

The role of relational and restorative practice in Alternative Provision: Reducing violence and overcoming barriers to learning

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Why me?

Transforming lives through
Restorative Justice



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Executive summary

Why me? has conducted preliminary research into the extent to which violence is an issue in Alternative Provision establishments, whether it is a major barrier to learning and what constitutes best practice in such settings to reduce, or even prevent, violence happening. The main focus was on restorative practice and its role in reducing direct violence. The issue of the indirect violence experienced by young people in Alternative Provision establishments, and specifically structural and cultural violence, was not specifically studied, but was implicit in many of the findings.

The impact of violence on young people

There is growing concern about youth violence, both in schools and in the wider community, and the extent to which excluded children and young people are getting drawn into criminal behaviour, including gang conflict and county lines. There is also a growing awareness of the links between low socio-economic status, social exclusion and trauma and the extent to which this experience of indirect violence (structural and cultural) makes many children and young people highly vulnerable to becoming involved in direct violence, either as victim or perpetrator or both. This demographic is amongst the groups most often excluded from schools and represented in AP. The concern that led to the project, of which this research is an initial part, was that because of the vulnerable nature of the children in Alternative Provision and the complexity of their needs, they were more prone to becoming involved in direct violence.

The research

The focus of the research has been on the perspective of senior leaders and other stakeholders who work in or with PRUs and APs, reflecting specifically on: the phenomenon of direct violence (or the absence of it) in their settings; the extent to which it acted as a barrier to learning; what good practice is being used to address potential violence – including the contribution that restorative practice can make.

The methodological approach adopted was both interpretive and constructivist – an approach that chimes with restorative practice, values and principles.

Data was collected from three sources – an initial online focus group, 15 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders from APs, conducted online, and an online questionnaire shared with over 250 AP establishments nationally. Data was analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis and the key themes informed this report.

The findings

Violence

The focus of the research was on violent behaviour (direct violence) and not on the structural and cultural violence experienced by young people which may have led to their being referred to Alternative Provision in the first place. The key message from most of the respondents in the one-to-one interviews was that directly violent behaviour is not an issue in their school, in large measure due to the relationships the staff cultivate with the pupils and the skills they have to de-escalate incidents at the outset so that they do not escalate to violence.

The violence that the children and young people do face is either out in the community or at home – or both – and this could be defined as both direct and indirect (structural and cultural). Therefore, they are certainly vulnerable to getting drawn into acts of violent behaviour, either as a victim or perpetrator or both. Concern was expressed about how to best develop resilience in the young people to resist the pressures they experience in the community to get involved in violence and criminal behaviours that can lead to violence, such as county lines, gang involvement and sexual exploitation.

The online anonymised questionnaires painted a more nuanced picture, and twelve of the eighteen respondents reported that, on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 meaning that violence was ‘a huge problem’), they would put the problem at 3 or over.

However, one-to-one interviews clarified that this may be restricted to the behaviour of a small cohort, and especially to the younger students who have yet to learn how to articulate their unmet needs and feelings.

Violence as a barrier to learning

None of the respondents believed that direct violence was a barrier to learning. The main barriers in their experience included adverse childhood experiences (ACEs); unidentified learning or developmental needs; unsafe home environments; negative perceptions of school and the curriculum; gaps in their learning from their mainstream school experience and low attendance. These are all examples or symptoms of what Johan Galtung would call indirect violence – either structural or cultural or both.

Trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice

All respondents were very aware of the high level of trauma that many of their pupils had experienced or were experiencing. Respondents' language reflected their understanding that a child or young person's behaviour is a form of communication. They noted the importance of recognising when someone has become dysregulated and therefore unable to control their emotions or their behaviour at that point. This understanding informed their interactions with pupils and their families at all times.

One very clear message that came through was about the importance of relationships and the role that relational practice played in creating a safe, stable environment for vulnerable young people.

All respondents in this particular piece of research were familiar with restorative practice – some had introduced the practice to their AP on joining the school as senior leader. The use of the practice varied a great deal. The predominant use is as a response to conflict or challenging behaviour, with informal conversations being the most-used intervention.

Given the wide range of relational and restorative processes that make up a whole-school model (e.g., proactive circles; non-judgemental active listening; inter-personal conflict resolution; problem-solving circles; mediation; formal restorative conferencing), there is scope for more to be done to make full use of the potential of relational and restorative practice.

Nevertheless, respondents were very enthusiastic about the impact restorative practice had made in their schools. What they reported was that restorative practice had led to an increase in trust; clarity on how to intervene/respond; consistency in staff interventions/responses/language; greater empathy amongst the young people and adult willingness to acknowledge their own contribution to an incident. It led to a reduction in aggression, conflict, suspensions, exclusions and physical interventions by staff. They noted an improvement in pupil behaviour, attendance, the way staff listened to pupils and the quality of their conversations. Many staff had changed their attitude to sanctions, having previously been in favour of their use. Overall, there had been a change in the whole school culture for the better.

In summary, respondents explained that their staff teams have the skills to create a safe and supportive environment, to identify issues before they get to 'boiling point', to de-escalate a potentially violent situation and to help young people learn from every incident and change their behaviour. This skill-set could be described as trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice.

Recommendations

Trauma-informed practice is being used in different ways in the different schools represented in this research. Relational practice is at the heart of each of these schools, and some aspects of restorative practice are being used. However, there seems to be a piecemeal approach to these three important practices, and there is scope for developing a cohesive framework in which all three are related and form a consistent and cohesive philosophy.

This framework could then form a firm foundation upon which more work could be done to support the young people themselves in learning how to make and maintain relationships, to resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways and to develop the resilience and assertiveness they need for resisting the pressures from their community to get drawn into violence and criminal exploitation.

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About Why me?

Why me? is a national charity that promotes and delivers Restorative Justice, a process which enables people affected by crime and other harmful behaviour to communicate with each other. This is done through a face-to-face meeting where appropriate, or indirect methods such as video messaging or letter writing. The process is facilitated by trained professionals who speak to both parties in advance to prepare them.

Restorative Justice can be used to address any type of crime, as long as both parties consent and the facilitators agree that it is safe to do so. It is not a substitute for other measures such as criminal justice proceedings and can take place while people are serving time in custody.

Restorative Justice gives people who have been harmed the chance to talk about the impact of the incident and seek answers about why it happened. Victims of crime often feel excluded, confused and re-victimised by the criminal justice process. Restorative Justice brings them back to the heart of the discussion and allows their voices to be heard. It is also one of the most powerful methods of helping people who have committed crime appreciate the consequences of their actions and make amends, if they wish to do so.

Restorative Justice has been shown to reduce repeat offending by 14% (Shapland et al., 2011). It enables people to talk about what has happened and to have the impact of their experience acknowledged. Restorative practices can also be used to address the impact of harmful behaviour outside the Criminal Justice System, for example to address conflict in communities or schools.

Why me? seeks to improve access to Restorative Justice through campaigns, communications and development work. They also run their own registered Restorative Justice service. Why me? was formed after Peter Woolf met Will Riley, someone whom he had burgled and assaulted, in a Restorative Justice meeting in prison. This meeting transformed Will's recovery and turned Peter away from a life of crime. Will then set up Why me? with Peter's help, to enable other people affected by crime to experience the benefits of Restorative Justice.

Glossary

AP	Alternative Provision – this is a generic term given to all educational establishments offering an alternative provision for young people who cannot access mainstream provision. This includes units in schools maintained by the local authority, academies, free schools and PRUs. However, the term is also sometimes used to distinguish an academy from a local-authority funded provision. In this report, the term AP will be used to cover both AP academies and PRUs – respondents in the research came from both settings.
PRU	A Pupil Referral Unit is a local authority-funded school set up specifically for pupils who otherwise would not receive a suitable education.
Relational practice	In this report, relational practice refers to the proactive elements that are often included within the umbrella term ‘restorative practice’. However, over the years there has been confusion about the use of the word ‘restorative’, which implies ‘repair’ or ‘healing’, to day-to-day practices which are actually useful to make and maintain relationships – these include non-judgemental empathic active listening; dialogue; proactive community-building circles; nonviolent communication (NVC).
Restorative practice	Restorative practice is the term often used for the application of the philosophy and principles of Restorative Justice in settings other than youth and criminal justice – such as schools, residential care homes, hospitals, hostels for vulnerable adults and indeed any workplace. Restorative practice seeks to address the damage to relationships caused by conflict or harmful actions. The practice involves giving everyone involved a voice and a chance to explain their own perspective, and an opportunity to see what has happened from others’ perspectives. Following the mutual sharing of feelings and needs, everyone collaborates to find a mutually acceptable way forward, often involving symbolic or direct reparation. The practice includes the proactive relational foundations described above that create a climate where, when things go wrong, they are put right, and when harm is caused and relationships damaged, repair is the default response as opposed to blame and punishment. Processes for this include face-to-face restorative conversations, mediation and formal meetings called ‘conferences’.

