

No. 4

Policy and
practice briefing

‘You only have one chance at your education so it’s important to make a go of it. When things get better at school they get better at home – it’s all linked together.’

School Restorative Conferencing

A positive approach to keeping
young people in the school community

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Barnardo's

NORTHERN IRELAND

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

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A positive approach to keeping young people in the school community

Dealing with disruptive behaviour is a difficult issue for many, if not all, teachers. Suspensions or exclusions are becoming increasingly used as a means of control, with many teachers feeling that there is no alternative. But does exclusion really work? This report looks at the effectiveness of suspension and exclusion, and highlights School Restorative Conferencing as an appropriate alternative.

The Diamond House School Restorative Conferencing scheme

The primary aim of the School Restorative Conferencing (SRC) scheme, which opened as a pilot in 2000, is to provide a positive approach to school inclusion for all through a restorative justice model. The project works with schools in the Southern Education & Library Board area and is based in Barnardo's Diamond House Centre, Moy, County Tyrone.

The School Restorative Conferencing scheme is a partnership between

Barnardo's Northern Ireland and the Southern Education & Library Board. It is a multi-disciplinary working relationship between schools, social work services, education welfare services and police youth diversion officers.

What is School Restorative Conferencing?

The remit of SRC is the inclusion and participation of children and young people in the decision-making process within school, with the aim of maintaining the young people within the school community. The voice of the child is central to the process. School Restorative Conferencing is derived from Family Restorative Conferencing (also known as Family Group Conferencing) and applies the principles of restorative justice to young people at risk of exclusion from school. The SRC approach seeks to find ways to keep the young person within the school system and so prevent a drift towards anti-social activity and social isolation which has been associated with school exclusion.

School exclusion

- The vast majority of children excluded from schools in Northern Ireland are from secondary schools (rather than grammar or primary schools) (1).
- In Northern Ireland male pupils are

much more likely to be excluded through expulsion or suspension than female pupils (2).

- Black pupils in England are 3-4 times more likely to be excluded from school than other pupils (3).
- In England pupils assessed as having special educational needs are three times more likely to be excluded than those without statements (3).
- Children in care are 10 times more likely to be excluded than other children (4).
- Children excluded from school are 90 times more likely to become homeless than those who stay on at school and pass exams (5).

Recent media coverage (6) has highlighted the rise in the numbers of children in Northern Ireland being expelled or suspended from school. Others, such as The National Association of Schoolmasters Union and Women Teachers (NASUWT), (6) have linked this to a rise in violence in schools, particularly violence directed at teachers, and defend the use of exclusion as a necessary tool to deal with this threat to teachers. There is a feeling that the use of suspensions or exclusions is becoming increasingly used as a means of control – many teachers simply feel there isn't an effective alternative.

A breakdown of suspensions and expulsions in Northern Ireland – 2001/02

	Suspensions	Expulsions
Key Stage 1	51	0
Key Stage 2	308	0
Key Stage 3	2,484	30
Key Stage 4	2,253	31
Total	5,096	61

Figures from the Department of Education Pupil Support Unit (2)

Ninety per cent of those expelled and 83 per cent of those suspended were male pupils.

It is important to look at the statistics in Northern Ireland in comparison to other parts of the UK. Northern Ireland has a much lower level of school exclusion than Wales, England or Scotland. For example in 1994/95 there were 12,458 school exclusions (0.159 per cent of school population) in England, compared to only 62 (0.018 per cent of school population) in Northern Ireland for the same period (7).

Research (7) into why this discrepancy exists found that differences in the statutory schemes regulating exclusion provided only part of the reason. They found that the smaller number of schools and smaller class sizes in Northern Ireland facilitated communication and made the negotiation of problems easier, thus preventing exclusions. They also refer to a survey carried out by the Department of

Education for Northern Ireland (8) which found that most schools did not identify the behaviour of pupils as a problem.

However, although pupils in Northern Ireland are less likely to be expelled, statistics show that once they are, it can be more difficult for them to return to education.

So just how effective is suspension and exclusion as an intervention for wrongdoing? *'If the goal of any intervention is to instil a sense of community and relational thinking then isolating someone (as in suspension and exclusion) is exactly the worst way to achieve it'* (9). There are also long-term implications from using exclusion, with identified links between school exclusion and a drift towards juvenile crime, homelessness and dependency on welfare agencies (10).

What does School Restorative Conferencing do?

