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# Restorative Practices in Schools in Northern Ireland: Towards an 'All School' Model

Brian Payne, Graeme Young and Jonathan Hobson\*

**Summary:** As in many other countries around the world, the knowledge of restorative practices in schools has grown in Northern Ireland in recent years. There are growing calls from within the education sector to further embed restorative approaches in teaching practice and to include the knowledge of these approaches in teacher training. Whilst restorative practices are recognised as a proven structured approach for conflict resolution and the repair of harm involving children and young people, its use in school settings remains intermittent in Northern Ireland. However, an international evidence base increasingly identifies a range of positive outcomes and successes where restorative approaches have been embraced.

In Northern Ireland, much of the growth in such practices to date has occurred within the integrated education sector, which includes children from the Protestant and Catholic traditions. An underlying compatibility between the transformative values and goals of integrated education and the approaches embraced by restorative practices has helped to bring about greater engagement with restorative practices in some schools. This paper argues that, far from being restricted to a few areas, the challenges posed within integrated education are universal to all schools in Northern Ireland, and consequently that an 'All School' restorative approach would help to address the broad spectrum of factors that can lead to relationship breakdown and the perpetuation of harm.

The paper considers three important developments that may lead to greater momentum for the growth of restorative practices across all schools in Northern Ireland, including the passing of the Integrated Education Act, 2022, the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016, and the publication of the ground-breaking *Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022–2027)*. That strategy also incorporates proposals for a Centre of Restorative Excellence to support practice. This paper argues that each of these developments can provide real opportunities for mainstreaming restorative practices across all schools in Northern Ireland and can help schools to forge

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stronger relationships with local communities and the broader institutions of society outside the school gates.

**Keywords:** Restorative practice, schools, human development, integrated education, bullying, punishment.

## Introduction

Restorative justice and its associated practices have become an important tool for conflict resolution within criminal justice and other formalised settings across many countries. This is particularly true across the European Union (EU), where there is an increasing focus on the integration of Restorative Justice into member states' policy, including: mention of restorative justice in the EU's 2012 Victims' Rights Directive (Directive 2012/29/EU); the 2018 Council of Europe recommendation CM/Rec(2018) encouraging the 'development and use of restorative justice with respect to their criminal justice systems'(Council of Europe, 2019); the 2020–25 EU-wide strategy on victims' rights, recognising restorative justice as having a role in empowering victims of crime; and the 2021 Venice Declaration, pushing for a greater role for restorative justice in criminal matters. Much of this policy work focuses on the contribution of restorative justice in addressing criminal behaviour in areas such as youth justice, policing, and probation (Rossner and Bruce, 2016; Kirkwood and Hamad, 2019; Pali and Maglione, 2021). Restorative justice in its most conventional form normally involves a meeting between a victim and an offender, often with support from within a community. The process emphasises the responsibility and accountability of those implicated in some form of harm to make amends for their actions, with a strong focus on providing support to the victims in order to heal the harm done and encourage reintegration of both key actors back into their communities (Gal and Moyal, 2011).

Increasingly, however, restorative approaches have also been incorporated into education and other settings as an alternative to retributive systems for responding to perceived rule-breaking, relationship breakdown and conflict (Song and Swearer, 2016). This will often include broader depictions of restorative 'practice' 'that are focused on relationship breakdown as well as cultural and organisational shifts in approaches to perceived rule breaking and harm' (Wearmouth *et al.*, 2007; Teasley, 2014). The main premise here is that institutional frameworks such as those in schools can bring people together based on shared identities and collective

goals, but they can also disenfranchise people to the extent that individuals feel left out and can even come to define themselves in terms of anti-institutional identities (Morrison *et al.*, 2005).

Proponents of restorative practices in schools point to its ability to offer an effective alternative to the use of traditional discipline, placing the emphasis on building social capital through collective dialogue to produce more socially cohesive and supportive environments (Morrison *et al.*, 2005). The importance of building and maintaining positive relationships among members of the school community is therefore paramount, encouraging all members to adhere to school rules and norms in order to avoid violating these relationships, with broad benefits for the school environment and student outcomes (Riestenberg, 2012).