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences – these include abuse (physical, sexual, emotional); neglect (physical and emotional); household dysfunction (mental illness, incarcerated relative, parent treated violently, substance abuse and divorce); social disadvantage (e.g., homelessness, economic hardship) and can lead to trauma. The impact of ACEs on an individual include: academic performance; classroom behaviours; increases in non-suicidal self-injury and mental and physical health issues in childhood and adulthood.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability – a child is diagnosed with SEND if they have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support. Often children with SEND are assessed and assigned an EHC.
EHC	An education health and care plan which sets out what a child needs in terms of extra support.
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health needs are a sub-set of SEND. They relate to a type of special educational needs in which children/young people experience severe difficulties in managing their emotions and behaviour. They need extra support to do so. They often show inappropriate responses and feelings to situations.
Dysregulation	Emotional dysregulation occurs when someone has difficulty regulating their emotions – they may feel overwhelmed and are unable to control their behaviour. Emotions can include fear, anger and sadness. Neuroscience has contributed to a greater understanding of the dysregulated state. A dysregulated person is unable to access the logical part of their brain and cannot be ‘reasoned with’ until they have been given the chance to calm down in a safe space.
Trauma	Trauma is a lasting emotional response to having experienced distressing events which may have been natural (flooding; fire; earthquakes; etc.), linked to human events (assault; abuse; bullying; bereavement; witnessing violence; war; fleeing to safety) or to systemic, historical violence (poverty; racism; homophobia; genocide).
Attachment disorder	Attachment disorder can result from experiences in early childhood of neglect, abuse, abrupt separation from caregivers or failure in a primary caregiver to respond to a child’s needs, leading to a loss of trust. It can affect mood, behaviour and social relationships.

Zones of Regulation	The Zones of Regulation were first developed by Leah Kuypers in 2011 (Kuypers & Winner, 2011). Her background was in working with children with autism, ADHD and anxiety. She developed a framework and curriculum designed to foster self-awareness and self-regulation. It uses colour-coding to help people identify how they are at any given moment. The model also draws on another concept called Social Thinking (developed by Michelle Garcia Winner) which encourages perspective-taking so that people think about the impact their thoughts and behaviours are having on others. (This is a key feature of restorative practice too.) The use of the curriculum helps people to learn tools they need to self-regulate.
The Window of Tolerance	The Window of Tolerance is an idea developed by Dan Siegel, a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, whose work has been very influential in the development of trauma-informed practice in the UK (Siegel, 2020). It describes the optimal state of ‘arousal’ in which we are able to function and thrive each day. Awareness of this window can help people with self-awareness and self-regulation. Everyone has their own zone of optimal arousal, and their own upper and lower limit. Being above one’s own limit is described as hyper-arousal and being beneath it is described as hypo-arousal. As adults, people can learn to regulate their own window of tolerance with awareness and self-care – practicing mindfulness, developing social connections, making life-style choices that reduce stress such as adopting healthy eating habits, a regular exercise regime and getting enough sleep.
Direct vs. indirect violence	This report draws upon the distinction between direct and indirect violence. First theorised by Johan Galtung, direct violence can be defined as physical or psychological acts of aggression; indirect violence refers to harm caused for which no one can be held directly responsible. This includes structural violence, where social structures and institutions lead to violence, and cultural violence, where cultural norms are embedded to make this violence seem normal.

Introduction

This report is about the role that Alternative Provision (AP) in educational settings play in addressing rising levels of violence amongst young people. Given the proven links between school exclusion and involvement in violence (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020), these establishments play a significant role in keeping young people safe from violence and diverting them from violent behaviours, alongside other agencies and the police.

As part of Why me?'s project, Reducing Violence: Restoring potential for disadvantaged young people in Alternative Educational Provision Units, research was carried out to explore:

- the extent to which violence is an issue for Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and Alternative Provision (APs) in England
- whether violence is a significant barrier to learning
- what role restorative practice is playing in enabling staff in these schools to build safer learning communities and reduce levels of violence

This report summarises the research methodology and documents key findings from the focus groups, one-to-one interviews and national survey. The research has been carried out by Dr Belinda Hopkins, Director of Transforming Conflict, the National Centre for Restorative Practice in Youth Settings.

A public health approach

In a report published by the Youth Violence Commission (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020), the authors referred to the strategy recommended in its interim report two years earlier – the adoption of a 'public health approach' to tackling rising levels of youth violence, which would be overseen and coordinated by regional Violence Reduction Units (VRUs). Such an approach, the report explained, involves:

- 1) Understanding the nature of the problem by gathering and analysing sufficient data;

- 2) Doing what works by developing and implementing policies and interventions informed by the best available theory, data and analysis;
- 3) Learning from experience by robustly evaluating and subsequently improving these policies and interventions.

This report has been informed by research that is closely aligned to such a public health approach. Data has been gathered from senior leaders and stakeholders working in or with Alternative Provision (AP) to identify what these people believe are the key issues for the young people in their care, what constitutes the main barriers to learning and how they strive to overcome these.

Respondents identify what constitutes best practice in these establishments. The research did include a particular focus on the role that relational and restorative practice plays. The report concludes by summarising what has been learnt, celebrating the best practice already in place in some establishments and pointing the way to next steps. In line with a public health approach, the report suggests that policy in this field can be improved by further evaluating the interventions that have been shown to have an impact in the schools taking part in this research. It is hoped that this project can contribute to the national initiative co-ordinated by the regional VRUs and to policy development on violence reduction in schools at government level.

What is Alternative Provision?

Alternative provision (AP) is defined by the Department of Education as:

'Education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour' (DfE, 2013)

AP settings include AP schools, academies, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), Further Education colleges, registered and independent providers.

These establishments are expected to provide a suitable education for excluded young people, but standards vary across the country, and expectations and outcomes for excluded children and young people are often low (Simms, 2022).¹

The provision for young people who have been referred temporarily or permanently to AP is on the increase as the use of exclusions in mainstream schools increases. In the Autumn Term of 2023, 3,104 young people were permanently excluded from school (an increase from 2,097 the previous Autumn) and 247,366 young people were suspended, an increase from 183,817 the previous year (DfE, 2023). In a document published in 2022, the figures were reported as being at least 32,083 pupils, educated across at least 761 alternative provision settings in England alone (Simms, 2022).

Many of these young people are extremely vulnerable. An Institute for Public Policy Research report from 2017 states:

‘Excluded pupils are many times more likely to come from a vulnerable background compared with the general student population in England. They are 10 times more likely to suffer from mental health problems, seven times more likely to have a special educational need, four times more likely to qualify for free school meals, and twice as likely to be in the care of the state’ (Gill, 2017).

The concern that led to the project, of which this research is an initial part, was that because of the vulnerable nature of the children in Alternative Provision and the complexity of their needs, they were more prone to becoming involved in aggression, conflict and violence.

Defining what is meant by violence in this report

The previous section referred to the vulnerability of many children and young people who are referred to Alternative Provision and the complexity of their needs. However, it is important not to pathologise them or somehow suggest that it is they who have the problem.

¹ The report will identify what the barriers to teaching and learning are in these establishments.

Research has shown that certain cohorts of young people in mainstream school are disproportionately targeted for their behaviour and are suspended or permanently excluded in greater numbers than their peers. These cohorts include:

- young people from poor socio-economic backgrounds
- Black children, especially Afro-Caribbean young people and especially boys
- young people with special educational needs, especially autism
- young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- young people in care
- young people with unrecognised mental health issues

These same cohorts often do worse academically and are more likely to be disaffected and disengaged. There are many reasons for these discrepancies when compared to the experiences of their peers, but some would argue that what these young people face amounts to structural and cultural violence – in society at large, and within the school itself (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). This is different from direct violence, which can be defined as physical or psychological acts of aggression.

In their book *Positive Peace in Schools*, Hilary Cremin and Terence Bevington offer useful descriptions of the difference between direct and indirect violence – the latter including structural and cultural violence. As they say:

‘Structural violence and cultural violence are often interdependent, with the structure of society providing mechanisms for cultural violence to be enacted, and cultural violence providing support for the continuation of structural violence’ (Cremin & Bevington, 2017, p. 3).

The research that informs this report focuses on direct violence involving young people. As the next section explains, this was a choice made because funding had been sought specifically to explore the rise of incidents of youth violence. It was also a choice based on the time-scale of the research, which was limited to thirty days, including the literature survey, research design, field work, data analysis and report writing.

Respondents in the research were not invited to reflect on indirect violence, an omission that future research in this field needs to address. Interestingly, these issues were not specifically mentioned by respondents either.

However, a closer analysis of the issues that were identified – as barriers to learning for example – might well reveal indirect violence as a factor. It could also be argued that many of the children and young people who are referred to Alternative Provision are victims of both structural and cultural violence, and that if these issues were better addressed in mainstream school then there would be fewer referrals in the first place.

Type of violence	Direct violence	Indirect violence – structural	Indirect violence – cultural
Definition	Physical, psychological or verbal aggression	Violence that systematically harms or disadvantages certain individuals or groups in society	Violence built into the discourses/beliefs about certain groups – including their capabilities and relative importance in society
Examples in schools	Bullying; harassment; verbal abuse; physical abuse; humiliation-based practices	Social and disciplinary exclusion of students who do not conform to normative standards of the dominant social groups For students – the stress caused by excessive homework and testing	Restricted curriculum that does not reflect the faith or culture of certain students Lack of representation of women and minoritised groups in resources used, and in displays around school Different academic expectations of students depending on their class, ethnicity, gender, etc.

Adapted from Cremin & Bevington, 2017, p.3

Project Information and Methodology

Background to the research

The research is carried out against a backdrop of concern about youth violence, both in schools and in the wider community, and the extent to which excluded children and young people are getting drawn into criminal behaviour, including gang conflict and county lines (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020; Youth Endowment Fund, 2023).

The cross-party Youth Violence Commission (YVC) was established in March 2017 following a debate the previous year on serious youth violence in the House of Commons. In their report, published in 2020, the authors describe:

'Three years on, levels of serious violence between young people remain stubbornly high. Knife and offensive weapon offences involving those aged 10- 17 and resulting in a caution or conviction have risen year on year, from 2,639 in 2013 to 4,562 in 2019. Following a similar trend, the number of finished consultant episodes for assault by a sharp object involving those under the age of 18 rose from 489 in 2012/13 to 849 in 2018/19' (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020, p. 10).

However, the authors also admitted that their findings over the three years had shifted their focus:

'The evidence provided to the Commission over the last three years has often forced us to switch our focus, from the violence perpetrated by young people, to the shocking levels of serious violence and mistreatment inflicted on these same young people throughout their lives' (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020, p.10).