SRC provides a safe environment which allows all those involved in a situation to feel able to constructively participate in the process and solution. The people involved in a SRC meeting will always include the young person and the person most affected by their behaviour – usually a teacher or another pupil. The safe environment supports the victim who is often feeling vulnerable. Parents are actively encouraged to participate and are seen as crucial to the process. Other school members or professionals also attend, such as a head teacher, social worker, police or a youth and community worker, and most importantly an education welfare officer (EWO). Wider community members, such as friends, are involved when requested by the young person.

Based on the Restorative Justice Model, School Restorative Conferencing seeks to:

- increase the wrongdoer's awareness of the harm they have done
- give the wrongdoer a chance to be held accountable to the person harmed
- give the wrongdoer an opportunity to repair the harm they have created so they can reintegrate into the school setting
- facilitate the wrongdoer's participation in the solution.

The person who has been harmed has the opportunity to:

- proceed only if they wish
- speak out about what has happened to them and how it has affected them

- speak directly to the person who committed the harm and be heard
- have an input into how the harm can be put to rights, enabling the victim to feel empowered.

Schools can benefit from:

- having an acknowledgment of the harm done to the school community
- holding a person accountable in a personal way
- having another approach available to deal with a situation where traditional methods of punishment have not proved appropriate or effective
- involving all parties in problem-solving, instead of choosing prescribed punishments that can often be judged too harsh, too lenient or simply ineffective.

The School Restorative Conferencing process

- 1 Following an incident or a series of events the school's staff, educational welfare officer, social worker or youth diversion officer can refer to the School Restorative Conferencing scheme.
- 2 A trained independent SRC co-ordinator meets with the wrongdoer and their parents, those affected by the incident, school staff, key professionals and other relevant individuals and invites them to meet in a 'round table' format.
- 3 A set of scripted questions are asked firstly to the wrongdoer. This helps the wrongdoer identify what they did, realise how these actions have impacted on the victim(s) and the school, and accept responsibility for their behaviour.
- 4 The victim(s) is asked to share the impact the behaviour has had on them.
- 5 Others – for example parents, friends, the head teacher – also share how they have been affected by the incident.
- 6 The group, with the wrongdoer playing an active role, discusses what can be done to repair the damage.
- 7 The wrongdoer is offered support and encouragement to enable them to repair the harm.
- 8 The plan is reviewed after three months (or earlier if needed).

Positive outcomes

The school restorative process is already used frequently in America and Australia and evidence shows that it has had a major impact on the reduction of school suspensions and exclusions and improvement in behaviour and relationships.

Pilot project – evaluation

During the pilot study the Diamond House School Restorative Conferencing scheme operated with one school conferencing co-ordinator and facilitated 29 School Restorative Conferences. A total of nine secondary schools from the Southern Education & Library Board area took part.

September 2000 – June 2003

September 2000 – June 2003

	Enquiries	Referrals	Engaged	SRC	Review
2000/2001	18	14	12	10	6
2001/2002	29	23	23	13	8
2002/2003	30	24	20	6	6
Total	77	61	55	29	20

Behaviour which resulted in referral to SRC included persistent truancy, aggressive behaviour, assault, bullying, vandalism, theft and disruptive behaviour. The SRC was not the first method the schools had employed to help address the young people's behaviour. Previous methods included suspension, detention, being put on report, speaking to parents or being referred to the support unit or an EWO.

Feedback

Children and young people

All the young people involved in the SRC were fully aware of the reasoning behind it and acknowledged their role within it.

'They told me what they would be doing, that they weren't blaming people but just trying to sort the problem out.'

'I thought they would be able to get me back into school and that I could help myself. I felt alright but I was nervous about talking to the principal.'

'It seemed like it would be alright because we would all get a chance to speak and I could decide who I wanted to be at the meeting.'

The vast majority of young people (93 per cent) felt that they had the opportunity to say everything they wanted or needed to say.

'I got to say sorry.'

'I really felt that I got everything out in the open.'

'[The co-ordinator] made it clear that I was the main focus, it was to help me and it was to focus on the positive – it was my meeting. This made me feel confident to say what I wanted because the meeting revolved around me and they were there to listen to what I had to say.'

When others in the meeting talked about the impact of the young person's behaviour on them, it had different effects on the young person concerned:

'I felt ashamed and sorry that I'd put them through it.'

'I didn't like it because they said that I was getting my mum into bother.'