These perceived benefits from implementing restorative approaches have led to growth in its use in schools in diverse countries across the world, including New Zealand, Australia, Canada, USA, Hong Kong, England and Wales, and across Europe. However, despite the recent popularity of restorative practices in schools, their use is still relatively uncommon in schools in Northern Ireland, with much of the growth occurring within the integrated education sector. The integrated sector in Northern Ireland is viewed as an alternative to the two separate, religiously based education systems that are largely (but not exclusively) composed along the lines of the preferred social and political identities (Catholic/Irish and Protestant/British) of the jurisdiction (McGlynn, 2011). A synergy between the transformative values and goals of integrated education and the dialogue-based accountability approaches that underpin restorative practices may have helped to bring about a greater embracing of restorative approaches in integrated schools, as well as associated forms of cultural change in such school settings.

Driven by the success of restorative approaches in the integrated education sector, the growing international evidence base, and policy movements in Northern Ireland, interest in the use of restorative practice across all schools in Northern Ireland has grown. Most recently, there has been a series of conversations between teachers, restorative practice advocates, academics, and policy-makers on the potential for expanding the use of restorative practices in the school setting. These include a major knowledge exchange at Ulster University (see Hobson *et al.*, 2022); two major public webinars, facilitated by Restorative Practices Forum NI's Education Sub-Group, which together attracted over 150 participants; and an evidence-

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gathering seminar with local practitioners on the use of restorative practice in education, health and social care, hosted at Ulster University on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Restorative Justice, to support their work on 'Implementing restorative practices in education, health and social care' (APPG, 2022). There has also been considerable sharing of ideas and experience on education across the island of Ireland, most notably in work between Restorative Practices Ireland and Restorative Practices Forum NI, with the former publishing an important 'Quality Assurance Framework' for Restorative Practices in Ireland, which considers in depth the role of restorative practices in schools (O'Dwyer, 2001).

These broad forums identified a series of interconnected challenges that can be seen in all schools in Northern Ireland, with most problems arising from a broad spectrum of factors linked to breakdown in relationships. These include issues such as problems at home, the challenges of moving from school to adulthood, the impact of power imbalances and barriers to effective communication, as well as the impact of retributive approaches to behaviour management in the school setting. While those present highlighted how restorative practices had impacted positively on these issues, it was also frequently acknowledged that any attempts to integrate restorative practice into existing school systems will meet a range of institutional, cultural, and practical difficulties, and without adequate resourcing would risk adding to the already difficult working pressures placed on school staff.

This paper draws on these debates to consider the prospects for expanding the use of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland. It begins by considering current evidence for their use, including key indicators of success. It then examines several important developments that may lead to greater momentum for the growth of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland, including the passing of the Integrated Education Act, 2022, the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016, and the publication of the *Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022–2027)*. Each of these areas has the potential to provide real opportunities for mainstreaming restorative practices across all schools in Northern Ireland, and in doing so can also help to forge new relationships with communities and the broader institutions of society outside the school gates. To make these changes sustainable, however, schools must receive extensive support and direction.

## Restorative justice in schools

There is a growing body of research on the use of restorative justice in schools. Some of the most in-depth research to date is centred in Australia and New Zealand where advocates have sought to integrate restorative practices in schools, building on thousands of years of traditional indigenous practice (Drewery, 2016). The focus here is on maintaining meaningful and just relationships based on respect for tradition, customs and culture, and on empowering communities to resolve issues themselves (Dyson *et al.*, 2022). In implementing restorative practices, school communities seek to bring about better outcomes by promoting and recognising the intricate connectivity between individuals and their communities. This includes a strong emphasis on building good relationships between students, their teachers, schools, and communities, rather than the maintenance of hierarchical systems, traditionally based on prescriptive and punitive behaviour-management methods (Lodi, *et al.*, 2021).

Across Australia and New Zealand, formal restorative justice initiatives were initially incorporated into the educational system as an effective means for behaviour control and management. The conferencing approach was initially considered to be the most successful method in education settings. However, as practice and research developed, a wide range of proactive and preventative methods were subsequently introduced to respond to difficult behaviours and disruption (Blood, 2005).

