

Restorative Circles as a Means of Proactive Student Self-Assessment: Integrating the Wellbeing Agenda into the Junior Cycle English Classroom

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Restorative practices have been an interest of mine ever since I took part in an online CPD programme entitled 'Restorative Practices for Classrooms and School Communities'. During this workshop, the facilitators drew from a strategy known as a 'Restorative Circle' and used it to frame the beginning and end of each day. When engaging in the circle, I experienced its propensity to support the formation of relationships with and among my peers in a learning environment and this formed the basis for this investigation.

KEYWORDS: Restorative Practice, Restorative Circles, Student Wellbeing, Junior Cycle, English

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to investigate if using 'Restorative Circles' in the Junior Cycle English classroom can foster the conditions needed to promote a sense of belonging at school. It seeks to address how a strategy associated with Restorative Practices can allow teachers and students to communicate in ways which encourage both parties to assess their behaviour and learning in the classroom. Such is key to the fostering of positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and is integral to the conditions needed to strengthen the sense of belonging at school for students. This brings us to the research question: 'How can Restorative Circles support the development of well-being in the English classroom? The subject of English holds great potential in this as many of its curricular aims are centred on engendering learning dispositions which can enable students to become critical and compassionate learners.

This is a synopsis of a longer piece of research from a professional dissertation which presents evidence which finds that teachers also occupy an important role in fostering the learning dispositions of students at school. It is imperative then that they remain aware of their role in mediating the school-going experience for students as well as cognisant of their responsibility to teach them in class. In preparing children and young people with what they need to create a better world for the future, teachers must actively seek out new ways of facilitating positive relationships with and among their students at school. In doing so, the school can promote a practice of teaching that fosters the well-being of its students.

CONTEXT

A recent report from Nolan and Smyth (2021) of the Economic and Social Research Institute focuses on the mental health and well-being of children and young people in Ireland and speaks of the decline in student sense of belonging at school. It confirms the decreasing trend in student well-being across all OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development) countries (OECD, 2019) and correlates in ways with the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in Ireland (McKeown, 2019). Such studies highlight how student well-being has become a priority for education in Ireland in recent years. They also serve to highlight the importance of relationships in the lives of children and young people and the role they play in the development of their positive mental health. In this way, they are indicative of the current future trends shaping education globally and reaffirm the continued need of education to contribute to the learning and well-being of its students (OECD, 2022).

The Junior Cycle Framework (NCCA, 2012) speaks of the importance of promoting school going experiences which facilitate the positive mental health and well-being of students. For teachers, such an understanding must inform how they understand their own practice and the ways in which they approach teaching their subjects. In identifying the demands students are exposed to in their initial years in secondary school, the Junior Cycle Curriculum notes how ‘all students engage in important learning about well-being through key curriculum areas’ (NCCA, 2017, p.44). This focus on student well-being has sparked interest regarding the different philosophies that can be adopted and implemented for teaching and learning in a classroom context. One such philosophy: ‘Restorative Practice’ has been gaining considerable recognition in recent years.

Restorative Practice is defined as,

“an approach to building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, preventing and resolving conflict and responding to harm where it occurs” (O, Dwyer, 8, 2021).

Emerging from the judicial system as Restorative Justice, Restorative Practices or RP as it is often referred to, is concerned primarily with the nurturing of interpersonal relationships between people in the aftermath of harm. In recent years, it has come to refer to a key number of values and strategies aimed at fostering relationships between people. One such strategy: ‘Restorative Circles’ can be used as a means of promoting positive interactions with and among people in a range of different settings (Dwyer, 2014). Figure 1.0 outlines how each circle invites those who have volunteered to take part, the opportunity to check-in and register the level of their energy/mood according to the numbers 1-10, and to share information about themselves.

