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Practice paper

Bonding across difference in beloved community: subverting the politics of domination in school

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Abstract

In recent years, the whole-school use of restorative practice has become synonymous with relational approaches based on empowerment and democratisation to support the reparation of harm between victim and offender. Similarly, the preventative function of restorative practice to the development of pro-social skills within a learning community has been highlighted alongside the centrality of whole-school approaches to social and emotional learning. In one setting, the whole-school use of restorative practice was enhanced and delivered through vertically structured coaching groups that provided a secure family base and exposure to diversity for pupils throughout their time in school. Coaching groups operated as a plumb-line back to restorative practice, as the site where pro-social skills could be tacitly modelled and rehearsed. Coaching groups provided an opportunity for trusting relationships to develop, impacting on feelings of safety and providing opportunities for disclosure and safeguarding. Subsequently,

collective responsibility for behaviour was supported, creating a distributed network of relational accountability and transforming how sanctions were administered, to create a non-hierarchical and relational system of discipline. This relates to transgressive forms of education and a socially orientated pedagogy, emphasising accountability alongside a whole-school ethos of care. Responsibility for behaviour is reframed from a singular to a collective pursuit, where relational responsibility eschews the alienating effect of individual notions of blame. Ultimately, this transformation subverted the classroom's politics of domination, allowing perceptions of learning and conflict to become entirely reframed.

Keywords restorative practice; relational responsibility; coaching; behaviour management; relationships

Introduction

Restorative practice originates from the use of restorative justice in the criminal justice system as a way of repairing harm between victim and offender. Contrasting with retributive and distributive forms of justice, where the focus is on punishment of the offender and fair compensation for the victim, restorative practice and restorative justice emphasise restitution of the harms on both sides of the offending equation. Restorative justice is based on the concept of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989) whereby the wrongdoer is treated with respect and empathy rather than judgement and stigma, while simultaneously confronting the wrongful act to support social reintegration. This inherently democratic approach to managing behaviour has become increasingly utilised in schools since the early 2000s (González et al., 2019), with evidence of impact in relation to decreases in student suspensions and behaviour referrals. Some studies have suggested 'that the use of restorative practice in schools might improve bullying and student-teacher relationships' (Weber and Vereenoghe, 2020, p. 2).

Social pedagogy is a multifaceted theoretical perspective that has been conceptualised as a science, a professional practice and a system of education (Hämäläinen, 2015). Some common denominators have been identified, particularly 'the interest in opportunities to alleviate social ills through education ... by paying special attention to the processes of social integration and emancipation ... [emphasising] the importance of community in human development' (Hämäläinen, 2015, pp. 1034–5). It is here that the use of restorative practice in schools and social pedagogic principles intersect, through their common focus on alleviating social ills through education and in community. As suggested by Hopkins (2009), 'restorative practice provides a framework ... to operationalise socially pedagogic principles, especially in challenging situations' (p. 19). In particular, the social discipline window (Wachtel, 2013) as a key theoretical driver for restorative practice emphasises doing things *with* (rather than *not*, *to* or *for*) individuals, to highlight the limits of neglectful, punitive and permissive responses to misbehaviour and to uphold a sense of agency through relationship with others in a community.

Relatedly, bell hooks's (cited in Maniglia, 2022) notion of an engaged pedagogy where teaching is 'relational and personal', with students and teachers making the effort not only to know one another but also to 'actually care about one another' (p. 240), ties into core values of restorative practice in fundamental ways. hooks's (cited in Maniglia, 2022) emphasis on the importance of lived experience where 'instructors know their students well enough to assist them in seeing ... lived connections' (p. 241) links to a working definition of restorative practice as 'an ideology grounded in relationships, enacted through positive communication, bringing individuals and communities to a place of awareness and accountability' (Procter-Legg, 2022, p. 2) wherever harm appears.

Despite the potential and positive intentions of restorative practice and restorative justice to treat young people with decency and inclusion when contending with problematic behaviour, it has been pointed out that there is clear and present danger of this approach being utilised in ways that allow 'adultist agendas [to] set in' (Vaandering, 2010, p. 169). By ignoring structural inequalities fuelling offending behaviour and locating notions of blame solely on the individual identified as the offender, restorative practice and restorative justice become vulnerable to being seen as merely 'a means for

managing student behaviour in a school environment ... instead of a means by which to understand the exercise and effects of specific sorts of power relations' (Vaandering, 2010, p. 169).