According to a more recent report by the Youth Endowment Fund, based on a survey of 7,574 teenage children:

'16% said they had been a victim of violence in the past 12 months. Among these victims, 68% experienced some form of physical injury as a result – equivalent to 360,000 13 to 17-year-old children in England and Wales. Even more (44%) had said they'd witnessed violence in the past 12-months. Nearly

half (47%) saying that they'd either been a victim or witness to violence within the last year' (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023).

Youth violence is not evenly distributed across the country – and in London, one in four children report having been a victim of violence.²

The report showed that whilst boys were more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence, girls were also experiencing violence – and especially sexual assault. What it also showed was that overall, in absolute numbers, the majority of perpetrators and victims of violence were White. However, Black teenagers were more vulnerable to being victims (21%) or perpetrators (22%) than White teenagers (16% and 14%, respectively).³

The report also indicated that certain demographics are especially prone to experiencing violence – and also highly vulnerable to crime and exploitation. This finding was also mentioned in the Youth Violence Commission report. This report reflected the growing awareness of the links between low socio-economic status, social exclusion and trauma and the extent to which these life experiences make many children and young people highly vulnerable to becoming involved in violence, either as victim or perpetrator or both:

'Many grow up surrounded by stark levels of deprivation, insecurity and adverse early-life experiences that have left them suffering from severe trauma, which too often goes overlooked and unaddressed' (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020, p. 10).

This demographic is amongst the groups most often excluded from schools and represented in AP.

Findings from the Youth Endowment Fund report pertinent to this research include what children report about their school experience (the report does

² When asking children about their experiences of violence as victims or perpetrators, they used the following definition: 'By violent crime, we mean the use of force or threat of force against another person or people, for example punching someone, threatening someone with a weapon, or mugging someone. This also includes sexual assault, which is when somebody intentionally touches someone in a sexual way without their consent' (Youth Endowment Fund, 2023).

³ The report pointed out that very often young people involved in violence can be both victims and perpetrators.

not specify whether respondents are talking about mainstream schools or alternative provision). Whereas in fact the majority of respondents (85%) said they felt safe in school, some did not. 20% reported that in the previous year they had stayed away from school because they did not feel safe. This percentage rose for children in receipt of Free School Meals, an indication of the low socio-economic status of their family, and rose even further for those supported by a social worker or a Youth Offending Team. Nearly half of the respondents reported being affected by violence or fear of violence – some having sleep problems, not being able to concentrate at school or responding to their fear by isolating themselves for protection. These experiences impacted most on racialised minority groups.

It was against this backdrop of concern about young people's experience of violence and the impact this was having on their mental health, and also on their school experience, that prompted the Why me? project, of which this research is a preliminary study.

Relational and restorative practice

Relational and restorative practice has a proven track-record of improving relationships in schools (Kane et al., 2009; Lodi et al., 2021; Skins et al., 2009). The practice was originally introduced into mainstream schools in the early 2000s as an alternative to exclusion – to avoid the 'school to prison pipeline' (Skiba et al., 2014) and in the UK was part of the then Labour Government's Street Crime Initiative. However, over the years the practice has developed at the theoretical level, thanks to writers and practitioners in the field who continue to be informed by new developments in education, psychology, neuroscience and social justice (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021; Burnett & Thorsborne, 2015; Evans & Vaandering, 2022; Hopkins, 2004, 2011, 2012, 2016; Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014; Morrison, 2007; Riestenberg, 2012; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). Many of these new ideas have then been adopted by training providers and introduced to schools internationally. Many schools implementing a restorative approach seek to create a consistency of philosophy and principles, not only in the way all 'behavioural challenges' are addressed, but also as a way to develop pro-social skills and a sense of belonging and to improve teaching, learning and personal development.

In their literature review of published research (from the UK, US, Canada, Australia and Europe) on the impact of implementation of restorative practice in schools, Lodi et al write:

'Its practices are oriented not only at the alternative management of incorrect and violent behaviours, for example, bullying, but mainly at the promotion of prosocial behaviours through the development of social and emotional skills (e.g., empathy, awareness, and responsibility), with the broader goal of building safe school communities that promote well-being' (Lodi et al., 2021).

Their paper identifies the most used restorative practices in schools – circles (for community-building and for problem-solving), restorative conversations, formal restorative conferences and mediation. It also lists the ways in which the practice impacted on the school:

- an improvement in school climate and safety
- a reduction in conflict, disruptive behaviour and bullying
- a reduction in the use of suspensions and exclusion
- an improvement in relationships between students and between students and teachers
- increased pro-social behaviours
- improved social and emotional skills
- improved relationships between school and families
- enhanced well-being across the school community

These improvements were also shown to improve attendance and academic achievement.

The proven benefits of implementing a restorative culture are pertinent to the search for strategies to reduce the occurrence of violence in schools. Whilst restorative practice can support mainstream schools to be able to better support vulnerable children to remain in school, it can also be of benefit to alternative provision when a child has been suspended or excluded.

The benefits listed above are likely to be as true in AP as they are in mainstream schools. A project carried out between 2009 and 2011 in three London PRUs demonstrated the impact on staff and students in terms of

building and maintaining relationships as well as providing a framework for addressing conflict and challenge in ways that repaired relationships (London Councils, 2012).⁴

However, there are challenges to implementing a restorative approach in AP. In her study of the use of restorative practice in three PRUs, Bentley points out that restorative practice depends on a certain level of communication skills and yet many children and young people in PRUs have speech and language difficulties (Bentley, 2019).⁵ She also highlighted the importance of consistency of the restorative ethos across the whole PRU and the importance of adhering to restorative principles when implementing the approach. These are issues I will return to at the end of this report.

Methodology

The focus of the research has been on the perspective of senior leaders and other stakeholders who work in or with AP, reflecting specifically on the phenomenon of direct violence (or the absence of it) in their settings, the extent to which it acted as a barrier to learning and the contribution that restorative practice can make to reduce violence. The methodological approach adopted was both interpretive and constructivist – an approach that chimes with restorative practice, values and principles.

Working interpretively gives a voice to respondents, an approach in line with restorative practice, which endorses working with people rather than speaking for them or imposing ideas on them. The approach is constructivist in that it focuses on the ways and means by which the social reality within AP is constructed by those experiencing it. This aligns with the restorative principle of multiple voices having value – and the understanding that there are multiple ways to interpret any given phenomenon.

⁴ For transparency's sake I must declare that it was my company Transforming Conflict who delivered the training in all three pilot PRUs and I was closely involved in the project, but not in the evaluation, which was carried out by the Back on Track Working Group. https://transformingconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/1476_restorative_approaches_prus_final_0.pdf.

⁵ Indeed, there is a proven link between speech and language difficulties and behavioural issues, and also a propensity to get involved in offending behaviour in later life (Bentley, 2019).

Had time permitted, a more collaborative methodology could have been used in which respondents and researcher worked together to co-create meaning from the data – thereby maintaining a more collaborative approach that embodied the restorative principles of collaboration and ownership. As this was a three-month study designed to fit project timelines, it was decided to adopt an inductive approach to data analysis, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), which draws more on the meaning-making skills of the researcher rather than the respondents.⁶ However, a key principle was always to reflect respondents' experiences and views as faithfully as possible, whilst acknowledging the part that my own subjective interpretation played, as someone with prior knowledge and experience of restorative practice (Byrne, 2022).

Method

1) Data collection

Data was collected from three sources:

- an initial online focus group
- 15 semi-structured interviews which lasted between 30-60 minutes conducted online
- an online questionnaire

These three stages of data collection offered the chance for an iterative approach since each stage provided useful pointers for the design of the next stage. The online focus group provided inspiration for how to structure the 1-1 interviews and how to design the questionnaire. The 1-1 interviews also provided further inspiration for the questionnaire. Some of the early respondents taking part in the 1-1 interviews formed the target group for a trial questionnaire. These respondents gave feedback on the questionnaire which helped to refine it before wider dissemination.

⁶ RTA is described by its developers Braun and Clark as a 6-stage process: 1) data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Participants of the focus group were self-selected and included senior leaders of Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision academies, stakeholders in the field of violence reduction amongst young people and others interested in this topic. They were reached by means of the existing Why me? database, LinkedIn and emails circulated by a company called The Difference⁷ to their database of APs. These sources meant that the participants were already inclined to be open to restorative practice (an issue discussed later).

Participants in the 1-1 semi-structured interviews were self-selected, again from responding to an invitation that was circulated by The Difference to their database of APs and by colleagues working in the relational and restorative field.

The questionnaire was disseminated using Mailchimp to APs all over England from a database accessed online⁸ and updated to ensure a correct email address was used. The intention was for this questionnaire to be filled in by a senior leader in each establishment.⁹

2) Research questions

Participants at all three stages of data collection were questioned on:

- the extent to which violence is an issue in their school – with violence broken down into verbal or physical and against self, other students, staff or property
- the extent to which such violence acted as a barrier to learning
- what strategies schools used to create safe environments and help engage pupils in their learning

⁷ A company that offers leadership training to improve the life chances of vulnerable children. The training includes trauma awareness and restorative practice. <https://www.the-difference.com>.

⁸ This database was supplied by the Department of Education in response to a Freedom of Information request made by Rebecca Tymoshyshyn on May 21st 2021. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/list_of_all_pupil_referral_units_2. The data comes from the website 'Get Information about Schools (GIAS)' accessed on 25 May 2021.

⁹ The database needed updating and unfortunately rarely included direct contact details for senior leaders. This meant that administrative staff may have decided not to pass the questionnaire on to an already very busy school leader.

- whether they used relational and restorative practice, and if so, in what ways
- what the impact of using relational and restorative practice has been on the school

The 1-1 interviews were semi-structured in the sense that questions were not written down and asked in a set order, but the topics above did shape the direction of the conversation.