In Australia now, the state governments of New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, and Victoria all have dedicated resources for state education institutions. One of the most prominent success stories from this approach, which features in broader Australian restorative discourse, is that of Fairholme College, Toowoomba, Queensland. An independent all-girls school with approximately 700 students (Restorative Schools Australia, 2022). Fairholme has been using restorative practices for 15 years. Embedded throughout the schools learning culture, it aims to provide an inclusive learning and teaching environment, and to develop the skills of students to resolve conflict collaboratively. Restorative practices at the school have removed the punitive element to resolving problems; instead, staff and students work together to listen, learn, and grow. As a boarding institution, practices form part of the wider culture in the living and social environment, and restorative conversations are led by older students who mediate minor conflicts.

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A 2009 Australian study on restorative practices in schools by Suvall (2009) was the largest ever conducted in Australia to date. Initial findings at the time described how school administrators dealing with relationship breakdowns and disciplinary violations through conferences felt safer and more empowered. The conferences themselves were seen as an opportunity to 'reinforce school values' and embed them across all conflict-resolution processes.

In New Zealand, restorative practices are used more commonly as an instrument in the social development of young people, rather than as a tool for behaviour management (Drewery, 2016). According to the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MoE, 2014), schools that take a whole-school approach were found to have better outcomes with regards to suspensions and exclusions, and the overall achievement levels of pupils. As of 2017, 174 schools across the country were using restorative practices, all with positive indicators of success, in line with the Positive Behaviours for Life programme (MoE, 2018).

Although the roots of the restorative justice practices adapted in New Zealand are from indigenous culture, there are concerns over the social development, health, and wellbeing of Māori and indigenous populations. Māori students comprise 15 per cent of the school population, yet are more than twice as likely to be excluded or suspended than those of non-Māori descent (MoE, 2014). The New Zealand Ministry of Education recognises the need to improve learning outcomes for Māori students and has committed to doing so through its *Positive Behaviour for Learning* programme. This programme has demonstrated a seismic shift in power relations between students and staff, empowering young people in schools to resolve the conflicts that affect the complex interconnected social relations (Drewery, 2016).

In Asia, the Hong Kong Centre for the Restoration of Human Relations, headed by Dr Dennis Wong, has been the prominent driving force behind the implementation of restorative justice in education and legal systems, as well as the work environment. Wong's research focused particularly on addressing widespread issues with bullying and breaking the cycle of bullying within schools, most of which was seen to stem from the social attitudes towards success and social life. Wong drew on Braithwaite, et al.'s (2003) Restorative Whole-school Approach (RWsA) which focuses on overcoming power imbalances that affect social relations, the prevention of bullying, reconciliation of student-orientated conflicts, and promoting re-integrative shaming of those implicated in bullying.

Since 2003, the Centre for the Restoration of Human Relations in Hong Kong has trained over a thousand teachers, senior officials, social workers, law-enforcement personnel and students in restorative practices including conferencing facilitation. Within these cohorts, over 160 of those trained were senior-grade students whose role is to facilitate peer conferences, with a view to assisting teachers in building a 'harmonious school life' (Wong *et al.*, 2009). Baseline statistics obtained after the implementation of the RWsA programme in Hong Kong schools showed that approximately 36 per cent of students displayed some level of bullying behaviours prior to the programme; the most common form of bullying was verbal (56 per cent) with physical bullying at 28 per cent and some form of social exclusion at 29 per cent (Wong *et al.*, 2011). Post-programme data showed that almost half (49 per cent) of students subject to the programme had reduced their bullying behaviours in schools, and bullying dropped significantly in the school. For schools that did not use the RWsA, bullying remained consistently high across all categories, with more than half (51 per cent) even increasing their bullying behaviours.