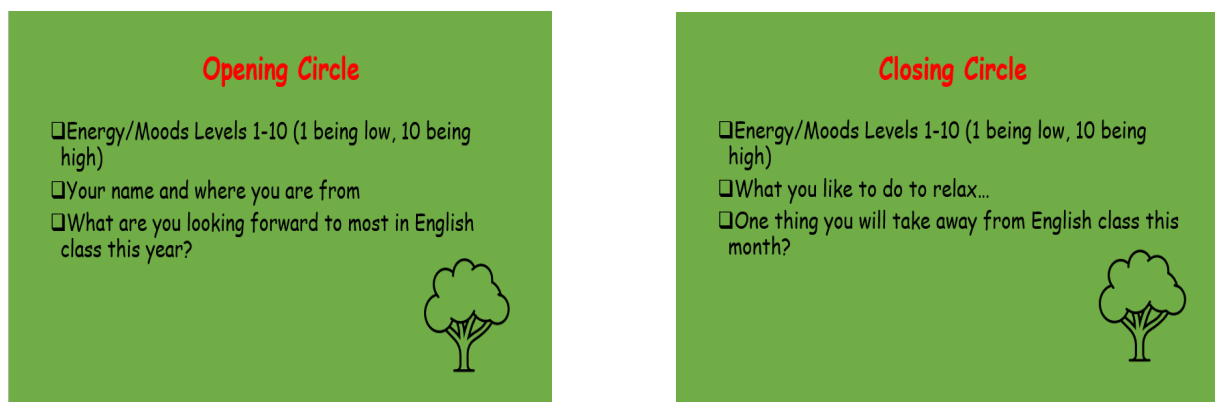


Figure 1.0 Outline of a Restorative Circle

Restorative Circles offer those who volunteer to participate the opportunity to communicate with and among each other. In creating the conditions that support positive interactions between people, restorative circles can provide opportunities for people to talk about themselves in the context of the information they address (The Childhood Development Initiative, 2014). At this rate, any discussion involving Restorative Circles in schools should be concerned with how they can be used as a means of enabling both teachers and students to assess their own behaviour and learning in the classroom. Furthermore, in promoting students' oral communication skills, Restorative Circles can also develop their capacity for self-reflection. In this way, students can learn according to the study of English at Junior Cycle.

The Junior Cycle English Specification (NCCA, 2015) extrapolates on the importance of learning outcomes that are grouped together according to the three stands of communication: oral language, reading and writing. These culminate in classrooms which "contribute directly to the physical, mental and social well-being" (NCCA, 2015, p.5) of students. In greatly improving the day-to-day experience of school for students, such learning can foster the conditions which help to promote a sense of belonging at school (NCCA, 2018). Encouraging these kinds of interactions between teachers and students can promote positive habits in other areas of learning at school by providing people with the opportunity to communicate how they are doing with regards to their learning and behaviour in the classroom (Parker & Bickmore, 2020). Consequently, Restorative Circles can encourage proactive self-assessment on behalf of each of its participants (Reimer, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

How Restorative Circles can be used to support students to form relationships with and among their peers in ways which lead to the creation of classroom environment that promotes a sense of belonging was investigated. The methodology employed drew on the analysis of a learning journal kept by the teacher as a means of reflecting on their practice and is informed by insights of the teacher as well as feedback received from the students (Wood, 2017). Through observing the actions of the participants being studied, qualitative research involves researchers using their senses "in a systematic and meaningful way" (McKernan, 2008, p.573) to gather successful data. As such, it implicated the teacher and their students as the point of research and foregrounds the importance of obtaining findings through interpretative as well as observable data. In doing so, this study assisted the teacher in researching an aspect of their practice as a means of better informing how to meet the needs of their students when teaching English.

