

Swimming pools, Flash mobs and Disruption in Schools; False Hopes or Promising Futures?

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'What are Restorative Approaches in Education?

Restorative Approaches are a range of practices used to manage behaviour in schools'¹.

We are at a pivotal point in the development and implementation of Restorative Approaches (RA) in schools. Changes in government priorities, the recent UK government elections which have brought a radical Conservative agenda to English schools, the forthcoming Scottish elections, which are likely to see deepening of a divide between these 2 countries, the economic situation and fears of another recession, are all having a significant impact on the work of schools and the mood of teachers. We know that RA has been successful where it has been implemented but some will be asking if we can afford the luxury of RA in times like these.

The questions I want to examine today focus on the following; What do we need to think about now? What do we need to do now? What would help?

While aware that different political and social contexts will necessarily give rise to different questions, I now want to set out some issues that we all seem to have in common.

'Victims' and 'Offenders'

There is still great deal of thinking to be done about the involvement of the 'victim' in repairing harm. There is an implicit assumption in RA that involvement of the victim is a 'good thing'; that returning the conflict to the people most directly involved is necessary (Christie 1977). This is problematic.

What about when an incident arises out of alcohol or mental health issues, grief and loss? These are not side issues; they are not marginal to the discussion in a nation beset by alcohol-related crime statistics and health concerns. We are foolish if we think that children, young people, and indeed the adults who work with them in school, can always leave such issues at

¹ Scottish high school website, accessed 10 January 2011.

the school gate. But perhaps what we can do is think much more actively about the structures we already have in place and which can be adapted to be more restorative, and in this case, work out the questions around involving 'victims'. In Scottish schools, for example, we have long had a system of regular joint meetings involving schools and partner agencies such as educational psychology, social work, parents and sometimes individual young people themselves, which aim to provide a multi-agency response to 'troubled and troublesome' young people. These meetings usually take place in secondary schools monthly, and in primary schools perhaps less often. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these meetings have become more restorative but this seems to be happening on an ad-hoc basis. In complex situations, where, e.g. mental health is an issue in the family, then clearly a multi-disciplinary response may well be helpful. A policy framework supported by the local education authority would be one way to ensure better coherence across the country for young people in difficulty.

Leaving that question to one side for the present, there is another question we need to consider. The involvement of the victim has been described by some as 'institutionalised revenge'; introducing an 'unfair bias' (Black 2003). The usual response to this criticism is that this happens only where a Restorative process has been poorly managed. But I am remembering the powerful words of Jackie Huggins, Australian Aboriginal author, Historian, and Aboriginal rights activist, when she talked about the complexity of using RA in severely damaged and fragmented post-colonial communities. Problems with involving the victim may not always relate to the inadequacies of training or process.

And while we often acknowledge that RA is a journey or a process, rather than a simple aim, we must then admit that along that journey, and very often in schools, the discourse about pupils is still often framed in terms of who is 'wrong' and who is 'right'. The talk is of bully and victim. We hear children described as a 'poor wee soul', or one of the 'waifs and strays'. I am sure you can think of other examples of totalizing language that are common in your setting. Paradoxically perhaps, given its roots in RJ, RA has the capacity to dismantle a false dichotomy of victim and offender. It offers a framework for recognition of the complexity of dynamic flows of power in relationships in schools, but only if it is developed as more than a tool of behaviour management. Research suggests that; youth offending makes youths vulnerable to adult harassment; victimisation predicts delinquency 3 years later; delinquency predicts victimisation 3 years later; the more often victimisation is repeated, the more strongly it predicts delinquency (Smith, 2004).

Power in schools

This leads on to thinking more broadly about questions of power in schools. We often talk about the ways in which we can learn from other related fields and this has been enormously helpful;

but we also need to think today more deeply about the ways in which schools are distinctive and different from other situations which might use a Restorative approach. For me, the most important difference is in the power relations within schools. This has a number of different aspects.