In South Korea, the Korean Peacebuilding Institute (KOPI) is an educational organisation that delivers lectures and workshops and provides restorative-practice training to enable schools to apply restorative approaches in their teaching and daily practice (KOPI, 2016). KOPI works with a number of elementary, middle, and high schools across the country, as well as several major education institutions, including Incheon Early Childhood Educational Promotional Centre and Sungkonghoe University. Programmes at the locations include the restorative discipline workshop, organising a restorative school guide, teacher healing programme, and the youth peace programme. Much of the restorative practice and programme development for schools centres around delivering anti-bullying strategies, peacebuilding, and conflict transformation. The training is considered a major success, helping to grow the restorative movement in South Korea, working closely with Korean schools to build and develop restorative capabilities in the classroom, as well as at the intersections between conflict and reconciliation throughout both South and North Korea (Kim and Young Lee, 2009)

In Europe, much of the focus for restorative justice practices has centred around the youth justice and wider criminal justice systems. In Germany, for example, the Juvenile Justice Act (JJA), introduced victim-offender mediation primarily as an educational and diversionary tool (Păroşanu *et al.*, 2013), and in response to juvenile conflict. These responses to social and community



conflict in the formal youth justice settings have been transferred recently into the educational setting. With the 2009 ratification of the United Nations (UN) Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2006, inclusive education became a requirement across Germany. Primarily centred around supporting students with special educational needs, inclusive education takes a relationship-orientated approach to strengthen social relations in the classroom environment. Recognising the similarities between the social focus of formal restorative justice approaches and conflict resolution approaches in the classroom, many German schools have implemented a continuum of practices from the prevention stage through to direct intervention. This has resulted in a range of successes linked to reducing conflict in the school setting, although more research is required to determine its full impact (Weber, Rehder and Vereenooghe, 2021).

There is a strong and growing community of practice across England and Wales that is seeing the development and integration of restorative practices in schools (Hopkins, 2002, 2003; Bevington, 2015; Short *et al.*, 2018). This includes a number of sites that have become 'restorative schools' (Procter-Legg, 2022), incorporating various restorative practices across all of their working and teaching practices. For example, in Bristol, the Restorative Approaches in Schools (RAiS) programme has been working in four schools in the south of Bristol since 2007. The programme had an ambitious range of objectives, including reducing the use of exclusions and unauthorised absences, reducing incidences of anti-social behaviour in school and in the community by school pupils, and a reduction in bullying and racial conflicts. Bristol was chosen as the site for the programme as exclusions were particularly high in that region and the Local Authority was the 'worst performing' in England. The four schools themselves were seen as having significant problems with behaviour, attendance and attainment (Skinns *et al.*, 2009).

A comprehensive research study by Skinns *et al.* (2009) found that the programme was successful in challenging pupil and staff perceptions of the usefulness of traditional mechanisms for punishing pupils. The restorative model was perceived by teachers to be more effective as it could resolve behavioural issues permanently by identifying the causes and responding to them. Students reflected that it meant they did not feel as if they were in trouble, which was beneficial given the negative effects of labelling. Overall, while data suggested that there was not a discernible reduction in fixed-term exclusions, there were noticeable benefits for relationships within the school

setting. Pupils felt that they were treated in a more reasonable and adult way, were encouraged to face up to being in the wrong and had an outlet for their feelings. Teachers reported a calmer, more emotionally literate school environment. Importantly, staff and pupils felt that restorative approaches were an effective way of dealing with bullying incidents (Skinns *et al.*, 2009).

This mirrors other positive UK studies, including Hopkins' (2015) evaluation of a restorative practices programme in a secondary school in Monmouth, South Wales, which found that the scheme had achieved a 93 per cent reduction in exclusions and a dramatic move away from the use of detentions to a new process where pupils are encouraged to engage in an internal process of self-regulation. The study also found that referrals to the Youth Offending Service were down 78 per cent and anti-social behaviour attributable to young people in the town was down by 48 per cent, with a marked rise in student attainment and attendance, and a steep reduction in staff illness and absence due to stress-related symptoms (Hopkins, 2015). Interestingly, the authors noted that a vital factor in the success of the programme was the adoption of a fully integrated all-school restorative culture. This finding was evident throughout the literature reviewed and underlines work elsewhere that has found that restorative approaches must be embedded across every aspect of the school setting, rather than applied as a sticking plaster to a particular problem or as an incremental change inside existing systems (Schiff, 2018; Blood and Thorsborne, 2005; Morrison, 2005).