This small-scale qualitative study assesses the design and implementation of Restorative Circles in a single-sex voluntary secondary school in Dublin. In focusing on a cohort of approximately 25 first year students, Restorative Circles were included in class at the start and end of every school month. In providing students with the opportunity to participate in both an 'opening' and 'closing' circle each month, students were encouraged to check-in as part of a group, share their thoughts and opinions regarding whichever statement was included in the circle at the time, and identify something they would like or have done differently when working in English. Moreover, in adapting a strategy associated with Restorative Practices for teaching in the Junior Cycle English classroom, each circle was composed in the context of the Key Skills (2012) and sought to address the Oral Communication strand of the Specification (2015). Restorative Circles were used in this way to assess students' oral communication skills as a means of developing their capacity for self-reflection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What will follow is a review of my teaching practice through the lens of my literature review. Using Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive thematic analysis framework, the themes identified from analysis of my own reflections and the reflections of students include: *opportunities for relationship building and opportunities for self-assessment. In discussing each of these areas, the following sections will explore what was unique about students who experienced engaging in Restorative Circles. I will indicate the tension between the underlying philosophy of Restorative Circles and their use as a methodology in the English classroom as a teacher.*

Opportunities for relationship building

Through their use in the English classroom, I have noticed the capacity of Restorative Circles to create and maintain relationships with and among students. Engagement with the entire circle process can contribute to its relationship-building capacity by foregrounding an engaging, consistent, and relevant means of assessment in the classroom. In creating the space for teachers and students to interact in this way, I have observed Restorative Circles as contributing to the building and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in ways which resonate with the work of Stowe (2016). The use of circles in the classroom diverges from traditional teaching and learning in fostering opportunities for both the teacher and students to speak and be heard. As such, the focus must be on the type of information participants are encouraged to communicate about when participating with them.

Opportunities for self-assessment

Through their responses in the English classroom, I have noticed the propensity of Restorative Circles to encourage the teacher and students to assess their own behaviour and learning. This can be seen in figure 2.0 which outlines a selection of circles that I both created and used in class across the year and in figure 2.1 which lists just some of the responses of different students, all aged between 12 and 13 years old, who chose to participate with them. Inviting students to respond to questions concerning the Junior Cycle Key Skills of 'Managing Myself, Working with Others, and Communicating' as seen in the student responses contained in figure 2.1 was used to familiar students understanding of some of the key concepts underpinning the Junior Cycle curriculum. In allowing students to identify and reflect on their own individual learning or behavioural goal as it related to the different key skill being addressed each month, Restorative Circles encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning in ways which correspond with the work of Morrison (2005). This is instanced by the proactive focus of many of the response of students in figure 2.1. In this way, Restorative Circles can provide opportunities for both teachers and students to communicate about how to improve their own learning and behaviour at school.

Opening Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐My most special memory is of... ☐One thing you can do differently this month when working in English class 	Opening Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐The best time of day for me is ... ☐One thing I can do differently when working with others in English class 	Opening Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐I love the weather when it is... ☐One thing I can do differently when communicating in English class 
Closing Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐The best present I could get is ... ☐One thing you did do differently this month when working in English class 	Closing Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐I won a prize for ... ☐One thing I did do differently when working with others in English class 	Closing Circle ☐Energy/Moods Levels 1-10 (1 being low, 10 being high) ☐My favourite kind of food is... ☐One thing I did do differently when communicating in English class 

Figure 2.0 Selection of Restorative Circles

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“To not leave doing my homework until the last minute”</i> • <i>“To ask more questions during class”</i> • <i>“To say something when I don’t understand”</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“To contribute more during interactions with my peers”</i> • <i>“To contribute less during interactions with my peers”</i> • <i>“To work with others rather than the same people again and again”</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“To think before I speak”</i> • <i>“To take more notes when my peers are sharing”</i> • <i>“To check that my peers understand what I say after I say it”</i> |
|--|---|--|

Figure 2.1 Selection of Students’ Responses

Summary of findings and how they have shaped my thinking

In this dissertation I set out to investigate “Restorative circles as a means of proactive student self-assessment” while simultaneously creating a link between well-being and restorative practices through Junior Cycle English by using restorative circles in the classroom. The overarching finding of this study have shown that a learning environment that fosters a sense of belonging, so important for well-being, can be created using Restorative Circles in the classroom. In creating the conditions which invite both teachers and students to assess their own behaviour and learning in the classroom, teachers can foster positive interpersonal relationships with and among students. While merely talking won’t necessarily mean that such relationships will be created or such issues will be addressed, providing both teachers and students with the opportunity to communicate with one another in a structured way may help to encourage both to take place. Such findings have challenged my thinking regarding the integration of well-being into the curriculum.

