of Elementary, Middle, and High Schools across the country, as well as several major education institutions, including Incheon Early Childhood Educational Promotional centre and Sungkonghoe University. Programmes at the locations include the Restorative discipline workshop, organising a restorative school guide, teacher healing programme and the youth peace programme. Much of the restorative practice and programme development for schools' centres around delivering anti-bullying strategies, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation. The programme is considered a major success, helping to grow the restorative movement in South Korea, working closely with Korean schools to building and develop restorative capabilities both in the classroom, as well as the intersections between conflict and reconciliation throughout both Koreas (Kim and Young Lee, 2009)

In Europe, much of the focus for restorative justice practices has centred around the youth justice and wider criminal justice systems. In Germany for example, the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA), introduced victim-offender mediation primarily as an educational and diversionary tool (Parosanu, 2013), and in response to juvenile conflict. These responses to social and community conflict in the formal youth justice settings have been transferred recently into the educational setting. With the 2009 ratification of the United National Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2006). Inclusive education became a requirement across Germany, primarily centred around supporting students with special educational needs, inclusive education takes a relationship-orientated approach to strengthen social relations in the classroom environment. Recognising the similarities between the social focus of formal restorative justice approaches and conflict resolution approaches in the classroom, many German schools have implemented a continuum of practices from the prevention stage through to direct intervention and have seen a range of success linked to reducing conflict in the school setting, although more research is required to determine its full impact (Weber, Rehder and Vereenoghe, 2021).

In the UK, there is a strong and growing community of practice across England and Wales that is seeing the development and integration of restorative practices in schools (Hopkins, 2002, 2003; Bevington, 2015; Short et al, 2018). This includes a number of sites that have become 'restorative schools' (Procter-Legg, 2022), incorporating various restorative practices across all of their working and teaching practices. For example, in Bristol the restorative approaches in Schools (RAiS) programme, has been working in four schools in the South of the Bristol since 2007. The programme had an ambitious range of objectives including reducing the use of exclusions and unauthorised absences, incidences of anti-social behaviour in school and in the community by school pupils and a reduction in bullying and racial conflicts. Bristol was chosen as the site for the programme as exclusions were particularly high in that region and the Local Authority was the 'worst performing' in England. The four schools themselves were seen as having significant problems with behaviour, attendance and attainment (Skinns, et al. 2009).

A comprehensive research study by Skinns et al (2009) found that the programme was successful in challenging pupil and staff perceptions of the usefulness of traditional mechanisms for punishing pupils. The restorative model was perceived by teachers to be more effective as it could resolve behavioural issues permanently by identifying the causes and respond to them, and students reflected that it meant they did not feel like they were in trouble which was beneficial given the negative effects of labelling. Overall, while data suggested there was not a discernible reduction in fixed term exclusions, there were noticeable benefits for relationships within the school setting with pupils feeling that they were treated in a more reasonable and adult way, were encouraged to face up being in the wrong and have an outlet for their feelings, and teachers reported a calmer, more emotionally

literate school environment. Importantly, Staff and pupils felt that restorative approaches were an effective way of dealing with bullying incidents (Skinns, et al. 2009).

This mirrors other positive UK studies including Hopkins (2015) evaluation of a restorative practices programme in a Secondary School in Monmouth, South Wales which found the scheme had achieved a 93% reduction in exclusions and a dramatic move away from the use of detentions to a new process where pupils are encouraged to engage in an internal process of self-regulation. The study also found that referrals to the Youth Offending Service were down 78% and anti-social behaviour attributable to young people in the town was down by 48% with a marked rise in student attainment and attendance and steep reduction in staff illness and absence due to stress related symptoms (Hopkins 2015). Interestingly, the authors noted that a vital factor in the success of the programme was the adopting of a fully integrated 'all school' restorative culture. This finding was evident throughout the literature reviewed and under-lines work elsewhere that has found that restorative approaches must be embedded across every aspect of the school setting rather than applied as a sticking plaster to a particular problem or as an incremental change inside existing systems (Schiff, 2018; Blood and Thorsborne 2005, Morrison 2005).