3) Data analysis

The data gathered from the focus group notes, the 1-1 semi-structured interviews and the longer answers from the questionnaires were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). This is an interpretative methodology involving the intersection of three elements – the datasets themselves, theoretical assumptions of the analysis and the analytical skills of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Study of, and familiarisation with, the data led to me identifying a number of codes (short summaries of key ideas) which were then grouped according to key themes. Further work considering and re-considering connections between codes and themes eventually informed the report. The research questions also helped to identify appropriate themes.

The data from the longer answers on the questionnaire helped to provide an impression of respondents' perspectives on the extent to which violence is an issue, and also provided some useful insights into what other strategies are being used to build relationships and address challenges. It has also provided an overview of the degree to which the full range of relational and restorative practices are being used in respondents' schools. It is likely that most of the questionnaires were filled in by the same respondents who participated in the 1-1 interviews, and the 'checklist' element (what relational and restorative practices were being used and with whom) lent itself better to a 'paper exercise' than during the more informal exchanges we were

having online.¹⁰ Questionnaires are not normally part of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, but in this case the extra data enriched the analysis and further informed the report.

Positionality

I do not come to this research as a neutral and impartial researcher. I have spent over twenty-five years working in the Restorative Justice field and was one of the main pioneers who introduced Restorative Justice into schools. My book *Just Schools* was the first, globally, to develop the concept of a whole-school restorative approach (Hopkins, 2004). Since the late 1990s, I have been speaking publicly, developing and delivering training and offering consultancy on what restorative practice (the term now widely used in schools) 'should' look like when properly implemented as a whole school culture. I continue to publish books in this field. I therefore have strong views on the subject and a passionate belief in what restorative practice can achieve, from my professional experience and from what I have learned from evaluation studies.

It was important, therefore, that I utilised a methodology that would allow me to let the respondents' perspectives guide my findings, whilst still acknowledging my role in choosing what was salient and important in what they were telling me. This acknowledgement aligns me with a qualitative methodological paradigm.

Whilst stating my positionality, it is also important to state that I am an ex-teacher myself, with experience of mainstream secondary schools in urban multi-ethnic settings. I am also female, White, middle class and able-bodied, with a commitment to social justice, and I inevitably bring these aspects of myself to my research.

¹⁰ There were 18 responses to the survey and of these it is likely that 15 of them are the same people who took part in the 1-1 interviews since they committed to doing so.

Findings

Introduction to this section

As explained in the methodology section, the data used for this analysis came from a) the notes made by an online focus group working in several smaller breakout rooms b) one-to-one interviews online and c) a questionnaire circulated nationally that received 18 responses.

The data from all three sources was first coded, with small segments of meaning assigned its individual code. Each code was then put with other segments of meaning which I deemed to be similar, and this helped me to identify the key themes. These I arranged using a Mind Map, which helped me get a sense of the story that I wanted to tell (Figure 1).

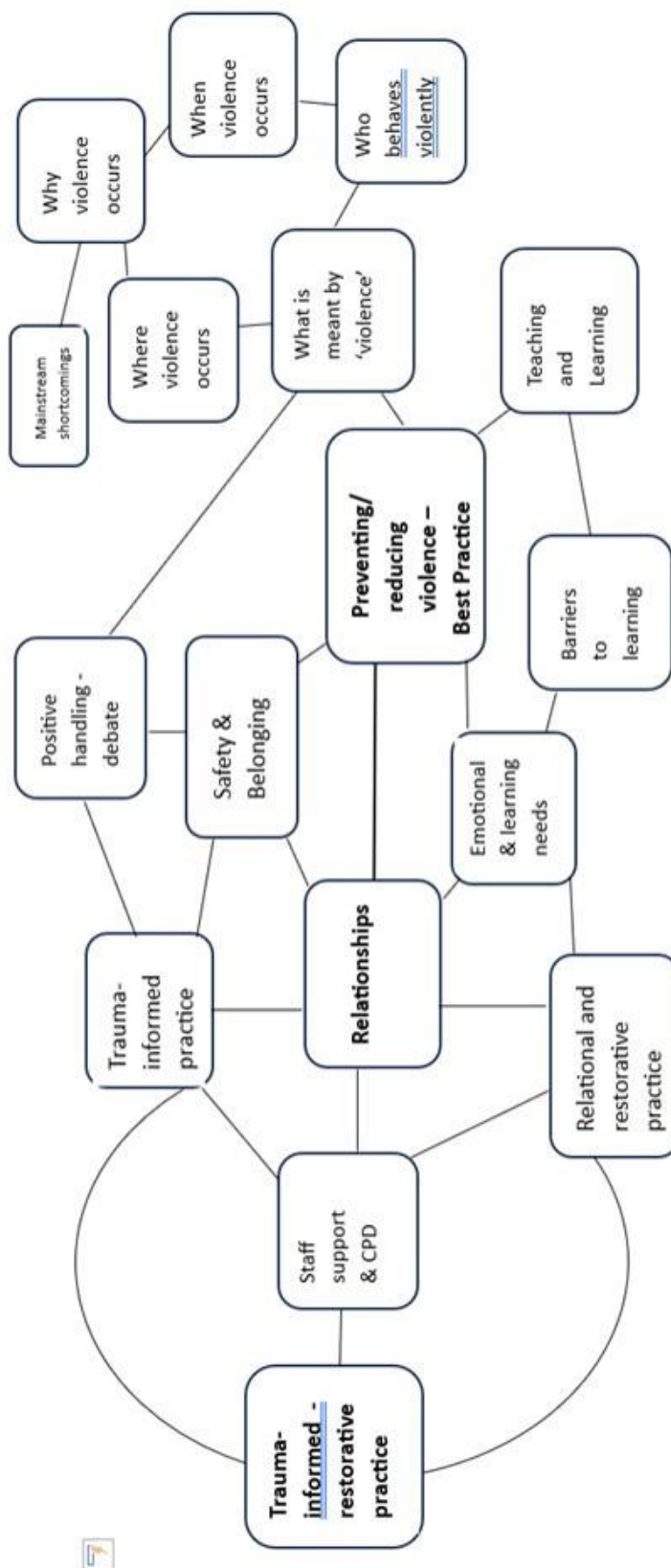


Figure 1: Themes identified in the data by the researcher¹¹

¹¹ It is standard practice in this kind of qualitative research, and especially Reflexive Thematic Analysis, that the researcher takes responsibility for the identification of the themes and avoids suggestion that these somehow emerged from the data.

What follows are the findings related to the themes identified. A longer discussion about these findings will be found after this section.

Violence

I start with the extent to which violence was an issue in their school since this was one of the research questions. Violence was defined as causing damage to either other people, property or self. With regards to violence to others, this was defined as verbal or physical. (It is acknowledged that the issue of emotional and psychological violence were not the focus of this study.)

The key message from most of the respondents in the one-to-one interviews is that they did not believe that violence is an issue in their school, in large measure due to the relationships the staff cultivate with the pupils and the skills they have to de-escalate incidents at the outset so that they do not escalate to violence.

Their view was that the violence that the children and young people do face is either out in the community or at home – or both. Therefore, they are certainly exposed to violence and are vulnerable to getting drawn into violent behaviour, either as a victim or perpetrator or both. Concern was expressed about how to best develop resilience in young people to resist the pressures they experience in the community to get involved in violence and criminal behaviours that can lead to violence, such as county lines, gang involvement and sexual exploitation.

Many respondents acknowledged that a violent incident was sometimes behind the referral of a young person to their school. Some attributed this to staff in mainstream schools not always understanding the needs of the child – and that unidentified trauma and unmet emotional, developmental or learning needs may have led to a build-up of frustration that eventually manifests itself in a violent outburst. Some mentioned that violence and aggression is on the rise in mainstream schools due to the lack of resources (training and personnel) to address the unmet trauma and need behind these violent outbursts.

There were some exceptions to the message that the APs in this study did not experience violence – whether to people, property or self. Some respondents explained that younger students did tend to express themselves more with their hands as they lacked the speech and language skills to explain what was going on inside. There was more of a tendency to lash out and kick or cause damage to property in their anger. One respondent explained that there was violence in the school but that this was limited to one or two children, whilst another said she rarely met a violent child per se.

Some of the respondents to the questionnaire were more ready to acknowledge that violence can be an issue, and the following graphics are interesting, if only that they offer a different perspective.

1) To what extent is violent behaviour (verbal or physical) an issue for your school within the school itself?
18 responses

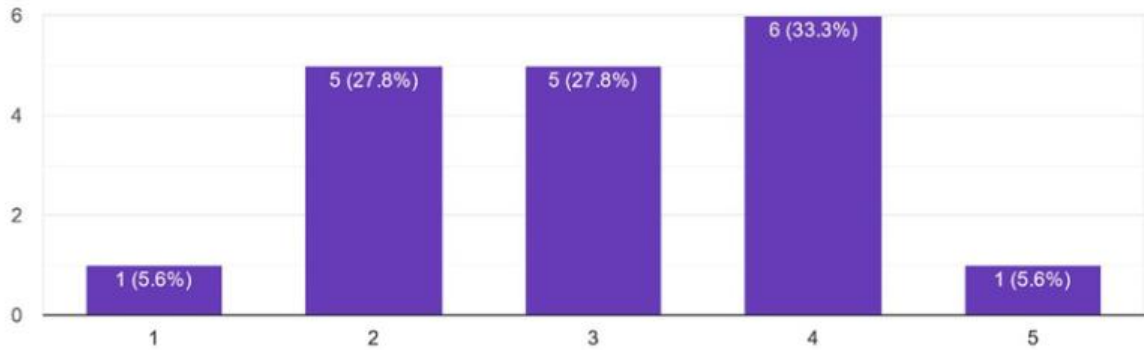


Figure 2: The extent to which violence is considered an issue (1 = not at all; 5 = a huge problem)

Questionnaire respondents identified verbal and physical violence as being the most common, with this violence primarily directed at other students, staff and property rather than to self – although self-harm was more common in Hospital APs. Those responsible for violence were students, but some respondents also mentioned violence from parents/carers.