The impact of restorative approaches in schools was recognised in a 2010 Department for Education report, in which whole-school restorative approaches were found to be the most effective at preventing bullying (Thompson and Smith, 2011). The success of such approaches has led some local authorities to establish dedicated teams or departments to support the integration of these practices into more schools, most notably in Gloucestershire (Gloucestershire County Council, 2022) but also in Oxfordshire (2022).

## **Expanding the use of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland is recognised internationally for pioneering work in developing restorative practices. This is most notable in the youth justice and community restorative justice sectors, which evolved as a direct consequence of Northern Ireland's transition from conflict in the wake of the Good Friday

Agreement of 1998 and the beginning of the Peace Process (see, for example, O'Dwyer and Payne, 2016; Payne and Conway, 2011; Eriksson, 2009; McEvoy and Eriksson, 2007).

In recent times, Northern Ireland has also seen the growth of such practices across a range of areas, including prisons, probation, policing, youth work, children's homes and housing (Hobson *et al.*, 2022). Despite its apparent potential, the use of restorative approaches in schools has been less evident. The evidence for expanding the use of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland is now considered under each of the three recent developments.

### ***Lessons from the integrated school sector***

In 2010, a mapping exercise of restorative work in Northern Ireland found just two integrated schools – Integrated College Dungannon and Lagan College – were consistently using restorative practices (Payne *et al.*, 2010). While more up-to-date information is limited, restorative practices are now incorporated in at least five more education institutions. Moreover, a number of schools have staff who are trained in restorative practices and deploy this learning in their teaching and pastoral work.

While the integrated sector is not the only part of the education sector using restorative practices, it has been an important driver for restorative work within schools more broadly. Integrated education essentially involves mixed (Catholic and Protestant) schools in Northern Ireland, with an overarching goal of fostering a fuller understanding of both the dominant traditions and overcoming negative stereotypes in a jurisdiction that continues to experience high levels of division and segregation in many communities, long after the onset of peace:

By educating children from both religious communities together and encouraging them to understand their historical and religious differences, both parents and educators hope that children educated within a religiously integrated setting will feel less threatened by the cultures and traditions of the other community, and be more likely to respect them, as well as form enduring cross-community relations. (Hayes *et al.*, 2007, p. 454)

The recent passing of the Integrated Education Act, 2022 in Northern Ireland's Assembly enshrines in law measures intended to further encourage, facilitate, and support the development of integrated education. Currently,

just under 70 of Northern Ireland's 1,091 schools are integrated, but with the passing of the new legislation, this is expected to grow. The legislation attracted criticism from some political parties and school-leaders from the non-integrated sectors during its Bill stage, with some claiming that it will elevate integrated education above other parts of the school sector. Proponents have argued that such legislation is needed to provide a level playing field for integrated education so that it can be offered as an option to a greater number of children.

In practice, integrated schools share many of the principles and goals of other schools, but they also have a set of enhanced challenges and objectives stemming from the needs of their cohort, which, we argue, are highly compatible with the values and goals of the restorative justice movement. For example, as stated in the new legislation, integrated schools must be supported in promoting an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding between those of different cultures and beliefs, as well as instilling respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion. This matches closely with the approach taken in restorative schools in England and Wales, which Procter-Legg (2022, p. 3) describes as 'the need to understand "affects" ... and emotions; articulation of an individual's needs; the aspiration to resolve conflict; and ownership of behaviour.'

There was, however, no mention of restorative practices in the 2022 Integrated Education Bill or subsequent legislation, despite the already widespread use of such practices by integrated schools and its apparent compatibility with many of the objectives put forward in the Bill. However, the extent to which some integrated schools have attempted to instil a restorative culture across every aspect of the school suggests that while there is not a legislative requirement to incorporate the approach, it is likely that restorative practices will play a prominent role as the integrated sector grows.