The impact of restorative approaches in schools was recognised in a 2010 Department for Education report, in which whole-school restorative approaches were found to be the most effective at preventing bullying (Thompson and Smith, 2011). The success of such approaches has led some local authority teams to establishing dedicated teams or departments to support the integration of these practices into more schools, most notably in Gloucestershire (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022) but also in Oxfordshire (2022).

Case Study: Expanding the use of Restorative Practice in Schools in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is well known internationally for pioneering work in developing restorative practices, most notably in the Youth Justice and Community Restorative Justice sectors which evolved as a direct consequence of Northern Ireland's transition from conflict in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the beginning of the Peace Process (see for example, O'Dwyer and Payne, 2016; Payne and Conway, 2011; Eriksson. 2009; McEvoy and Eriksson, 2007).

In recent times, Northern Ireland has also seen the growth of such practices across a range of areas including prisons, probation, policing, youth work, children's homes and housing (Hobson et al, 2022). Despite its apparent potential, the use of restorative approaches in schools has been less evident. The case study presented here considers the evidence for expanding the use of restorative practice in schools in Northern Ireland, set against some important recent developments: the planned expansion of the integrated school sector, underpinned by new legislation; the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; and the publication of the ground-breaking Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022-2027), including proposals for a Centre of Restorative Excellence. Each is considered in turn.

Lessons from the Integrated School Sector

In 2010, a mapping exercise of restorative work in Northern Ireland found just two integrated schools - Integrated College Dungannon and Lagan College - were consistently using restorative practices (Payne et al., 2010). While more up to date information is limited, restorative practices is now incorporated at several more educational institutions in Northern Ireland including most notably in Hazelwood Integrated College, Belfast; Priory Integrated College, Holywood; and Integrated College, Glengormally; and outside of the integrated sector, in St Malachy's High School. Moreover, a number

of schools have staff who are trained in restorative practices and deploy this learning in their teaching and pastoral work.

While the integrated sector is not the only part of the education sector using restorative practice, it has been an important driver for restorative work within schools more broadly. Integrated education essentially involves mixed (Catholic and Protestant) schools in Northern Ireland, with an overarching goal to foster a fuller understanding of both the dominant traditions and to over-come negative stereotypes in a jurisdiction which continues to experience high levels of division and segregation in many communities long after the onset of peace:

‘By educating children from both religious communities together and encouraging them to understand their historical and religious differences, both parents and educators hope that children educated within a religiously integrated setting will feel less threatened by the cultures and traditions of the other community, and be more likely to respect them, as well as form enduring cross-community relations.’ (Hayes et al 2007, p454).

The recent passing of the Integrated Education Act (2022) in Northern Ireland’s Assembly enshrines in law measures intended to further encourage, facilitate, and support the development of Integrated Education. Currently, just under 70 of Northern Ireland’s 1091 schools are integrated but with the passing of the new legislation this is expected to grow. The legislation attracted criticism from some political parties and school leaders from the non-integrated sectors during its Bill stage claiming it will elevate integrated education above other parts of the school sector while proponents have argued that such legislation is needed to provide a level playing field for integrated education so it can be offered as an option to a greater number of children.

In practice, integrated schools share many of the principles and goals of other schools but also have a set of enhanced challenges and objectives stemming from the needs of their cohort that, we argue, are highly compatible with the values and goals of the restorative justice movement. For example, as stated in the new legislation, integrated schools must be supported in promoting an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and beliefs, as well as instilling respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion. This matches closely with the approach taken in restorative schools in England and Wales, which Procter-Legg (2022, p3) describes as ‘the need to understand ‘affects’ ... and emotions; articulation of an individual’s needs; the aspiration to resolve conflict; and ownership of behaviour.’

There was, however, no mention of restorative practices in the 2022 Integrated Education Bill or subsequent legislation, despite the widespread use of such practices already by integrated schools and its apparent compatibility with many of the objectives put forward in the Bill. However, the extent to which some integrated schools have attempted to instil a restorative culture across every aspect of the school in order to respond to challenges and promote an ethos of fairness, cohesion and community spirit, suggests that while there is not a legislative requirement to incorporate restorative practices into the inter-workings of integrated schools, it is likely that restorative practice will play a prominent part in terms of identifying current good practice and in seeking to replicate restorative approaches as the integrated sector grows.