Firstly, (and this relates back in part to my concern about the need to consider again the role of the victim) schools are not voluntary organisations. They occupy a unique place in society because education is both a right and an obligation for children aged 5-16 years. The question of power in any institution is always complex but thinking about 'voluntariness' within schools deserves to be at the forefront of our thinking about RA, and especially when we consider questions of choice, readiness, engagement, timing and so on. We may not be able to 'solve' this question but we should acknowledge its contribution to understanding the complexity and uniqueness of RA in education.

This question of power is not intended to suggest support for a simplistic view of teacher-pupil relations, where all teachers have all the power and all pupils have none. A much more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of power is needed for this discussion. We know, for example, that some pupils have extraordinarily powerful positions in a school community. They can motivate whole groups to raise funds for a special charity, or get teachers to do a 'X Factor' or 'Stars in your Eyes' event. We can all think of some teachers who seem to be able to silence a class with a look. So can some individual pupils. We also know that some *groups* of pupils have more power than others; that white, heterosexual males dominate space in schools and in the spaces around school. School is a 'soup' of asymmetrical relationships. What of the key equality issues (age, disability, religion, race, sexual orientation and gender) and relative poverty? Not nearly enough work has been done in relation to these issues in education, and in thinking about what Derick Wilson has reminded us (June 2010) is the 'differential impact of harm'. Without this thinking and research, we are still offering only a superficial exploration of possibility and challenge for RA.

I also wonder if we need to think again about one particular issue, which is often difficult for schools; that is, 'telling', 'clipping' or 'grassing'. It is interesting and significant how many local and dialect words for this we have found when doing research with children. It is often an area of tension in schools between adults and children. Even pupils who would not be involved in any disruption will be unlikely to 'tell' on their peers. Research indicates that schools feel they deal well with bullying and children do not (Benetto 2009, McKenna 2009). This is such a stark and consistent finding that the issue of power in school is in this sense, one of the most immediate areas where RA may be much more widely used. However, it cannot be effective unless we explore the issues which underlie the staunch refusal to 'tell' on the part of pupils. What issues

about loyalty, fear, group and individual identity do we need to understand better? This seems to be me to be a clear example of where a diluted version of RA as behaviour management is shown to be inadequate. RA as both ethos building approach and as a response to harm is needed.

I want to raise two further questions about power in schools. The first relates to RA and dealing with more serious issues in school. In the research we have undertaken (Lloyd and McCluskey 2009, Kane et al 2007), there have sometimes been concerns from school staff about RA's capacity to deal with very serious harm and conflict. While there is strong evidence that RA has been able to deal with very serious difficulties between individuals and in communities more broadly, I also think we need to think closely about how this works in schools. One of the most telling points made by David Carruthers in the first of these seminars in February 2010 for me, was when he talked about a restorative conference which followed a serious offence. He said, 'The tragedy remains a tragedy'. He went to suggest that a restorative intervention may not always be about forgiveness. It may have a more modest aim to allow those involved to feel safe again, to have some understanding of a situation. It seems that teachers' fears about using RA in serious situations relate to a concern that the 'tragedy' or trauma or hurt will be somehow airbrushed out or sidelined, its impact minimised. However, a good Restorative process will always be mindful that 'the tragedy remains a tragedy'. When we were undertaking the research in Scotland, one primary school child said to us, 'we are not best friends but we get along now'. Perhaps in a much more minor way this pupil was reflecting on an effective Restorative intervention, making a similar point, implying that a restorative meeting had not taken away the difficulty but made it manageable. In one important sense, we would do well to reframe the question about the severity of the harm caused. We may ask, not 'how serious is the offence/incident/harm?', but rather, 'are those involved all ready to participate?' To answer this question needs knowledge, skills and support for both.

