

Working Together Towards a Restorative Society: Applying Theory, Demonstrating Evidence and Sharing the Practice

Conference, Gresham Hotel, Dublin, 20 March 2013

Overview by Dr Kieran O'Dwyer

Introduction

The purpose of the conference was to showcase best practice in community-based responses to conflict. It was aimed at frontline workers, volunteers and community activists engaged in family support, community development and education. Its objectives were to offer practical tips and resources in relation to community-based restorative practice, to show innovative and effective models and to highlight the role of restorative practice as a prevention and early intervention tool. It brought together presenters from a variety of backgrounds in which restorative practices are employed in preventing and responding to conflict, including schools, youth work, criminal justice and communities. The programme comprised four plenary sessions as well as six parallel workshops, with most of the latter run both in the morning and afternoon. Demand for places at the conference exceeded capacity and the engagement in workshops and plenary sessions was active and enthusiastic.

The conference was funded and organised by the Tallaght-based Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) which, among other things, provides training in and support for Restorative Practice in the community in Tallaght West. It was supported by the All-Ireland Restorative Practice Strategic Forum, which promotes and supports the use of restorative approaches spanning all sectors of the community through the development of strategies and capacity.

Opening Remarks

Marian Quinn, CDI's CEO, welcomed presenters and participants. She highlighted that Restorative Practice was not just a response to crime, which was its initial focus, but was also an important measure for preventing crime and giving people a greater sense of safety and belonging in their communities.

The Ombudsman for Children, Emily Logan, formally opened the conference. In her address she said that Restorative Practice offered an important and effective way to engage with children and young people and give them a voice, a process which is at the heart of her Office. She said that as a society we needed to move from doing things to or for children, with adults deciding what was best for them, to doing things with children and involving them as active participants in finding solutions to problems. She noted that schools, communities, youth services and so many other agencies were now using this approach as a central way in which they worked with young people, in order to manage conflict effectively, encourage individuals to take responsibility and support a focus on solutions rather than blame. She concluded by commending all those committed to the Restorative Practice approach.

Plenary sessions

In the first plenary session, in an address on resistance and renewal, Steen Sogaard, Denmark, spoke about recognising and overcoming resistance to change, and maximising opportunities for collaboration. He spoke in particular about his involvement in the “balanced city approach” in Denmark, a priority purpose of which was to develop new methods of work, collaboration and development in deprived areas. The task was not easy because of a resistance to change. People did not appreciate being told what to do and it was a natural reaction to feel personally criticised when one’s working methods were questioned. It was important to develop common ownership and recognise the validity of each person’s voice. The focus in such interaction was often on areas of disagreement, which were usually a minor element of the total picture, rather than areas of agreement, which were plentiful. He employed methods of Appreciative Inquiry, an organisational development method which focuses on successes and strengths, and Asset-Based Community Development which in a similar vein investigates, describes and mobilises assets in a community, an organisation, a family or an Individual. His experience was that if you appreciated individuals and organisations as people and bodies that bring assets, they felt valuable and were much more likely to get involved. The success of his project depended on involvement and training of local champions (“culture carriers”) and relevant public servants, creation of active networks developing together, and engagement with and involvement of people who felt excluded. He concluded with ten key ideas for optimising collaboration: establishing relations, keeping an open agenda, focusing on

areas of agreement, ensuring everybody had a voice, real (not token) involvement, drawing Asset Maps, starting with what you could do together and where you were successful, developing together, being open-minded and being ready to give up responsibility.

Sheila Connolly and Elaine O'Connor, participants and parents on a three-year Partners in Education programme, Dún Laoghaire Home School Liaison Cluster and Dún Laoghaire VEC, presented on their experience of learning about Restorative Practices and showed a DVD made as part of their programme, which highlights the use of Restorative Practices in community groups. They spoke of their aspirations for sharing knowledge, skills and experiences with groups throughout the Dun Laoghaire borough and beyond.

