



FORUM

Restorative Practices at Integrated College Dungannon, Northern Ireland, a High School for Protestant and Catholic Students

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

During the 1980s and '90s in Northern Ireland, a number of integrated schools were established that students from both Protestant and Roman Catholic families could attend together. The "integrated education" movement was a response to what are known as "The Troubles," the continuing conflicts, frequently violent, between British rule and Irish nationalists, and to a school system segregated along religious lines.

Integrated College Dungannon (ICD), established in 1995, is one of 19 integrated secondary schools in the country. The school has recently embarked on a journey to integrate restorative practices throughout the school culture.

Claire Venon, vice principal of ICD, said, "Three years ago our principal Andrew Sleeth and I went to a talk for multidisciplinary agencies who work with young people. Terry O'Connell was flown over, he did this training, and after an hour or two a light came on in our heads. We said, 'This is amazing stuff.' It all just seemed to make sense."

The two were so inspired by what they heard they decided to try it out for themselves. Said Venon: "As the head of pastoral care and behavior management, I set up some restorative meetings on the basis of the little that we had learned. They were very successful. Kids and parents came out of meetings thanking us for talking to them. Kids were coming up with their own sanctions, and a lot of them were tougher than anything we'd impose. The children liked the logic of the process and thought it was fair. Even when they're in the wrong, they get to tell

their side of the story. We thought: we definitely have to do something."

ICD has a committee of teachers and administrators called "The Dissemination of Good Practice Team," which takes on a new initiative each year. For the '07-'08 school year they decided to begin implementing restorative practices (RP). The committee got funding to invite Terry O'Connell, a former police officer and director of Real Justice Australia, who has been a pioneer of



Terry O'Connell talks with students about restorative practices.

restorative justice and restorative practices, to come back to Northern Ireland for a four-day training.

Said O'Connell: "I basically worked with all of the staff. I worked with every student. I worked with the leadership group and administration. I worked with the various year coordinators and students. And then we ran a workshop for parents. Meeting with everyone makes a big impact, and it allows for an integrated approach tailored to a particular school community."

O'Connell added, "The idea of sharing RP in an explicit way, with all the stakeholders, introduces a new system of accountability built around an expectation of how everyone can be treated in a fair and respectful way. The question came up, 'How does this help

us, given the long system of community and political turmoil?' My response was it provides an opportunity to create new experiences for students and for new stories to be told."

Les Davey, chief executive of IIRP UK, accompanied O'Connell during the four days of training. He observed: "There is a very nice feel to the school. They are really trying to harness RP now and push it across in every area."

ICD has made a number of strides to incorporate RP. Teachers have been encouraged to use RP whenever possible in their classes and around the school. Training resources have been made available. Every teacher has a phone-call script posted on his or her desk that provides a framework for phone calls with parents, based on restorative practices. The script includes useful questions to diffuse a situation if a parent is upset, such as: "What happened?" "Who has been harmed or hurt?" and "What can be done to make things right?" The framework has helped parents feel less defensive and aggressive. Teachers can now relate to parents in a way that lets everyone work together.

The above questions echo the scripted questions used in a restorative conference, a structured meeting between "offenders," "victims" and both parties' family and friends in which they deal with the consequences of crime or wrongdoing and decide how best to repair the harm.

THE RESTORATIVE QUESTIONS ARE:
For "offenders":
 • "What happened?"

FORUM

- “What were you thinking about at the time?”
- “What have you thought about since the incident?”
- “Who do you think has been affected by your actions?”
- “How have they been affected?”

For “victims”:

- “What was your reaction at the time of the incident?”
- “How do you feel about what happened?”
- “What has been the hardest thing for you?”
- “How did your family and friends react when they heard about the incident?”

The restorative questions are also used in more informal interactions to help students tell their stories about incidents that happen, express their feelings and arrive at solutions to problems. These questions are posted on signs in classrooms and at five public locations around the school, including where parents can see them at parking and drop-off points. A Restorative Justice Room has been set up for teachers to conduct meetings, as well.

Additionally, the school produced a video of students performing dramatized versions of restorative meetings, for use in informative assemblies. In the coming year, all students will have some class work involving the ideas of RP. And a volunteer team of 12 sixth formers (seniors in the American system) has been trained to help resolve conflicts among the student body on the playground using RP.

James McCoy is head of the English department and a member of the Good Practice Team. “I’ve used RP quite a bit,” said McCoy. “I’m a form tutor for the year 10 class, aged 13- to 14-year-olds. As form tutor, you are the first port of call. A number of times I’ve used restor-

ative practices to resolve problems with a student in my class. I was certainly quite cynical about it to begin with. I thought, ‘It’s namby-pamby talk’ and that there wasn’t a great deal of difference between what we were doing and what Terry was suggesting. Now that we’ve been through it, I see it’s really quite powerful.”

McCoy mentioned an incident where he got a call from a parent who was concerned that her child was being pushed by an older boy while getting on the bus after school. He fell to the ground once and was being continually victimized. McCoy told the parent he’d use a restorative circle to try and resolve the conflict if she’d like. He spoke to each of the boys and then asked if they’d be willing to come to a meeting in his room. They agreed, and during the session it came out that the older boy, who was only “having a laugh,” didn’t realize the effect this was having on the younger boy, who was so shaken by the abuse that he was taking days off from school.

Said McCoy, “I find [RP] is a really good way of diffusing a situation that could potentially blow up in your face.” For example, he said that when parents phone they can be irate. Now, he said, he focuses on: “the restorative approach—what’s happened, who has been harmed or hurt, and what we need to do to make things right. I don’t argue. When people realize you value their child and want what’s best for them, they are less defensive and less aggressive.”

McCoy warns against thinking RP is a quick fix or a panacea. “Teachers had the impression one meeting would be enough, and if it didn’t work, they thought it was a pile of nonsense. We have to reassure staff: One meeting may not be enough.” He added, “There’s the whole issue of time, ‘Where do I find it?’ A lot of staff think they don’t have time, but you don’t always need a lot of time. You can speak to someone in a restor-

ative manner and have a good effect. It doesn’t have to be a massive meeting.”

At the end of the first year of implementation, a survey of teachers and students helped measure the response to RP. About a third of students reported that they had participated in some form of restorative process or meeting. The feedback from staff was mixed. Many had really tried to apply the ideas and liked it, but some were still afraid or resistant. The Good Practice Team will continue to focus on the further implementation of RP for the ’08–’09 school year.

Asked about relations between Catholics and Protestants in the school, ICD vice principal Venon said: “I’ve been here 13 years, since day one. The problems we have are the same as any school. I can count the number of incidents between Protestants and Catholics on one hand. Now we have children from all over the world. We have 10, 11, 12 percent international students.”

Venon mentioned an incident involving a boy from Poland. Two boys pushed the Polish boy behind a bathroom door, breaking his arm. Venon got the students together for a restorative meeting. The mother of the injured boy really just wanted an apology. Without the meeting, the offending boys would not have known that the injured boy had needed an operation. Said Venon: “The upshot is that the boys are now friends. The meeting helped the mother, too, to have a formal apology.”

Concluded Venon: “On a daily basis there’s a lot of low-level stuff — ‘She’s calling me names,’ ‘She sent me a nasty text,’ ‘She took my boyfriend off me.’ We want to open up the channels of communication and reduce ignorance. When [children] don’t understand each other, that’s when fights happen. We need to move into the future. How are we going to fix it? That’s where restorative practices comes in.” ☉