In believing such an endeavour requires more than just following policy, this research has invited me to ask are we truly doing well-being by bringing restorative practices into the classroom? In corresponding with the work of Farrell & Mahon (2022), I am encouraged to see the ways student well-being can elude the outcomes associated with the curriculum. In stressing the importance of “meaningful and sustained relationships” (Farrell & Mahon, 2022, p.3) a different understanding is needed when considering the ways in which teachers can foster the positive mental health and well-being of their students. In this way, English supports the investigation of Restorative Practices in an educational setting and students’ contributions fostered a sense of belonging as they engaged with one another in Restorative Circles in the English classroom. Moving forward, it may be equally as useful for teachers to use restorative circles as a means of fostering communication between students through their reading and writing skills. Doing so could shine a light on the important role these other literacy skills undoubtedly play in fostering a sense of belonging at school as well as allow for other ways that restorative practices could help underpin the teaching of English in the classroom.

Significance of findings

The English Junior Cycle Specification allows for teachers to interpret well-being agenda according to their own pedagogical practice. As such, there is no singular approach to teaching well-being. This investigation was an attempt to merge restorative practices with students’ English course using Restorative Circles in the classroom. Through engaging with Restorative Circles in the classroom and the process of communicating with their teacher and peers, “interactions among students and between students and teachers are very respectful and positive, and conducive to well-being” (DES, 2016, p.13). Such responses can easily be linked with the learning outcomes across the Junior Cycle English specification.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My engagement with restorative circles as part of a CPD course in Restorative Practices encouraged me to reflect on my behaviour and learning in ways that were “relevant to students’ learning” (DES, 2016, p.17). For me, it foregrounded the creation of a learning environment that spoke of the factors impacting on the positive mental health and well-being of students today and indicated the role Restorative Practices can play in helping to foster a sense of belonging at school. This highlights the continued need for both teachers as well as those enrolled in initial teacher education to explore opportunities for continuous professional development across the practice of teaching.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to address what has been perceived as a decrease in student sense of belonging at school. It has borrowed a strategy from Restorative Practices and adapted it as a means of assessment for the Junior Cycle English classroom. In this way, it has tried to support the development of student well-being by providing them with the opportunity to self-assess their own behaviour and learning. Through Restorative Circles, it has encouraged students to build relationships with one another as a means of fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. In doing so, it has highlighted the important role that teachers play in affecting the well-being of their students.

The Teaching Council (2020) suggests that research conducted during placement “can align with the needs of the school, the learning needs of pupils, and the HEI-based research elements of the programme” (Teaching Council, 2020. P19). As such, I believe in the importance of practitioner research to initial teacher education as it enables the teacher to reflect upon their own practice and apply their reflections to improve their professional pedagogy (la Velle, 2019). While I am aware of the limitations of this study, I believe that I have gained very useful insights into how to improve my own teaching practice as well as the teaching of my colleagues in the English subject department.

In conclusion, the findings of this study may act as a catalyst for a broader understanding of the relevance of restorative circles to the area of initial teacher education in ways which correspond to the CROÍ framework (Teaching Council, 2016). Furthermore, it also validates continuous professional development (CPD). In this way, this research could also help to shape school policy and support school improvement in ways which correspond to the improvement of students teaching and learning (DES, 2016). In conclusion, to restore a sense of belonging across the teaching, learning and assessment of any subject at Junior Cycle, initial teacher education, collaboration, reflection, and research must be available and continuous professional development needs to be supported through teachers’ professional careers

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