For those people who had reported violence being an issue, this was something experienced either daily or weekly by just over half the respondents, whilst just under half reported it occurring once a month or even more rarely.

6) Does violence occur:
16 responses

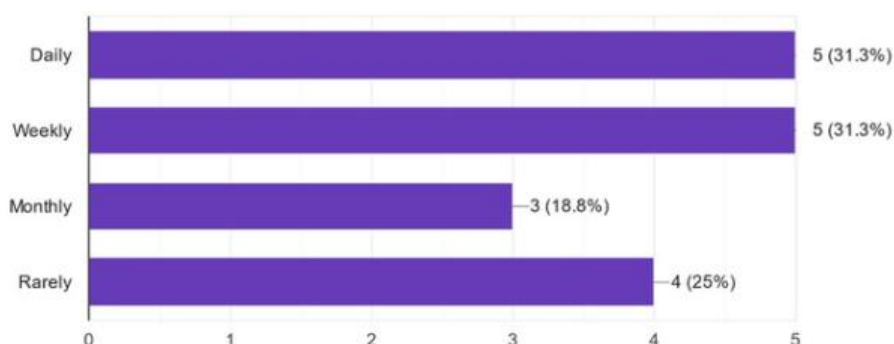


Figure 3: The frequency with which violence occurs

Questionnaire respondents did agree that violence in the community is a big issue for their young people, and most believed that their pupils were at significant risk of becoming engaged in violence. This was an acknowledgement of how structural violence impacts the lives of the young people in their care, although this term was not used.

Figure 4 illustrates their responses to the question about what they believed constituted the triggers to violence. It was interesting that most respondents had very clear ideas about this, which helps to explain their success in ensuring that violence was headed off at the pass.



Figure 4: Triggers to violence – data from 1-1 interviews and the questionnaire ^{12 13}

¹² The number of similar responses for each topic varied between 1-3 examples, and this is reflected in the relative size of the script; the colour of each entry is not significant and was generated by the Word Cloud programme.

¹³ Produced by: https://ahaslides.com/features/live-word-cloud-generator/?source=blog&medium=button&campaign=landing_site&content=features.

These are in effect the issues and unmet needs that the children and young people have on a daily basis and are very similar to the barriers to learning identified in Figures 6 and 7. In other words, these factors exist as potential triggers every day, but thanks to the relationships the staff manage to develop with the pupils and the trauma-informed relational and restorative skills they use, they are successful in reducing the likelihood of triggering violent outbursts – or de-escalating them early on.

One issue which revealed different points of view was the use of restraint or positive handling. Most respondents confirmed that their staff had had training on some sort of positive handling – TeamTeach¹⁴ being the most often mentioned. People generally agreed that there were times when it was necessary to use restraint to keep people safe. However, there were some respondents who had grave concerns about its use. They were of the opinion that it was experienced by children and young people as a violent act in itself, and that even the potential of it being used made for a more ‘heated’ environment. Several respondents were trying to reduce the use of restraint as much as possible, favouring the use of verbal de-escalation instead, and one stated that they simply did not use it. Several reported coming to their new post to find that practice had been questionable and that, in their opinion, what violence there had been was, at times, instigated by the staff themselves.

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, in the question about who was responsible for violence in the school, no-one mentioned staff. Had there been time to involve children and young people as respondents in the research, it would have been interesting to explore if they shared a similar view – and how they experience positive handling (aka restraint).

¹⁴ <https://www.teamteach.com/>.

5) Who acts in a violent way in the school?

16 responses

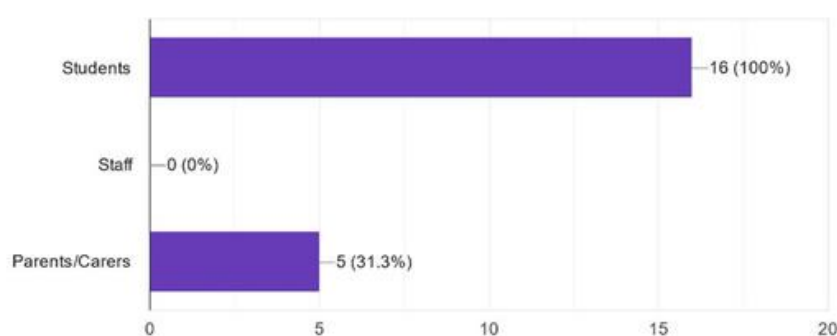


Figure 5: Who is responsible for violence in the school

Barriers to learning

Another research theme was the extent to which violence was a barrier to learning. Respondents identified a long list of barriers to learning, illustrated below by a word cloud (from the one-to-one interviews) and a graphic from the questionnaire. There is much to unpick here, but the key finding that is pertinent to this research is that none of the respondents believed that violence within their school was a barrier to learning. What is interesting is the similarity between Figure 4 and Figure 6. Many of the same issues that were barriers to learning were also what triggered violent outbursts when they occurred – and were almost certainly what was behind a child's referral to an AP in the first place. They indicate the structural and cultural violence that the young people have to contend with.

One respondent had a nuanced view about the role that violence did play in impacting how young people engage in learning:

'Violence not in itself a barrier to learning. It is the mindset and the pre-occupation the children have about conflict and the threat of violence that gets in the way – the fight or flight mentality.'



Figure 6: Barriers to learning – word cloud from 1-1 interviews ¹⁵

The answers to the questionnaire reflect the same issues, as Figure 7 illustrates.

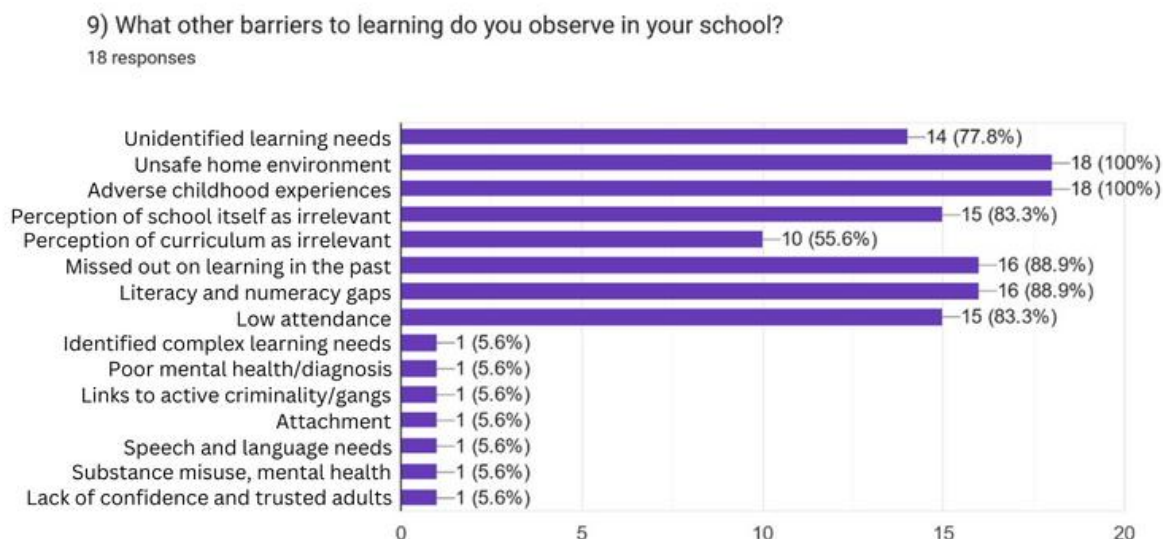


Figure 7: Barriers to learning – from questionnaire

Relationships

One very clear message came through from conversations with respondents, and this was about the importance of relationships. From the context of the conversations, what was primarily referred to was the relationship between adults at the school and the pupils. One respondent said that cultivating relationships was more important than curriculum delivery. Another said these were interrelated:

¹⁵ As for the first word cloud, the size of the words indicates the frequency of response, ranging from smallest (1 response) to largest (3 responses). The colour of each response is not significant.

'Our philosophy is basically that the right curriculum, allied to positive relationships (via policies and practice), will bring engagement, attendance, etc. We often talk about having the balance of pastoral support, with an academic curriculum that stretches and brings confidence and ambition. You can't have one without the other if you are getting it right. The pastoral element is most important at the start, allied to academic scaffold. But once the student is settled this can be removed and that is when you get rapid and sustained progress that can be taken back into mainstream school. Just pastoral is not the role of the school, and no pastoral leaves students not feeling safe or heard. The role of AP is to provide both.'

Another respondent echoed this sentiment, explaining that although a young person may begin by working for the adult because they valued the relationship, when they saw that they could succeed, they began to develop intrinsic motivation.

The importance of good relationships between adults and young people was in part linked to engagement with learning, but it was also linked to creating a sense of community and belonging – both of which many of the young people arriving at the school had not experienced whilst in mainstream school. Some respondents reported how important it was for the children and young people to feel they belonged – and to experience friendship for the first time.

Good relationships are also a factor in ensuring the young people accepted the boundaries, routines and rules shared by staff. As one respondent said: *'without the relationship you get pushback'*.

Good relationships with parents and carers was another important issue raised by several respondents, with one mentioning how staff strove to be in touch with them every day.