In the afternoon plenary session, Tim Chapman and Hugh Campbell, University of Ulster, spoke on using Restorative Practices to develop safer and more just communities. Tim described restorative justice as a process where those most affected by an injustice engage with each other to restore what has been lost, damaged and violated by the harm that has resulted from the injustice. Restorative practices were the methods, techniques and skills required to participate in and to facilitate restorative justice. The focus too often was on treating an individual offender as a “bad apple” and responding with punishment, risk management or therapy. The focus needed to be on the “barrel” (family, community, society) and the “barrel maker” (political system, the economy) too. We needed to see community differently and promote good community relations, recognise interdependence, ensure equity and embrace (not just tolerate) diversity. The roots of a restorative society lay in establishing a culture of respect, equity and solidarity, building social cohesion in a diverse and inclusive society, and implementing non-violent responses to harmful conflict. Families, schools and communities developed their ability to nurture, protect and socialise members through restorative practices. Hugh described the University’s support in training local people in restorative practices, through enabling community organisations to design and deliver their own training and through enrolling local people from working class areas on accredited university courses. Classrooms were places of welcome and hospitality but also of challenge and being stretched. Individuals’ experiences were heard and valued but it had to be recognised that others’ stories were also valid and none were the complete truth. Emphasis was put on developing empathy – the ability to listen to and understand others’ perspectives.

Restorative practice was a proven community development approach which builds structures, communication and relationships within a community to help tackle problems with crime and anti-social behaviour and also to help prevent problems before they occur. People living in areas with crime problems needed to become empowered and take responsibility and that people closest to the problems needed to have greater regard for their own capacity to address and overcome difficulties.

The final plenary session heard from Fiona Temple, School Principal of Mulroy College in Milford, County Donegal who has strived to incorporate Restorative Practice into work in three schools and the VEC in the North West. She described how this approach had informed her own teaching, improved the teaching and learning in her classrooms, and improved relationships between staff and students and within these groupings. She recounted the challenges along the journey of embedding this approach through the entire school community and spoke of how Donegal VEC embraced the approach through various training and RP projects. She described how she used RP in all areas of conflict management and how it informed all levels of communication in her school. RP in schools flowed from a firm belief that teaching was more than transferring information from books into young people's brains. Education was not just about academic achievement and emotional intelligence was just as important as getting through exams. It was necessary to teach young people how to manage emotions such as anger and to manage situations where they got into conflict with peers, parents or teachers. The big picture was equipping them for life after they left school. She said that young people tended to buy into the restorative process quite naturally and they saw circles as a forum where they could feel safe to talk and not feel judged. It was more challenging for teachers to adjust and, for example, to communicate honestly and openly and accept a relationship not based on their formal position of authority.

Workshops

The first of the six interactive and participative workshops focused on Restorative Practice in a youth work setting. Michelle Costello, Linda Leavy and John Madigan (Tallaght Youth Service, Foróige Youth Workers and RP Trainers) provided practical examples of applying RP with both individual young people and youth groups. Key focuses were on what helps or hinders building positive relationships and particular challenges in working with young people. After an initial presentation on restorative practice and the

concept of a continuum of such practice, practical learning exercises included a focus on affective statements and defective questions and a role-play demonstration of a restorative conference. Discussion focused, among other things, on a harmed person sharing feelings with a wrongdoer about what has been done, on what happens if no resolution is reached (said to be unlikely with fair procedure and adequate preparation but recognising that solutions will not always satisfy everyone), the application of RP principles in participants' current roles, the importance of application of RP language and principles in informal interventions (e.g. in the corridor), the applicability of RP in everyday life and at home, the need to avoid "why" questions and the notion of a mini-conference as a useful intervention.

The second workshop featured Claire Casey, Community Engagement Coordinator, CDI and Sharone Samuels, Community Activist and Restorative Practice Trainer. They considered what it takes to become and remain a restorative community, drawing on the experience in Tallaght West to date. CDI implemented a Restorative Practice Programme as part of its Community Safety Initiative which included training for almost 700 people working and living in Tallaght West, training for almost 100 young people, development of a cohort of locally-based RP Trainers (16 to date) and establishment and support of a number of networks of RP practitioners in order to enable reflective learning and continuing development of restorative activities. An independent evaluation found that it had been successful in improving people's ability to handle conflict, reducing conflict occurring, increasing collaboration between agencies, improving relationships between service providers and service users, between work colleagues and between family members. It also supported people to become more willing to report crime and anti-social behaviour. Things that worked well included the establishment of an interagency management committee, alignment with a Garda pilot programme, the training of local trainers and regular meetings of trainers. Learning points concerned the need for greater flexibility regarding training and commitment to time off work, the difficulty in achieving target numbers for training courses, and the need for a full time coordinator. The workshop also featured the introduction of RP in St Mark's Community College, Tallaght, with a focus on steps taken, challenges faced and factors which helped. RP was now well established there, a fact that was given visual recognition by the award of a flag. Use of RP was found to be time-saving once it was embedded and there was much positive anecdotal evidence from students. Success factors included commitment by the school principal, the involvement of two teachers who were undertaking a Master in Education