All of the young people felt that they had been listened to during the SRC.

'They asked me questions about school and stuff and listened to what I said.'

'I know for a fact they were listening to me – they were looking at me and asking me questions.'

During the SRC process every point raised is discussed, and only included in the plan if the young person agrees to it. Seventy-nine per cent of the young people agreed that they had contributed to the plan.

The vast majority of young people – 86 per cent – felt that SRC was better or much better than other methods adopted by the school in the past.

Afterwards, 50 per cent of young people reported that their relationship with the school had improved, and 71 per cent of young people feel that their behaviour at school is now better.

'I've improved a lot. I do my homework and I haven't stolen anything.'

'I'm trying to behave now – if people do things on me I ignore them because I don't want to get into no more trouble. What they write on my reports now is good.'

'It's better now because I don't want to let anyone down.'

'It's a good idea and it improves your behaviour. I don't get in much trouble now, things have got better at home – not that much fighting anymore.'

Thirteen of the fourteen young people who took part in the evaluation would recommend School Restorative Conferencing to another young person.

Families

'I felt I had a better understanding of the teachers' concerns.'

'Everyone was listened to and shown respect.'

Professionals

'It's a good idea, especially as the pupil was able to see how his behaviour impacts upon others.'

'I feel it is a very positive approach and can see it being effective in a number of cases.'

'John's teachers are happier now that he is no longer bullying. For this type of pupil this approach is very successful.'

Some key principles of School Restorative Justice

The experience of Diamond House School Restorative Conferencing highlights a number of key principles central to the success of the process.

- Voluntary participation of child or young person.
- Emphasis on the process being a positive and empowering experience.
- Ownership of and commitment to solutions.
- Facilitated by trained personnel.
- Working in partnership with pupil, family and school.
- Support of Education & Library Board.
- Support of school management and teachers.
- Support of associated professionals.

It is also very important to remember that:

- not all referrals need to progress to SRC – intervention and engagement can lead to improvement in behaviours / attendance
- not every young person or every situation is suited to SRC – it is one choice available to help but not the only solution.

Positive outcomes from the pilot evaluation

- Improved relationship between families and schools.
- Improved behaviour and attitude of the child / young person.
- Young people who have been excluded have been able to return to the school system.
- Prevented young people who were at risk of suspension / expulsion from being excluded from school.
- Increase in attendance levels.
- Increase in performance levels.
- Reduction in disruptive behaviour / bullying.
- Reduction in suspension / exclusion.
- Increase in young people remaining in school system.

Vision for the future

Diamond House has been successful in gaining funding to continue and expand the School Restorative Conferencing work. Funding from The Children's Fund and Peace II will enable the project to recruit two full-time school co-ordinators to concentrate on work with Year 8 and 9 and to develop the approach within primary schools. The creation of a senior schools co-ordinator will concentrate on work with Year 10 – 12 pupils and provide support through to school leaving age.

Conclusion

School Restorative Conferencing is clearly a valuable asset to schools seeking to keep young people with problem behaviour within the school environment. It also reflects the ethos and practical guidance within the Department of Education's report, *Pastoral care: promoting positive discipline* (11).

School Restorative Conferencing:

- encourages dialogue between the protagonist and the victim
- helps build positive relationships between the young person, their family and school personnel

- develops a greater understanding of each other's position, and collaboration to repair relationships helps the young person realise their responsibilities and accountability to others for their future.

It is important to stress that SRC is not always appropriate for every situation or for every young person. Where there are deep-seated problems, especially if they originate at home, SRC alone will be of limited use. However it can highlight the need for more specialist support for the family.

Recommendations

- All schools should be supported to actively promote an environment where affirmative relationships and positive behaviour is promoted. This aim is clearly stated in *Pastoral care: promoting positive behaviour* (11), a publication setting out the Department of Education's response to and support for positive discipline strategies.
- Opportunities for schools to explore positive behaviour strategies such as Restorative Conferencing should be facilitated and offered to a wider range of schools.

- School policies for behaviour management should emphasise primarily pupil-focused strategies and promote positive discipline methods.
- School discipline policies should reflect the benefits of early intervention.
- School behaviour policies should involve staff, parents and pupil representatives
- Schools should be supported to develop greater communication with parents or carers, especially when there are behavioural difficulties. The root cause of disruptive or problem behaviour at school may be the result of difficulties at home.

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