Trauma-informed practice

Everyone I spoke with referred to the importance of being aware of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) most of their pupils had experienced

and the high level of trauma these had led to. Several respondents explained that the children and young people referred to their school fell into one or more of the following categories:

- those with diagnosed needs or conditions that had not been met in mainstream schools
- those with undiagnosed conditions or needs which therefore had not been met
- those who had experienced trauma
- those with attachment disorder

Respondents’ language reflected their understanding that a child or young person’s behaviour is a form of communication and the importance of recognising when someone has become dysregulated. Most of the respondents talked about their use of two important practices – Zones of Regulation and Windows of Tolerance. Respondents spoke about how their staff teams were encouraged to work within their own Window of Tolerance, and the concepts were being adapted to help the young people understand themselves better.

Blue Zone tired; sad; bored	Green Zone calm; happy; focused
Yellow Zone silly; worried; frustrated	Red Zone angry; out of control

Figure 8: Zones of Regulation – see Glossary for fuller explanation

hyperarousal fight/flight; emotionally reactive; panic; rage; hyper-vigilant; stress; sense of threat
window of tolerance calm; grounded; present; open; able to function, take on challenges and manage stress; sense of safety
hypoarousal freeze; slow; detached; dissociated; numb; fatigued; shut down; depressed; sense of collapse/helplessness/shame

Figure 9: Window of Tolerance – see Glossary for fuller explanation

There is much more to trauma-informed practice than these two concepts. However, it was clear from the interviews that respondents, and their staff, understood that a child's behaviour is a form of communication and that so-called 'naughty' or 'disruptive' behaviour is a sign of dysregulation. This understanding informed their interactions. Several respondents had sought out extra training in trauma-informed practice and were spreading the ideas across their staff teams.

Use of restorative practice

Respondents varied in where they were in their personal journey of restorative practice and so did the school they worked in. Most of the respondents I spoke with were relatively new to their posts. Many had been responsible for introducing the practice themselves – and were at different stages of staff training. Every respondent to the questionnaire reported using restorative practice, some for over 10 years.

13) How long have you been using relational and restorative practice in your school:

18 responses

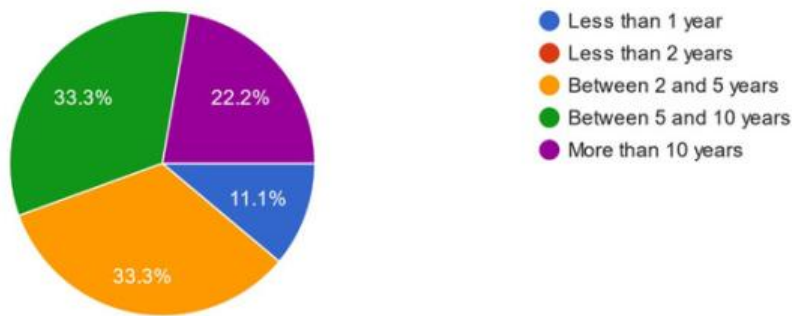


Figure 10: Length of time using restorative practice

Everyone I spoke with was very positive about the impact that restorative practice had made in their schools – saying it was ‘massive’ and ‘has changed the conversation’.

They reported that restorative practice had led to an increase in:

- trust
- clarity on how to intervene/respond
- consistency in staff interventions/responses/language
- empathy amongst the young people
- adult willingness to acknowledge their own contribution to an incident

Restorative practice led to a reduction in:

- aggression
- conflict
- suspensions
- exclusions
- physical interventions by staff

There was an improvement in:

- pupil behaviour
- attendance
- ability of staff to listen

Many respondents noted a change in:

- the language used by staff with pupils – it was less confrontational
- the quality of conversations between adults and pupils
- staff attitudes to sanctions (and especially exclusions) – had hitherto supported their use
- the whole school culture – a change for the better

It is hard to gauge exactly how people are using restorative practice. One study involving three PRUs showed that none of them were implementing restorative practice in ways that were consistent with restorative principles, and young people experiencing restorative meetings were critical of the way these were carried out (Bentley, 2019). Inevitably in this type of study, I am relying on self-reporting. However, the questionnaire responses do suggest a wide use of the full range of possibilities. One questionnaire respondent reported learning from the options provided on the form, which may suggest that taking part in the research has itself made an impact on their practice.

The responses from the questionnaire illustrate the wide range of different ways that schools are using restorative practice, and this will in part depend on the nature of the training that they had received. Some training providers introduce restorative practice in terms of behaviour management ‘tools’, only to be used after an incident, whilst others emphasise the ‘whole-school culture change’ aspect, which includes the use of proactive circles, day-to-day interactions between all members of the school community, conflict resolution and mediation (again across the whole school community), classroom management and pedagogy.

14) Please tick the relational or restorative processes you use within the senior leadership team to support each other and to model best practice to the whole staff team.

18 responses

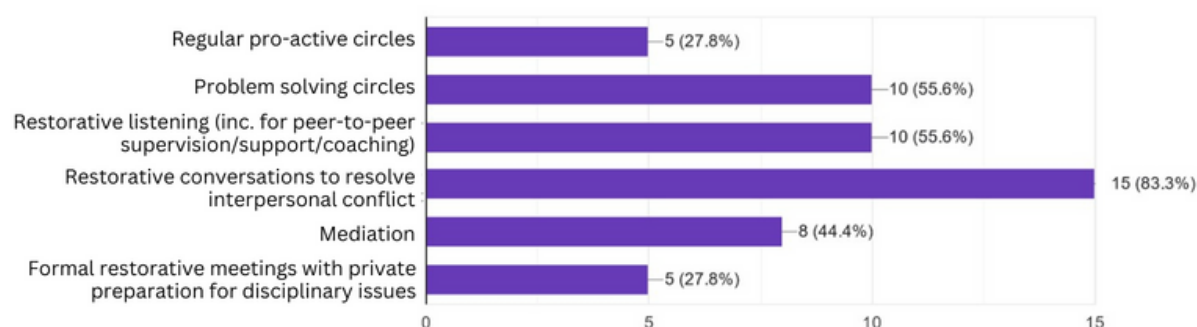


Figure 11: Using restorative practice as a senior leadership team

15) Please tick the relational or restorative processes you use within the whole staff team to support each other and be models of best practice for parents/carers and for the students

18 responses

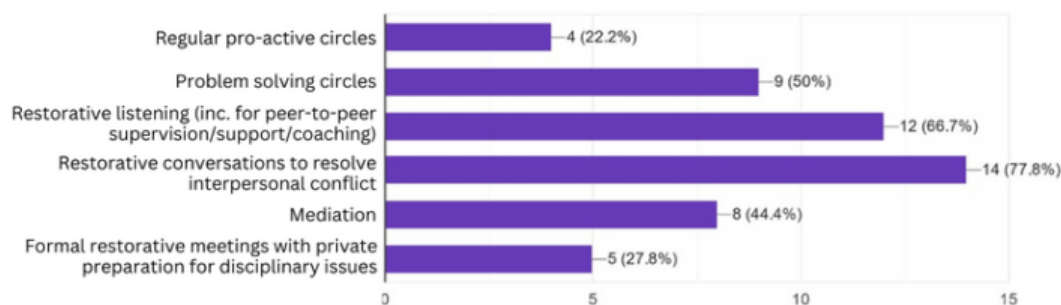


Figure 12: Using restorative practice within the staff team

16) Please tick the relational or restorative processes you use with parents and carers to support each other and strengthen the parent/carer-school partnership

16 responses

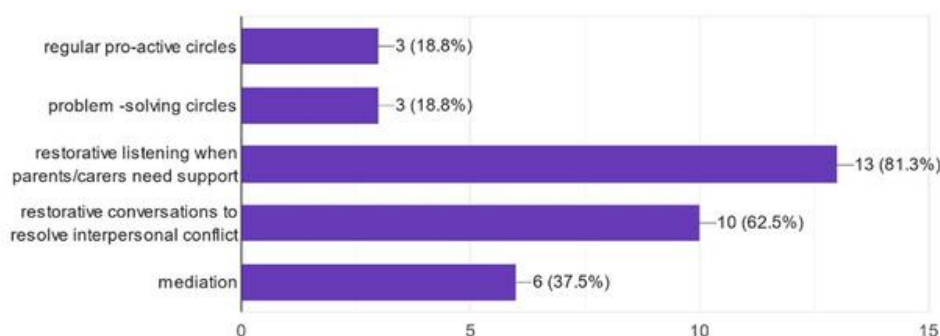


Figure 13: Using restorative practice with parents and carers

17) Please tick the relational or restorative processes you use with students

18 responses

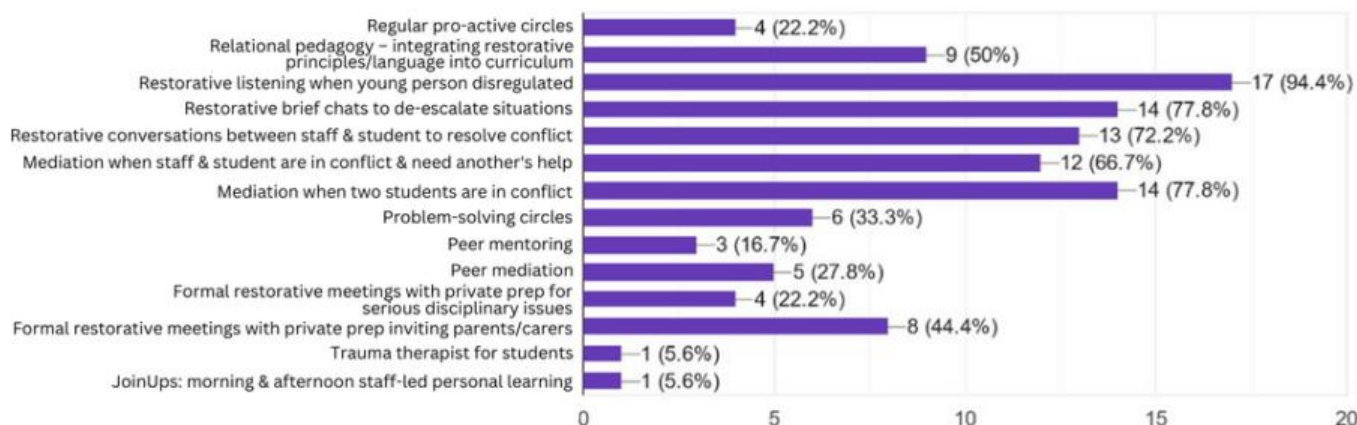


Figure 14: Using restorative practice with students

Some respondents taking part in the one-to-one conversations with me explained how they were encouraging staff to use 'scripts' to help them be consistent in the way they were responding to challenges and incidents. Others spoke of how staff had been trained to use TeamTeach and restorative language together – addressing any potential distress by the child at having been restrained by having a restorative conversation as soon afterwards as they were able to do so.