### ***Restorative practices as a response to bullying***

A potentially more important development for restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland has been the recent enactment of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016, which came into effect for schools on 1 September 2021. Despite greater awareness of its impacts, exposure to bullying still constitutes a significant threat to children and adolescents, especially in school settings (Kasen *et al.*, 2004). This is particularly important, as research into the impacts of bullying both for those impacted and those accused shows an increased risk of mental health and/or disciplinary problems

that could continue into adulthood (Foody *et al.*, 2018). In its supporting evidence for the new legislation, the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill, 2015 quoted research that found 39 per cent of Year 6 pupils and 29 per cent of Year 9 pupils in Northern Ireland had reported being bullied in the last two months. It also quoted a review by the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF, 2013/2022) that highlighted wide variation in policy and practice in addressing bullying in schools and found that existing legislation and guidance were inadequate.

Anti-bullying policies in schools in Northern Ireland are complex, and subject to a range of different legislative guidelines, policy frameworks and international instruments (see, for example, Purdy, 2016; Purdy and Smith, 2016). The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016 is made up of three main clauses designed to remedy the issues raised above:

- (i) The introduction of a common definition of bullying;
- (ii) The placing of a legislative duty on school boards of governors to secure measures to prevent bullying; and
- (iii) The placing of a duty on schools to keep a record of incidents of bullying.

This built on previous legislation – for example, Article 19 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order, 2003, which amended Article 3 of the Education (NI) Order, 1998, requiring schools for the first time to address bullying specifically within their policies, either as part of their existing discipline policy or as a stand-alone anti-bullying policy.

While restorative practice is not specifically mentioned in the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016, the Act does place an enhanced requirement for schools to have in place an effective, preventative, responsive and restorative anti-bullying ethos that is instilled throughout the whole school. This is also grounded in policy in the Northern Ireland Education Authority's *Anti-Bullying Policy Framework* (2001), updated to include implications arising from the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016, as well as subsequent changes to policy incorporated in the *Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework* (ETI, 2017) and *Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools, A Guide for Schools* (DoE, 2017); and in the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum's revised report on 'Effective Responses to Bullying Behaviour', which details a range of potential restorative interventions that can be used in response to a bullying incident (NIABF, 2013/2022).

The Education Authority's *Anti-Bullying Policy Framework* puts forward comprehensive guidelines for schools in drafting their anti-bullying policy to ensure that it is integral to their pastoral-care and child-protection policies. Importantly, restorative practices are mentioned specifically in three places:

- (i) Relating to reduction/removal of behavioural barriers to learning, schools are required to 'implement a post-incident debriefing process to help pupils develop restorative attitudes and learn from experience' (Education Authority NI, 2001, p. 3);
- (ii) When describing the creation and maintenance of a listening and telling culture, schools are required to 'resolve difficulties in restorative ways to prevent recurring bullying behaviour and meet the needs of all parties' (Ibid., p. 4);
- (iii) Finally, when discussing ways of working with targeted pupils to try to help them change their 'unacceptable behaviour', schools should facilitate 'ongoing dialogue to ensure that the strategies identified and agreed would, when implemented, result for example in: greater resilience; development of new coping skills and the promotion of positive restorative relationships' (Ibid., p. 7).

When placed in conjunction with the variety of other guiding principles and measures for supporting both those subject to and those involved in bullying, the measures put forward in the Education Authority's *Anti-Bullying Policy Framework* present a compelling case for empowering and supporting schools to integrate restorative practices fully across all aspects of the school environment.

### ***Placing schools at the centre of the restorative movement***

The third development that can support greater use of restorative practices in schools is the advent of a new *Adult Restorative Justice Strategy for Northern Ireland (2022–27)*, which, to quote the then Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland, Naomi Long, in her Foreword to the strategy document, sets out to:

... better meet the needs of victims of crime and to provide redress for the harm caused to them, as well as to find an effective alternative to punitive responses and establish positive ways of dealing with children, young people and adults when incidents occur. (Department of Justice, 2022, p. 2)

The strategy puts forward ambitious plans to ensure that restorative justice becomes embedded within the criminal justice system and, importantly, in the work of its partner organisations, underpinned by a vision that prioritises early intervention, rehabilitation and resettlement, as well as incorporating restorative justice in court-ordered community and custodial sentencing (Higgins, 2022). Included are plans for a ground-breaking Centre of Restorative Excellence (CORE), which has the potential to transform the relationship between the State and a broad spectrum of organisations working in the justice and related community and voluntary sectors. Such a centre would make space and resources available for services working from both bottom-up and top-down approaches to come together and, in doing so, overcome some of the challenges they have faced in developing restorative services and linking effectively to the criminal justice system and its other partners in government (Hobson *et al.*, 2022).