degree and whose thesis drew on RP and the payment for substitute teachers to facilitate training. RP was described as a way of working with people more effectively, rebuilding relationships and solving problems: most people were already doing most or all of it, but RP provided a framework to do it consistently and consciously and to move from doing it from some of the time to more of the time to most of the time.

In Workshop 3, Steen Sogaard, focused in greater detail and more interactively than in the plenary session, on overcoming resistance, tools for collaboration and getting the local community involved.

Workshop 4, led by Derrick Wilson, University of Ulster focused on values that would underpin a restorative society. He described a broad range of areas where restorative approaches needed to be embedded, including criminal justice, adult and family conference approaches, healthcare, public authorities, schools, youth work and community development, non-governmental agencies, trade unions, faith organisations and broader civil society. He highlighted process values such as respect, individual dignity, inclusion, responsibility, humility, mutual care, reparation and non-domination, as well as individual values such as respect, honesty, compassion, open-mindedness and patience. He spoke of the need to restore strength and vitality to civil society and politics and extend the reach of restorative practices in daily life, by for example, rituals of acknowledgement, political and civic meetings, opening up societal silences, civic forums and public meetings. It was also necessary to respond restoratively to harm done through the criminal justice system (through the likes of restorative conferencing, diversion and victim offender mediation) and to promote relational and organisational cultures so that the experience of being harmed was less likely (through the likes of peer mediation, whole organisation practices, public organisation/citizen restorative working practices, whole school approaches, year/class meetings and circle time). He drew attention in particular to the restorative principles of equity and diversity and the value of interdependence. Participants in the workshop broke into groups to identify barriers and helpful factors in establishing restorative practices. Barriers identified included lack of awareness and understanding, resistance/lack of acceptance, time consuming, limits on time for training, inadequate funding, adversarial culture, perception that it is just another fad and lack of buy-in from management. Helpful factors included community support, broad involvement, public relations,

networking, acceptance and belief, the existence of Garda projects, facilitator skills, support for those trained and general ownership.

In workshop 5, young people from Dublin's Northside Partnership's Young Community Leaders Project (Shannon Baker, Mairead Doran, Christopher McDonnell and Stephen Turner) shared their experiences to date, including examples of how they were currently using Restorative Practice in their work with younger children and youth groups. It was pointed out that over 30 young community leaders had been trained in Restorative Practices in the Partnership area and Restorative Practices were used to problem-solve and resolve conflicts within families, in youth clubs, schools, after school clubs and political focus groups, with everyone having a say in the solution. They demonstrated through participant involvement the use of restorative practices to come up quickly, effectively and democratically with ideas to deal with a variety of ad hoc topics.

The final workshop featured Margaret McGarrigle, Restorative Practice Trainer and Fiona Temple, Principal, Mulroy College. The facilitators shared learning and tools for introducing and embedding Restorative Practices in school communities. As with workshop 3, this provided an opportunity for a plenary speaker to engage more interactively with participants. Margaret first described restorative practice, adding that RP was a philosophy that ought to guide the way we acted in all our dealings. She described a continuum of restorative responses ranging from formal conferences through restorative circles, classroom circles and mini conferences to general use of affective questions and statements, restorative 'chats', smaller informal conferences and proactive circles. Consistent and widespread use of restorative language, a restorative ethos and a welcoming environment were important in this context. She also presented a model of a restorative school, with changing emphasis on type of restorative approach at different stages of building positive relationships in the whole school community, maintaining relationships when problems and conflict occurred and repairing relationships when harm was caused. She proposed a restorative practice checklist, asking if

- the practice was respectful, fair, explicit, supportive, constructively and positively challenging and inclusive;
- it focused on building relationships by establishing trust with and between people, developing empathy, insight and learning and repairing any harm that may have been done; and

- it promoted responsibility, accountability and likelihood of positive behavioural change and reintegration.