Restorative Practice as a response to Bullying

A potentially more important development for restorative practice in schools in Northern Ireland has been the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which came into effect for schools on 1st September 2021. Despite greater awareness of its impacts, exposure to bullying still comprises a significant threat to children and adolescents, especially in school settings (Kasen, et al, 2004). This is particularly important, as research into the impacts of

bullying both for those impacted and those accused shows an increased risk of mental health and/or disciplinary problems that could continue into adulthood (Foody et al, 2018). In its supporting evidence for the new legislation, the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill (2015) quoted research that found 39% of Year 6 pupils and 29% of Year 9 pupils in Northern Ireland had reported being bullied in the last two months. It also quoted a review by the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF, 2013) that highlighted wide variation in policy and practice in addressing bullying in schools and found that existing legislation and guidance was inadequate.

Anti-bullying policies in school in Northern Ireland are complex, and subject to a range of different legislative guidelines, policy frameworks and international instruments (see for example, Purdy 2016; Purdy and Smith, 2016). The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 is made up of three main clauses designed to remedy the issues raised above: the introduction of a common definition of bullying; the placing of a legislative Duty for School Board of Governors to secure measures to prevent bullying; and introduces a duty to keep a record of incidents of bullying. This built on previous legislation, for example, Article 19 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 which amended Article 3 of the Education (NI) Order 1998 requiring schools for the first time to address bullying specifically within their policies, either as part of their existing discipline policy or as a stand-alone anti-bullying policy.

While restorative practice is not specifically mentioned in the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, it does place an enhanced requirement for schools to have in place an effective, preventative, responsive and restorative anti-bullying ethos that are instilled throughout the whole school. This is also grounded in policy in the Northern Ireland Education Authorities' Anti-Bullying Policy Framework (2001), updated to include implications arising from Addressing Bullying In Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, as well as subsequent changes to policy incorporated in the 'Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework' ETI (2017) and 'Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools, A Guide for Schools' DE (2017).

The Education Authority's Anti-Bullying Policy Framework puts forward comprehensive guidelines for schools in drafting their anti-bullying policy to ensure it is integral to their pastoral care and child protection policies. Importantly, restorative practices are mentioned specifically in three places. On P3, relating to reduction/removal of behavioural barriers to learning schools are required to 'implement a post-incident debriefing process to help pupils develop restorative attitudes and learn from experience'; on p4, when describing the creation and maintenance of a listening and telling culture schools are required to 'resolve difficulties in restorative ways to prevent recurring bullying behaviour and meet the needs of all parties'; and finally, on page 7, when discussing ways of working with targeted pupils to try to help them change their 'unacceptable behaviour' schools should facilitate 'ongoing dialogue to ensure that the strategies identified and agreed would, when implemented, result for example in: greater resilience; development of new coping skills & the promotion of positive restorative relationships'.

When placed in conjunction with the variety of other guiding principles and measures for supporting both those subject to and involved in bullying, the measures put forward in the EA Anti-Bullying Policy Framework present a compelling case for empowering and supporting schools to fully integrate restorative practice across all aspects of the school environment.

Placing schools at the centre of the restorative movement

The third development that can support greater use of restorative practice in schools is the advent of a new Adult Restorative Justice Strategy (2022-27) for Northern Ireland, that, to quote the then Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland Naomi Long in her Foreword to the strategy document, will:

'...better meet the needs of victims of crime and to provide redress for the harm caused to them, as well as to find an effective alternative to punitive responses and establish positive ways of dealing with children, young people and adults when incidents occur.'
(ARJS, 2022 p2)

The strategy puts forward ambitious plans to ensure restorative justice becomes embedded within the criminal justice and importantly in the work of its partner organisations underpinned by a vision that prioritises early intervention, rehabilitation and resettlement as well as incorporating restorative justice in court ordered community and custodial sentencing (Higgins, 2022). Included are plans for a ground-breaking Centre of Restorative Excellence (CORE) which has the potential to transform the relationship between the state and a broad spectrum of organisations working in the justice and related community and voluntary sectors. Such a Centre would make space and resources available for services working from both bottom-up and top-down approaches to come together and in doing so, overcome some of the challenges they have faced in developing restorative services and linking effectively to the Criminal Justice System and its other partners in Government (Hobson et al, 2022).