This article provides a critical understanding of restorative practice in school through the lens of bell hooks (1994, 2000, 2003; Brosi and hooks, 2012) by utilising the model of whole-school restorative practice that was observed in one school in the north-east of England. Here, the use of restorative practice was enhanced by vertically structured coaching groups (CGs) of eight to ten pupils that students joined on entering and remained in for the duration of their time in school. The aims of these group were to manage behaviour through relationship (Hibbin, 2023; Warin and Hibbin, 2020). As explored by Schumacher (2014) in her ethnographic study of therapeutic weekly talking circles, CGs provided students with 'a safe space for peers helping peers' (p. 3). Relatedly, the definition of restorative practice as an 'ideology grounded in relationships, enacted through positive communication' (Procter-Legg, 2022, p. 2) links to the safe communicative space of the CG, as well as to hooks's (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, where students and teachers work to know and care about each other. As such, the CGs in the school could be understood as a self-contained system of pro-social support, linking in with the social pedagogical contention that special attention must be paid to 'the pedagogic meaning of people's spontaneous common action within a self-governing community' (Hämäläinen, 2015, p. 1035).

As might be well understood by the reader of this special issue, bell hooks is commonly associated with critical pedagogy and intersectionality within adult education. As a result, it seems perhaps unusual to be applying her ideas to the use of restorative practice through coaching in school. However, as pointed out by Vaandering (2010), hooks's insight 'calls attention to the fact that concepts of humanisation, community, and conflict are universal and of as much importance in the lives of young people, as adults' (p. 171). Therefore, hooks's focus on engaged pedagogy in the democratic classroom, education as the practice of freedom and the notion of beloved community (Brosi and hooks, 2012; hooks, 1994, 2003), all have important links to restorative practice through coaching in school. In addition, her links to critical and feminist theory provide a backdrop to the politics of domination (hooks, 1994, 2003) that are prevalent in schools, evidenced through institutional responses to misbehaviour, which favour isolation and exclusion over inclusion and repair (Golding, 2021).

Methodology

'Embedding Restorative Practice in Schools' (Warin and Hibbin, 2020) was a national, two-year evaluation study that aimed to explore pockets of good practice of whole-school restorative practice, capturing the ways that effective schools sustain restorative practice over time. In total, nine school settings were recruited to the study through purposive and snowball sampling, ranging from primary and secondary settings to schools for specialist educational need and disability.

Auden Downs (pseudonym) – the secondary mainstream school that is the focus of this analysis – had a novel method of implementation of restorative practice through coaching based on their 14 years' experience (at the time of the evaluation) of implementing CGs, which they went on to merge with the delivery of restorative practice after seven years. Data collection at Auden Downs involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups with senior leadership, class teachers, coaching leads, pupils and parents. In total, four interviews with coaching leads, two interviews with senior leadership, two parental interviews, three student focus groups and two staff focus groups were undertaken over the course of three in-person visits. Interview questions centred on staff training, staff perceptions of coaching and restorative practice, behaviour management strategies used in the school, the school exclusion policy, the impact of coaching and restorative practice on the child and the adults, the role of leadership, communication strategies and parental engagement.

Ethics for the project was granted by Lancaster University Ethics Committee and informed consent was gained from research participants. All data was de-identified, including the school name, and role names were used rather than assigned pseudonyms. All data was stored securely on a password protected server in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (2018).

Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), which advocates a data-led and iterative method of constant comparison between findings and stages of

data collection. NVivo qualitative data software was used to analyse the data set using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The analysis aims to emphasise student voice wherever possible, to access how restorative practice through coaching was received and perceived by young people alongside the adult (which is often framed as the expert) point of view. The rationale for this approach addresses concerns relating to adultist agendas in the delivery of restorative practice (Morris, 1999; Vaandering, 2010), alongside hooks's (1994) own focus on student voice.

Findings

Positive communication through restorative practice and coaching

This first theme considers students' dialogic skills to examine their ability to engage with restorative practice as a form of conflict resolution, and in relation to the opportunity to practice pro-social skills for community building within the context of coaching.

Dialogic skills for restorative practice

Restorative practice is a skills-based approach that asks a specific set of questions in the event of harm being caused.¹ As such, restorative practice brings the 'victim and offender'² into a mediated dialogue to support individuals to better understand each other's perspective: how harm is experienced and the conditions for its creation. As described by one of the teachers when considering the use of restorative conversations, 'even though we're using the word sanctions, actually you might ... watch a conversation happening and [be] thinking okay, that's not what we traditionally think of as a sanction'. Students were explicitly taught restorative practice from the moment that they joined the school, and they were given opportunities to extend their training, so that teachers could utilise those students to deliver restorative practice where appropriate:

So, everybody in Year 7 gets an introduction to restorative practices ... it's done in circles ... So, it'll be 30 kids at a time ... with a couple of members of staff ... around circles and why circles are important to us as a school, how to respond in circles ... Less about behaviour really and more about engagement ... And then, from that, a group of those pupils will be given the opportunity to go into the full restorative practice training ... available to Year 8s and above ... (where) they become restorative practice reps. (Coaching Coordinator)