Although the work towards a CORE is ongoing, it represents significant buy-in from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland. One of the leading architects of the service, who participated in a knowledge-exchange workshop on developing restorative services, described how we have ‘an opportunity to make this a centre that all can learn from, that promotes partnership working, and that provides accreditation and ongoing monitoring of standards’ (Hobson *et al.*, 2019, p. 18).

While the *Adult Restorative Justice Strategy* does not specifically involve schools in its planning or proposed deployment – in large part because the strategy relates to those resources which are under the remit of the Department of Justice – there is recognition that restorative practices involving early intervention and prevention are relevant to the wider intentions of the strategy. The strategy document notes that a restorative continuum will allow informal engagement where it is deemed appropriate (Department of Justice, 2022), which would potentially include school involvement as part of an early-intervention model of practice. This is significant in terms of the role that schools might take in any planned CORE, considering the importance that many of the key criminal justice agencies and organisations who might be involved in the CORE place on their relationship with the schools. There is also an increasing realisation of the important role that schools play in preventing young people from entering the school-to-prison pipeline (Schiff, 2018). It therefore seems of paramount importance that an Adult Centre of Restorative Excellence must also involve some form of work with schools – for instance, directly through Education

Authority representation in the CORE, and through enhanced links with the criminal justice agencies and organisations operating in that physical and policy space.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has reflected on the prospects for expanding the use of restorative practices in schools in Northern Ireland. As the international case studies highlight, there are well-evidenced potential benefits in the use of restorative approaches in school and educational settings. The consideration of recent policy developments in Northern Ireland shows that there is a clear narrative emerging, which points to the untapped potential that can be realised when policymakers, criminal justice agencies, and school teams embrace integrated restorative approaches. This includes producing more resilient and responsive environments for responding to the many challenges faced inside and outside the school gates, and in bringing about highly positive effects for student and staff outcomes. Furthermore, it is clear that in many cases in Northern Ireland, and particularly across integrated education, restorative practices fit closely with existing approaches in many schools that already emphasise an ethos of diversity, respect and understanding. From such a perspective, schools are central to the idea of restorative justice as a social movement: they provide an opportunity for young people to become empowered, to develop healthy tools for managing conflict and difference. Furthermore, such skills can contribute to supporting the move from childhood to adulthood, providing a set of values and attributes that contribute to continued growth and produce benefits for the communities in which people live and work.

Nevertheless, a number of issues remain to be overcome. While delegates in public forums have spoken passionately about their belief in the effectiveness of restorative practices and their potential for the future, they also point to continued difficulties that impact on the development of such practices. Most of these revolve around a lack of support and adequate resourcing, which highlights that for restorative practice to grow from the bottom up, it must be supported and encouraged by leadership from the top. This includes clear support in policy and legislation, including some of the recent policy from the Department of Education and from wider government. While there is a strong desire amongst many schools to train teachers and school staff in restorative practices, as well as a wealth of training expertise to draw upon, schools lack the required funding. It was also



frequently acknowledged that, without adequate resourcing to prevent adding to the already difficult working pressures placed on school staff, restorative practices are at risk of being seen as a burden on staff, rather than an opportunity to improve the school environment for all.

To be effective, restorative practice in schools will require the support and involvement of all, whether that be policymakers, pupils, staff (including non-teaching staff), management, or the wider school community, in both understanding what acting restoratively means, and in instilling an effective restorative culture within an all-school approach. If this can be achieved, there is no reason why Northern Ireland cannot find the levels of success and positive impacts in restorative schooling that are enjoyed in many other countries.

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### ***Legislative instruments***

- Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland), 2016
- Integrated Education Bill, 2022