Although the work towards a CORE is ongoing, it represents significant buy-in from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland. One of the leading architects of the service, who participated in a Knowledge Exchange workshop on developing restorative services described how we have 'an opportunity to make this a centre that all can learn from, that promotes partnership working, and that provides accreditation and ongoing monitoring of standards' (Hobson et al, 2019, p18).

While the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy does not specifically involve schools in its planning or proposed deployment, in large part because the strategy relates to those resources which are under the remit of the Department of Justice, there is recognition that restorative practices involving early intervention and prevention is relevant to the wider intentions of the strategy. The strategy document notes that a restorative continuum will allow informal engagement where it is deemed appropriate (ARJS, 2022), which would potentially include school involvement as part of an early intervention model of practice. This is important in terms of the role that schools might take in any planned CORE, considering the importance that many of the key criminal justice agencies and organisations who might be involved in the CORE place in their relationship with the schools that reside at the centre of their communities, and who enjoy an increasingly important role in supporting interventions with young people. Similarly, there is an increasing realisation of the important role that schools play in preventing young people from entering the school to prison pipeline (Schiff, 2018). It therefore seems paramount that an Adult Centre of Restorative Excellence must also involve some form of work with schools, for instance directly through Education Authority representation in the CORE, and through enhanced links with the criminal justice agencies and organisations operating in that physical and policy space.

Conclusion

This article has reflected on the prospects for expanding the use of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland. As the international case studies highlight, there is well-evidenced potential benefits in the use of restorative approaches in school and educational settings. In our considerations of recent policy developments in Northern Ireland shows, there is a clear narrative emerging, which points to the untapped potential that can be realised when policy makers, criminal justice agencies, and school teams embrace integrated restorative approaches. This includes producing more resilient and responsive environments for responding to the many challenges faced inside and outside the school gates, and in bringing about highly positive effects for student and staff outcomes. Furthermore, it is clear that in many cases in Northern Ireland, and particularly across integrated education, restorative

practices fit closely with existing approaches in many schools that already emphasise an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding. From such a perspective, schools are central to the idea of restorative justice as a social movement: they provide an opportunity for young people to become empowered, to develop healthy tools for managing conflict and difference. Furthermore, such skills can contribute to supporting the move from childhood to adulthood, providing a set of values and attributes that contribute to continued growth and produce benefits for the communities in which people live and work.

Nevertheless, a number of issues remain to be overcome. While delegates in public forums have spoken passionately about their belief in the effectiveness of restorative practices and their potential for the future, they also point to a continued difficulties that impact on the development of such practices. Most of these revolve around a lack of support and adequate resourcing, which highlight how, for restorative practice to grow from the bottom up, it must be supported and encouraged by leadership from the top. This includes clear support in policy and legislation, including some of the recent policy from the Department of Education and wider Government. While there is a strong desire amongst many schools to train teachers and school staff in restorative practices, as well as a wealth of training expertise to draw upon, they lack the required funding. It was also frequently acknowledged that, without adequate resourcing to prevent adding to the already difficult working pressures placed on school staff, restorative practices are at risk of being seen as a burden on staff rather than an opportunity to improve the school environment for all.

To be effective, restorative practice in schools will require the support and involvement of all, whether that be policy makers, pupils, staff (including non-teaching staff), management, and the wider school community, in both understanding what acting restoratively means, and in instilling an effective restorative culture within an 'all school' approach. If this can be achieved, there is no reason why Northern Ireland cannot find the levels of success and positive impacts in restorative schooling that are enjoyed in many other countries.

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