Fiona spoke about implementation. Leadership was needed to challenge existing processes, inspire a vision, enable others to act, model the way and encourage the heart. It was necessary to capture hearts and minds, develop a shared vision, develop effective practice, develop a whole-school approach and ensure professional relationships. The stages of implementation comprised an opening information session, a decision of all school staff to proceed, development by the school of an explicit plan for implementation (led by a working group), a training session for all staff within the first year to demonstrate skills, development of skills in conferencing and circles on an incremental basis, creating a visibility of restorative practices in the school (posters, language, newsletters, etc.), a constant review of progress, skills developed and shared within the school community to achieve sustainability, a review of the school code of behaviour and other policies in the light of a restorative school practice, and co-ordination with restorative approaches in the wider community. Essential restorative skills included notably appropriate body language, being non-judgemental, emotional articulacy, listening with empathy, listening for feelings and needs, reviewing and modelling good practice, restorative enquiry, conflict management and restorative conversations. Discussion points included the vital role of school principals and the need for their support; schools starting often with formal conferencing but moving to less formal approaches on a broader, more regular scale; the need for school culture to change to be more welcoming in terms of tone/language/ethos, and the importance of training and practice to demonstrate benefits for staff and students alike.

Conclusions

The conference could be said to have largely achieved its objectives. It provided practical tips and resources from those who had already accumulated considerable experience in restorative practice, in its introduction, implementation and bedding down. It showcased innovative and effective models and furnished ample evidence of the effectiveness of restorative practice as a prevention and early intervention tool across a range of diverse areas. Participants heard personal stories of journeys into restorative practice and testimonies of how lives were enriched by embracing its philosophy and applying simple yet fundamental principles. People's understanding of restorative practice was deepened, regardless of their prior level of exposure.

A striking feature was the applicability of restorative concepts and practices across diverse areas, including parenting, schools, community development, neighbourhood relations, youth work and criminal justice. Restorative practice was shown to be effective in such settings and to have potential for further growth in all areas. The conference highlighted too the potential for wider positive societal change by embracing restorative practice in everyday life and in social, cultural, political and economic interactions. Restorative practice was seen as a way of empowering communities to deal with their own problems and conflicts through healing, non-violent means. A common theme was the need for us to recognise the validity of each other's story and the need for each voice to be heard and respected: successful collaboration depended on it.

Interdependence and relationships were also common themes. Restorative practice sought to protect and strengthen relationships to prevent conflict and, where conflict occurred, to repair relationships, while ensuring accountability and making good the harm caused.

It was made clear that a variety of models of restorative practice exists from which the most appropriate can be selected to suit different circumstances at different times. Models ranged from formal conferences to informal restorative conversations, with the more formal interventions typically reserved for more serious cases and used less frequently. The more informal models were generally apposite and effective for everyday encounters. Availability of and experience in the full spectrum of intervention types was recommended. Implementation of restorative practice was not about selecting a single model and sticking with it in all situations.

The adoption of a restorative approach is facilitated by the ease with which a simple set of skills can be learned and applied. The essentials can be captured in a few common-sense ideas and questions which are then typically developed through appreciation of fundamental values and training in the use of restorative techniques and language. It was encouraging that young people were reported as buying into and "getting" the restorative concept very readily. The skills involved were valuable life skills, applicable in all aspects of life. Ultimately, the success of restorative practice in all settings relies on its adherence to its underlying philosophy, principles and value, including mutual respect, inclusiveness and responsibility.

The conference also provided insights into how restorative practices can be introduced in organisational or community settings. Speakers stressed a number of critical success factors: leaders/local champions (“culture carriers”) to inspire, provide vision and drive the initiative; the establishment of networks across organisations to support and shape implementation in their areas; genuine not token involvement of all parties; application of restorative principles in the implementation process itself; a focus on positives, strengths and successes; management buy-in; and provision of training, confidence-building and on-going support. Resistance could be expected since long-standing working methods, authority relationships and organisational structures were being challenged but experience showed how resistance could be overcome through demonstration, involvement, recognition, confidence-building, open-mindedness, planning and patience.

A key message was that despite resistance to widespread adoption of restorative practice, we could embrace it effectively and successfully in our own daily practice, whatever our role. The palpable energy and interest among conference participants would suggest optimism for the future use and spread of restorative practice.