Trauma-informed relational and restorative practice

Many respondents to the research seem to have built their own trauma-informed practice from years of experience working with vulnerable, volatile young people. One respondent said that his staff had always used informal restorative practice and had been trauma-informed long before 'all these badges'. Some did, nevertheless, acknowledge that formal restorative practice training had given them a framework and a structure to have conversations and had changed the nature of these conversations.

Other important elements to good practice – routines, rules and boundaries

Arrival routine

Most people I spoke with talked about the routine in place when students arrive. This consisted of staff to 'meet and greet' them as they arrived. This gave staff a chance to assess how each young person was that day, as well as to help them feel welcome and valued. This was also a time to remove prohibited items such as mobile phones and vapes.

Students then took part in a shared breakfast. In some smaller schools, this was for everyone, and in others this was in class groups. Most people spoke of this breakfast as a time to help the young people feel part of the group, to interact informally and to learn social skills.

Some respondents mentioned the value of the young people being in small groups and spending time with their tutor and the beginning and end of each day – to prepare for the day and then to reflect at the end of it.

Mainstream shortcomings

A recurring theme in the 1-1 interviews was the extent to which respondents believed that mainstream schools have let the children and young people down. One person went as far as to say: *'when a child is excluded it is because the adults have failed them'*.

Whilst acknowledging that mainstream schools do not always have the resources to address the multiple needs of many children, some respondents believed that many schools were not committed to trying:

'The local secondary schools are more willing to move kids around from school to school because accessing services takes up too much time.'

There was a sense of pride that in AP, at last a child will have their learning needs and developmental needs identified, understood and catered for, but also a sense of regret bordering at times on anger that these needs had not been met before. Several respondents also spoke about how unsafe children had felt in a mainstream school – arriving frightened and anxious, feeling like a failure and believing they were coming to a very dangerous place, having been threatened with exclusion and AP if they did not behave. In fact, respondents described many children and young people feeling safe for the first time. Research is showing that violence and aggression are on the rise in mainstream schools – whilst this research study at least is suggesting that perhaps APs have many of the answers already.

Some respondents spoke of the work they did with their local schools to try and keep a child in mainstream schooling – with the assumption that this would be the best place for them. However, there was ambivalence in some cases because there was also the sense that AP is offering something very special to many vulnerable children and are actually the appropriate provision for them. Some respondents were critical of mainstream staff not being understanding about trauma; labelling a child as 'naughty' rather than trying to understand the communication behind the behaviour; not valuing the importance of understanding each child as an individual and of cultivating relationships; and damaging the child's sense of self-worth by labelling them as a 'failure'.

Some respondents voiced frustration at what a mainstream school expected of them when a young person was referred to their school. They felt that they were somehow expected to wave a magic wand and get the child *'mainstream ready'* - *'whatever that means'*, remarked one respondent – as opposed to the mainstream school recognising that it was their responsibility to make the child's transition back to their school a success by improving their own practice to accommodate the multiple needs of the child.

Staff support and professional development

Many respondents spoke of the importance of staff support, and the strain that the work had on them. Some respondents had introduced peer-to-peer coaching or supervision models whilst others paid for outside supervision for their team on a regular basis.

One Head acknowledged that it was not only the children and young people who came with a history of ACEs and trauma. Many of the adults working in the school did too. To that end, one respondent was actively developing a set of self-audit tools for staff to use to manage their mental state and ensure they were in the best possible place to face the challenges of the job. In this school, a counsellor and a trauma therapist were made available to all staff every few weeks. Several respondents mentioned the Window of Tolerance as a useful self-care tool for staff to use with themselves, as well as teach to their pupils.

Some stressed that the senior leadership team had an open-door policy so that both adults and young people knew that they were always available if someone needed a listening ear. The notion of a 'culture of sharing' was one that several people talked about developing in school.

Many respondents mentioned the use of daily or weekly debriefs for staff to talk through what had been happening – partly so that everyone was able to share information about individual pupils, but also so that staff could share and learn from each other. There was a general commitment to learning from experience and exploring what could be done differently next time. Respondents were using different strategies, but there was a sense that they

were all constantly striving to do the best possible job and were open to learning for themselves and their team.

Discussion

Before discussing the findings, it is important to be transparent about the limitations of this research. A huge limiting factor was the time available. Just thirty days were assigned for this part of the project – which needed to include a literature review, research design, identifying and contacting respondents, questionnaire design and testing, questionnaire dissemination, data analysis and report writing.

Another limitation was the nature of the sample represented, including the degree to which this sample is representative of the wider group of PRUs and APs across England and the size of the sample itself. It is true that ‘opportunistic sampling’ was used, given the tight time scale of the research. Offers from contacts in the field of restorative practice to disseminate the invitation to engage in the research were gratefully accepted. This inevitably meant that respondents were self-selected and more likely to already be familiar with, or interested in, restorative practice. In fact, 100% of the respondents to the questionnaire reported that they used restorative practice. What varied was how long they have been using it and in what way. In 1-1 interviews, some respondents admitted it was all very new and something they wished to explore further.

The size of the sample may at first be considered too small to draw conclusions. 16 people took part in 1-1 interviews and 18 people (many of whom were also interview respondents) filled in the questionnaire. However, this is a qualitative study, where what matters is not so much the scale of the sample but the quality and depth of the insights gained. The small sample can still provide a snapshot of what senior leaders in AP believe to be the main barriers to learning in their schools, share reflections on the extent to which violence is an issue for them within their schools, and share the strategies they use to create safe and productive learning environments.

What is important is that the report does not suggest that these views are representative of the whole AP field. Indeed, an important question that was

posed to the respondents was how representative they believe their school to be – and how they may be different from other such schools. One respondent's answer to this question was:

'Overall, I would like to think that the vast majority of people who work in AP that I have come across believe in the power of relationships and that means things like being trauma informed, and using restorative practice is built into their ways of working as it is what they believe in. However, I have no real evidence that this is the case.'

The sample is far too small to be able to state that there is a correlation between low levels of violence in AP and the use of relational and restorative practice. However, the fact that all respondents report low levels of violence and attribute this to the skill level of staff is interesting. Given that these skills include trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice, it certainly means that the possible link between this practice and violence reduction deserves further study.

Violence

The key message from most of the respondents in the one-to-one interviews is that direct violence is not an issue in their school, in large measure due to the relationships the staff cultivate with the pupils and the skills they have to de-escalate incidents at the outset so that they do not escalate to violence.

Respondents to the questionnaire seemed more ready to acknowledge that violence could arise. Given that many of the respondents to the questionnaire were also respondents in the one-to-one interviews, this may at first seem strange. However, it is likely that the anonymity of the questionnaire enabled people to be more honest, with six people stating that violence was a significant issue and one that it was a huge problem. Of the six respondents experiencing violence as a significant issue (level 4 on a scale of 1-5), three said this was a daily challenge, and three reported it as a weekly challenge. The one reporting violence as a huge problem said that it happened every day.

The questionnaire did not ask how many people were responsible for the violence, and this would have helped to put the answers into perspective. Some respondents in the one-to-one interviews did say that it was a small number of individuals who were responsible for the violence – sometimes only one or two.

Another factor could have been timing. The one-to-one interviews took place at different times over the space of one month. It is possible that by the time the questionnaire was answered, respondents could have had a week or two when certain individuals had had a very bad day or week. This would almost certainly have influenced the answers.

The key message still remains the same – with a few exceptions, the respondents believed that staff had the skills to identify potential trigger points for violence and calm things down before an outburst, and to de-escalate situations quickly should they flare up. Whilst some schools did report using positive handling at times when safety was an issue, there is also an awareness that such methods can in themselves aggravate a situation and be perceived by the children and young people as a violent act. The use of verbal de-escalation, including relational and restorative conversations, was making a contribution and ‘changing the conversation’.

Because of the focus of this research, one area that was not explored was the extent to which the adults working in AP themselves experienced violence. It was mentioned by only one respondent in the context of a new site in his multi-academy trust where the ethos and policies had yet to be introduced. This omission is interesting in the light of a YouGov survey from June 2022 which reported that one in seven teachers had reported facing violence at least once a month.¹⁶ Could it be that the emphasis that staff in AP put on maintaining good relationships, and on practices which seek to understand the communication behind outbursts of violence, means that these staff are in fact much safer than those in a mainstream school without these commitments or capacities?

¹⁶ <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/42840-one-seven-secondary-school-teachers-say-they-face->

Barriers to learning

One observation about the findings is that all the barriers to learning identified seem to be located within the child, with the implication that working with and supporting the child will help. What caught my eye were the references to negative attitudes to learning, and the perception of some children and young people that school and the curriculum are an irrelevance in their lives. There is a growing literature that supports this view and emerging research suggesting that an increasing number of young people are becoming disengaged. This is particularly the case amongst racially minoritised young people, for whom the curriculum is perceived as ignoring who they are and their cultural heritages (Perera, 2020). As Cremin and Bevington explain, this is an example of the cultural violence that these young people experience (Cremin & Bevington, 2017).