This links to a further troubling issue: the roles and responsibilities of staff in school. In contrast with many of the people with whom we work in partner agencies such as social work, psychology, health and community education, teachers do not have a formalized structure of support and supervision. There is no systematic place and time for preparation and review of person to person work and outcomes. This is not to deny that many senior staff offer good support to staff, or that many departments and teams support each other very well, but this relies too much on good will and luck. I wonder if one of the effects of this lack of formal support and supervision has been an erosion of confidence about professional boundaries. Those of us who are fortunate to have worked closely with social workers and educational psychologists, for example, recognize that they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. When they encounter a professional issue, they have opportunities to discuss it. I think teachers

have taken on, and been asked to take on, more and more responsibilities in recent years and the boundaries have become very much more blurred. Clearer systems of support and supervision would assist with that, as well as offering a much needed space for 'caseload' issues to be explored and worked through. Greater attention needs to be paid to the ways in which we think about support for those who work most closely with those who are most damaged in schools. This is not an argument for avoiding the use of RA, or for handing it on to an outside facilitator. Much will be lost when this route is taken. It should point up, however, the need not only for staff training, but much more care about the meaning of 'support' for staff who may have most contact with the most vulnerable children and their families.

A second question here is about the use of RA with adults. Although RA has been shown to be most effective where it is modeled by school leaders and where staff adopt RA in resolving difficulties between themselves as well as with children, our research and that of others reveals that RA is often restricted to use with children (as in the quotation from the school website noted earlier). Is it simply a case of a need for more training or is there something else that we need to explore and understand? Walford (1994) noted that educational research often pays too much attention to those with less power. It is often easier to research less powerful groups in society. Researching teachers may be seen as much more risky so the focus of research and professional learning and school policy, especially in difficult areas such as relationships, is often on the pupils. However, research also suggests that organizational discourse; the way staff in schools talk, is closely related to organizational practices; what counts as normal and acceptable ways of doing things. And that schools with a 'wider range of well-connected practices have less difficult behaviour' (Watkins, Mauthner, Hewitt, Epstein and Leonard 2007, 61) e.g. when a school can acknowledge and analyse the ways in which it is part of a network of causes of difficulty, and discussion is focused on initiating solutions which take this into account, success is more likely (Drewey 2004).

There are questions, too, to be asked about spaces and opportunities for parental involvement. Parents and carers are still on the periphery of schools. RA seems to have the potential to offer a healthy way of increasing engagement of schools with their local communities. In our research, we have encountered isolated but successful examples of this in schools, but they are rare. What are the barriers? What would make it better? More research that looks at the issues for adults, and links with work with parents is needed. I think we face a key challenge here. Despite recent UK government calls for a 'big society' and greater involvement of parents in schools, this is problematic. Those of us who heard Judge David Carruthers in February 2010, heard him talk about the involvement of the local community. He suggested that in NZ, most of the necessary infrastructure was already in place. We are not in that position and we will need to find another route.

Teaching and learning

From a focus specifically on people, power and relationships, I want to turn now to begin to explore how these relate to teaching and learning. In Scotland a new national curriculum is being introduced, which aims to move away from prescription to a new recognition of the professionalism and expertise of teachers. What are the connections and distances between such teaching and learning policies and RA? Will they nourish and sustain each other or destroy? Wendy Drewery's contribution at the RA seminar in June in Cambridge highlighted some important similarities in policy directions between New Zealand and Scotland and further research which examines the connections, and perhaps the gaps, between policy on behaviour and policy on teaching and learning. Research in this area could bring significant benefit. There are other areas which we should also consider: What might be the implications of using RA with younger children? Is it simply a case of adapting what we know or are there more fundamental questions to be asked about developmental appropriateness? What about children with learning disabilities or who have autism?

What about punishment and RA? If dialogue builds relationships and those relationships are the foundation of restorative cultures, how can communities maintain the integrity of a process within the confines of structures and legislations that impinge on building restorative cultures? This issue is one with which our research team have often wrestled (McCluskey et al. forthcoming, McCluskey et al. 2008). And perhaps on a different level –what about the silences in our schools? e.g. homophobic violence and bullying? It seems sometimes that schools have become very good at politeness, valuing silence and avoiding conflict. 'We have raised a nation of passive bystanders'. Brenda Morrison reminded us of these words of the Dalai Lama at the first RA seminars. At what cost?