A recent report called 'Schools for All? Young people's experiences of alienation in the English secondary school system' illustrates the degree to which young people are feeling alienated and disengaged from their school experience (MacPherson et al., 2023). Based on a national survey involving 10,000 young people in 2021 and then qualitative research involving 100 young people between 2021 and 2022, one of the shocking findings is that nearly 50% of young people between the ages of 15 and 16 do not find their school experience enjoyable or meaningful, but rather as something they have to get through to improve their prospects for their future. They feel alienated and stressed by teaching methods that have been introduced in recent years, the emphasis on exams and more traditional subjects such as Mathematics and English. Students who would be more interested in creative and practical subjects do not see the relevance of what they are being taught and do not feel recognised or valued for their different interests and aptitudes.

These findings suggest that the structural and cultural violence experienced by so many children and young people can lead to frustration and, at times, direct violence. As several of the respondents said, '*Behaviour is communication.*' Sadly, in such cases this communication is often ignored. The young person responsible is more likely to be blamed, rather than the social injustice they are reacting against.

We might draw the conclusion that one barrier to learning is the violence built into the educational system itself, and that children and young people who believe that the curriculum is irrelevant are acting a bit like ‘canaries in the coal mine’.

What is interesting is that in AP there is a real opportunity to offer much more personalised learning opportunities, geared to the interests and aptitudes of the children and young people. Several respondents did refer to this as their approach, and I wonder if in fact the small class sizes and the greater emphasis on meeting learning needs might mean that APs can become hubs of curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation. Greater engagement with learning would lead to a greater sense of achievement, an increased sense of agency and a heightened sense of self-worth – all factors likely to reduce frustration, despair, conflict and violence.

Analysing what constitutes barriers to learning and how to overcome these is extremely important for AP. A report published in 2020 by the Centre for Social Justice highlighted the fact that:

‘In 13 LAs not a single child in AP has passed their English and maths GCSE in the past three years. In three, not a single teacher in AP is qualified. And there is no area in the country where the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving AP equals even the very worst-performing area for children from mainstream.

Moreover, there is a huge disparity between north and south, with one in 50 pupils in the North East achieving a basic pass in maths and English, compared to one in 12 in Outer London’ (The Centre for Social Justice, 2020, p. 5).

This report was aspirational:

‘We believe that any child being educated in AP should obtain better outcomes than the same child would have achieved at their mainstream school’ (The Centre for Social Justice, 2020, p. 4).

This aspiration highlights the ambivalence that many respondents in the report seemed to have about mainstream education. On the one hand, they work very hard with their local schools to provide the advice and support to help staff there keep a child in mainstream. And yet, on the other hand, they are genuinely very proud of the work they do and seem to believe that their setting may well be the best place for that child. Indeed, if they can ensure better outcomes for that child, then that is something to be proud of.

Relationships

The relationships that staff in AP have with the pupils has already been identified as a protective factor in terms of reduced violence, increased safety and trust and a motivating factor in terms of effective teaching and learning.

What I want to mention here was a set of relationships that were not emphasized as much as they could have been – those between the pupils themselves. There were some examples given of opportunities to socialise, over shared meals for example, taking part in practical activities or having access to a shared common room. However, there were very few examples of explicit opportunities made for building trust, understanding and connection between the young people – developing their relationship building skills using circle practice, for example (a key part of relational and restorative practice). When this came up in conversations, some respondents expressed an interest in finding out more about these ‘proactive circles’ (as they are sometimes called), although one respondent voiced concern about some of his students engaging in circle process due to their experience of trauma and being on heightened alert.

Another opportunity to develop relationship skills is using what I refer to as Relational and Restorative Pedagogy – an approach to teaching and learning that develops social and emotional skills whilst also delivering the more formal aspects of a curriculum (Hopkins, 2011). This is also a feature of Guy Claxton’s Learning Power approach. He talks about the power of reciprocity, emphasising the importance of being ready, willing and able to learn alone and with others. One respondent mentioned this as integral to the teaching and learning policy in their school.

Restorative practice

What is interesting is that the most used restorative processes are the informal responsive ones. Respondents describe using problem-solving circles, 'restorative' listening (non-judgemental active listening) and inter-personal problem-solving chats as the most common uses amongst the senior leadership team and with staff. These informal responses are also the ones most used with the pupils, which is also what people reported in the one-to-one interviews. Proactive circles and the more formal restorative 'conferences' for responding to serious incidents are used least often. This may be expected since the more that lower-level interventions are made, the less likely it is that serious interventions will be needed.

Alternatively, it may be that staff do not have the confidence to address deep-seated conflict. Two respondents described how keeping young people apart was a tactic for avoiding potential conflict, and the phrase 'divide and conquer' came up twice by two different headteachers. In one case this meant ensuring pupils had different timetables and were never on site at the same time. Whether restorative interventions had been tried in such cases was not discussed. This was an interesting response and a curious one if the schools were embracing restorative practice with confidence and competence. However, it would be inappropriate to make a judgement here because engagement in a restorative process must always be voluntary, and it is true that some people simply do not want to engage, however much support and encouragement they are given.

However, more notable was the limited use being made of proactive circles, one of the most powerful parts of restorative practice. When I queried this during the interviews, some people expressed an interest in finding out more, and I did wonder if perhaps proactive circles had not been part of their initial training. It is true that some training providers do still focus on the responsive aspects of restorative practice and not the proactive, relational aspects.

Only one respondent mentioned the use of circles to give children and young people ownership of school and class norms and the opportunity to support and challenge each other if these norms were not adhered to. This has been

a key part of restorative practice in the US, for example in schools for troubled youth with life experience of trauma and substance misuse.

The regular use of circles, whether amongst adults or children/young people or both, can help build a sense of community and a sense of belonging – both of which are important for building strong and healthy relationships (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). As Jean Schmitz, a restorative practice trainer based in Peru, says:

‘Having a sense of community means feeling part of something bigger than ourselves, which can give us a sense of identity, security, and support. In addition, the educational institution, as a community, can provide a social context in which we can develop healthy and strong relationships, receive and offer help, learn and grow, and contribute to the collective well-being.’¹⁷

Trauma-informed, relational, restorative practice

Every respondent in the one-to-one interviews and the questionnaire said that they used trauma-informed practice and almost all are attachment aware. There is more to learn about what this actually means on a daily basis. I have personal experience of working with a school that would identify as trauma-informed and yet recognises that more practical skills are needed to ‘operationalise’ the awareness and understanding of trauma when conflict or challenge occurs. The two complement each other, which seems to be the experience of everyone I spoke to.

The field of restorative practice in schools is increasingly becoming trauma-informed (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021), and there is much greater emphasis now on the proactive relational practices. Hence the usefulness of using the phrase relational and restorative practice. Restorative practice in the absence of trauma-awareness runs the risk of causing more harm, not repairing it, and responsive restorative practice in the absence of a proactive relational culture is like gardening in a gale.

¹⁷ LinkedIn post from Jean Schmitz.

Conclusion

This report has shared the findings of research designed to explore the extent to which direct violence is an issue for Alternative Provision (AP) in England; whether such violence is a significant barrier to learning; what constitutes best practice in creating safe, calm learning environment and the role that restorative practice is playing in enabling staff in these schools to reduce levels of violence.

Main findings

The key message from most respondents was that physical and verbal violence was not a big issue in their school. There was a discrepancy between what respondents said about levels of violence in the one-to-one interviews and what was recorded in the questionnaires. However, reasons for this discrepancy were suggested in the discussion. Furthermore, the one-to-one interviews did suggest that even when violence did occur, it seemed to be restricted to a small number of individuals. This is a noteworthy finding given the concerns nationwide about growing youth violence and the disproportionate number of excluded children finding themselves drawn into violence and other criminal activity.

What respondents explained is that, although the young people in their care are exposed to violence in the community beyond the school gates and are very vulnerable to criminal exploitation, within the school itself things can be different. Respondents acknowledged that often a violent outburst at the mainstream school was the deciding factor for the referral of the young person to their AP, but that once their previously unmet or undiagnosed learning needs, trauma and emotional needs had all been recognised, they were able to settle down and feel safe and supported. Because of these violent outbursts in mainstream (which can lead to exclusion), and because excluded young people are more likely to be drawn into violence in their community, this has given rise to the belief that the AP itself must be a violent place. However, this piece of research shows that this is not necessarily the case.

What is working well

Respondents explained that their staff teams have the skills to create a safe and supportive environment, to identify issues before they get to 'boiling point', to de-escalate a potentially violent situation and to help young people learn from every incident and change their behaviour. The research suggests that these skills could be summarised as: trauma-informed, relational and restorative practice. This combined approach is gaining traction in schools internationally (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021, 2024 (in press)).

What could improve practice

Trauma-informed practice is being used in different ways in the different schools represented in this research. Relational practice is at the heart of each of these schools, and some aspects of restorative practice are being used. However, there seems to be a piece-meal approach to these three important practices, and there is scope for developing a cohesive framework in which all three are related and form a consistent and cohesive philosophy. This framework could then form a firm foundation upon which more work could be done to support the young people themselves in learning how to make and maintain relationships, to resolve conflicts in nonviolent ways and to develop the resilience and assertiveness they need for resisting the pressures from their community to get drawn into violence and criminal exploitation.

Nonetheless, the main finding is that trauma-informed relational and restorative practice, even when not fully developed, can make a huge impact on the lives of the children and young people in AP. If this practice could be consolidated and improved in schools where it is already being used, and if it could be more widely disseminated across all such schools, the lives of many more young people could be made safer, happier and more fulfilling.

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