Local Contexts, Local Questions

You will have noticed that I have referred to Scotland and Scottish examples in this paper. I want to continue to do so. Alongside the issues which are common to many of us, we also need to consider the importance of local contexts much more closely. For those of us working in Scotland, we might usefully consider the following taken for granted aspects of our context: that, for example, Scotland's Presbyterian traditions shape the 'way we do things' and therefore that Scottish schools are much more likely to be open to Restorative ways of thinking about issues and difficulties; local decision making, equality of all members of a community rather than hierarchy; that single sex schooling is exceptionally rare in Scotland, despite its acknowledged advantages for both boys and girls at different stages of the lifecourse (Sullivan, Joshi and Leonard 2009); that comprehensive schooling is the norm; and most children attend their local school in primary and secondary schooling, whether in urban or rural areas. How do these

taken for granted aspects of local context shape our understandings of RA and openness perhaps to particular aspects of RA? Comparative research, which looks at Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland has much to offer here in 'making the familiar strange'.

What else matters? What do we mean by 'RA'?

A long time ago in China, a philosopher was asked the first thing he would do if he became ruler. The philosopher thought for a while, and then said; well, if something had to be put first, I would rectify the names for things. His companion was baffled; what did this have to do with good government? The philosopher lamented his companion's foolishness, and explained. When the names for things are incorrect, speech does not sound reasonable, things are not done properly, the structure of society is harmed; when the structure of society is harmed, punishments do not fit the crimes; and when punishments do not fit the crimes, people do not know what to do².

We have had many debates about RA as a term. We have heard people say that it does not matter what we call it. We have had some very sensible alternative suggestions for what we might call it. It is worth exploring why this 'naming' remains such an issue. What might these debates tell us about the state of RA? I personally like the term 'RA' because it is flexible enough to convey a sense of ideas that are theoretically complex, rich and eclectic.

This means that we can answer the question, 'What are we restoring to?' at a number of different levels. We can talk about the need to restore relationships in schools, as a microcosm of a world in which many feel isolated and alienated, where relationships seems fragmented and disconnected, where more people vote in X Factor than in the Election. Schools' attempts to repair its own community relations reflect the wider need to repair and reconnect communities (Wachtel 2005 and others). It works too at the level of repairing individual sets of relationships that have been damaged, between A and B, X and Y. It implies that conflict is always with us, and an inevitable part of community, but that we have to find productive ways to acknowledge its role and make good use of disruptive moments. I like that too and find it helpful. It works too in terms of restoring children to their home and school communities when they are at risk of wider social exclusion linked with offending. McAra and McVie (2010) argue that,

systems need to address four key facts about youth crime; serious offending is linked to a broad range of vulnerabilities and social adversity; early identification of at-risk children is not an exact science and runs the risk of labeling and stigmatizing, pathways out of offending

² The philosopher was Confucius, quoted in War of Words, Essay by Steven Poole, in *The Guardian*, Saturday February 18, 2006.

are facilitated or impeded by critical moments in the early teenage years, in particular school exclusion; and diversionary strategies facilitate the desistance process' (2010;179).

So research which examines inter-professional working with 'troubled and troublesome young people is also much needed.

However, the term 'RA' is also limited. It is clearly not always appropriate to talk about Restorative approach, when we might imply that a pupil be 'restored' to some damaging or traumatic personal situation. There is too, an irony in saying that RA works best when used preventatively; as part of building the ethos and positive climate of a school. Common sense tells us that using a term like 'restorative' isn't good enough here. I am not sure 'restorative' is the best way to describe the young man who said,

I came to the workshop thinking that other people were the violent ones and I was one of the peaceful ones. This helped me to realise that life isn't divided up like that³.

...though he clearly understands the principles underpinning RA.

This feels wrong! So I do think we need an alternative term. And I think this group should spend some time working it through.

In summary, then, we face a number of key dilemmas about RA; our understandings of 'victim' and 'offender', the complexities of power in schools, how RA may link to developments in teaching and learning, the vexed question surrounding the use of RA with, and between, adults in school, the equally problematic issue of what constitutes 'community', as well as the need to re-examine what we mean by the term 'RA' and whether it has outlived its usefulness. Some of these questions have been raised before but we have been as much hampered by the research to date as helped by it. Apart from the national research undertaken by our team in Scotland, many of the research studies in recent years in UK have been funded by interested parties. One of the problems for RA is that it can seem like motherhood and apple pie to those who are committed to it. Indeed one of the challenges, I would suggest, is the enthusiasm of its supporters. It is hard to find research that questions its success and effectiveness. We urgently need further independent and critically informed research in the areas identified.

And what if we don't do this research? What if we say that we can't afford further research in these financially challenging times? If we don't commit to such research, we resign ourselves to

³ Participant in an Alternatives to Violence programme, <http://www.avpbritain.org.uk/whatpeoplesay.html>
Accessed 21.1.11

losing something that might just be the first framework for identifying and building the links behind key ideas in e.g. productive pedagogies, human scale education, rights respecting schools; ideas which can radically transform schools for the better.

So what about the swimming pools and flash mobs?

Recently, as a result of the winter weather, we had no water at home and had to reacquaint ourselves as a family with the public swimming baths. It was a long time since I had used the public baths, but going back I noticed for the first time, the unwritten informal rules that operate there. One example will suffice. If you can imagine a Victorian swimming pool, refurbished for the twenty first century but still with cubicles around the pool and lockers installed handily beside the showers. But everyone leaves their belongings in the cubicles and the doors open. Nobody uses the lockers. This pool is in a part of town which is predominantly middle class housing but also has a large student population which is mostly transient. The pool is well used. I don't know how it works in other areas of the city but I certainly do not see this as a middle class phenomenon. It reminded me of a spontaneous and unconnected conversation I had at a research conference this year over dinner with some people about outdoor swimming. She talked about the unwritten rules of open air swimming on Hampstead Heath in London. There are many rules, they work well and the communities which use the swimming areas are many and varied. How do we understand this?

And flashmobs? Any visit to Youtube will show you a flashmob. What interests me here has 2 aspects: the activity itself but also the faces of the audiences. What do we see? Smiles, eye contact between strangers, a sense of fun after initial confusion, the breaking down of silence and social barriers if only temporarily. The desire to come together seems to be strong, to be seen and to see others, to connect, to trust, to take risks, to be spontaneous, to celebrate the random? Is it about reclaiming public space? Openness to others? Asserting ideas of community on a human scale? Subversion? Disruption? About challenging compliance as an end in itself? When I checked on-line recently I noticed that there had been 4 events in Philadelphia in November 2010 alone (I was in Philadelphia that month so was interested to see). It clearly is something to think about. It seems to bear little relation to what happens in schools.

However, that brings us to a very current question, much more obviously rooted in the politics of the UK. It is a long time since we have had students protesting on the streets about ideology, as we have seen in recent months. It is part of a much larger sense of unrest nationally and globally, but one impact is that it foregrounds discussion about what it means to be a citizen, to live in a democratic society. Those of us who read about the Anti-Iraq war student/pupil walkouts may see a connection. This is an important time for RA because such acts can encourage

debate about meanings of citizenship, justice, relationships, rights and responsibilities. It challenges a high school which proclaims on its website this diluted version of RA;

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What do we need to think about now? What do we need to do now? What would help? I suggest that we need to move on from arguing that RA 'works' to arguing that it is relevant and timely, a set of ideas whose time has come; a framework on which schools can and should build and a central way of introducing school pupils to a positive experience of justice and community. I think in order for this to happen in ways that are sustainable and authentic, focused and critical discussion and research are now urgently needed. If we face even some of the challenges outlined above, we will be able to reject any idea of RA as social control with a liberal face or indeed old wine in new bottles. We will see RA as disruption rather than a way to tackle disruption.

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