Students acknowledged the benefit of this approach on a practical basis where they recognised that a teacher asking a student to undertake a 'corridor conversation' with a fellow student allowed 'the teacher [to] carry on with the lesson' (Student). It also had important implications for peer support where students reported feeling 'more comfortable talking to someone in your own class that you know' (Student). In addition, providing students with training to deliver restorative practice alongside teachers embodied a partnership approach, which was part of the institutional identity of the school, where 'one of the things that we have in school – passengers into crew ... is about the children being part of what we do ... rather than being teacher/pupil, it's about us working together' (Teacher):

So we talk about high challenge, high support ... That allows us to work with in terms of the social discipline window ... It's not doing to them, it's not doing for them ... by working with each other ... And of course we do that because it brings about the right outcomes and the best progress. (Headteacher)

Dialogic skills in CGs

The skills for restorative practice were further practised and modelled in the context of coaching that represented an authentic opportunity for connection and social engagement over time, where students were able to speak freely within the familiarity of their CG. Students reported liking 'the age ranges ... and how, it's not forced' alongside the fact that over '2 or 3 years' they would get 'used to those people, seeing them everyday' (Student). An explicit element of the coach role was the expectation that they should get to know the members of their CG on an individual basis, creating a shared environment of disclosure:

It depends on how much you share with your Coaching Group ... But sometimes [the Coach will] pick stuff out ... for one person it will be 'how is your new baby sister' or for me it's 'when was the last time you slept' ... for other people it will be 'when is your dad next coming to see you', so you're able to connect more emotionally with your Coaching Group. (Student)

Safeguarding concerns that could limit students' ability to engage were sometimes uncovered through the trusted environment of coaching, where student disclosures were not frequent, but neither were they uncommon: 'Children will disclose things that make you shudder. But they're disclosing in front of their Coaching Groups ... It's not often, but they do so because they feel that they're family and with that they get a disproportionate level of support' (Headteacher).

For students to feel comfortable with this level of disclosure, they needed to feel secure, and one of the key findings from the original study (Warin and Hibbin, 2020) was that coaching provided students with a secure family base for the duration of their time at school, creating the conditions for students to feel safe and supported over time. Students reported how it felt 'like a family' that helped them 'through bad times' (Student). In addition, learning dialogically from and about each other was also reflected strongly in student responses: 'In our Coaching we all have really strong opinions so we have little debates and conversations. If there's been anything controversial in the news or the world ... we just talk about it ... everyone's opinions are different but they're all valid ... you can always learn something new.'

This amplification of student voice through coaching had clear implications for confidence and students' ability to talk comfortably in front of others, which was something that a majority of students reported experiencing. In addition, for some students who struggled less with confidence, the impact of coaching on listening skills was also in evidence: 'Well, I've always been quite a loud person, since I joined the school, but back then my communication skills weren't very good because I used to talk too loud and sometimes speak over people and not realise ... I can't talk over the person' (Student).

Overall, CGs provided students with deep opportunities to engage in dialogue, practising the skills required for speaking, listening and restorative practice in the context of a secure family base. While restorative practice was the framework for restoration and repair of relationships, CGs were the site where the dialogic skills for restorative practice could be practised naturally over time.

Critical pedagogy

The second core theme relates to the use of restorative practice at Auden Downs in a manner that provided a re-orientation of the disciplinary system, from hierarchical notions of power and authority to more democratic, distributed and relational ways of approaching disciplinary action in school.

Restorative practice and coaching: subverting the politics of domination

A re-orientation of the disciplinary system to one based on relationship and knowing the child, over more conventional means of meting out discipline in school, was in evidence at Auden Downs:

You could probably argue that there was an individualised seniority ... So, if I know child x is having issues with something, then instead of going to Head of Department or Head of Year, I'd go to their Coach. Because the likelihood is that the Coach will know ... the relationship with me as their Head of Year is ... they see me as ... authority or in trouble, whereas the Coach has a much more laid-back relationship ... they feel like they can address the problem without it necessarily meaning that they're in trouble. (Head of Year)

Students described coaches as the 'one teacher in the school that you know really well ... they're always going to be your Coach from year 7 to year 11' (Student). It was these teachers, with a pre-existing relationship formed through coaching over time, who delivered sanctions and advocated for the student when misbehaviour required escalation. Importantly, this impacted on how the sanction was experienced; as suggested by one teacher, 'the sanction comes across differently when you have a different relationship'. There was an emphasis on how sanctions were delivered, where 'the red line is still the red line, but how you show them the red line is different' (Head of Year). As one student reported, rather than 'shout at you and ... make it worse ... the teacher gets down onto a deeper level and speaks to you about why you did it.' There were, of course, instances when restorative practice was not

as effectively implemented, where teachers still sometimes defaulted 'to more hierarchical behaviours' (Coaching Lead) when capacity to engage with the demands of a relational and restorative approach was reduced. However, in such instances coaching was seen to act 'like a constant plumb-line' (Coaching Lead) back to the restorative baseline that provided a standard for behaviour across school.

Further reinforcing the democratic ethos, restorative practice representatives were chosen from 'not any kind ... of cohort of kid' (Coaching Coordinator) to ensure that there was full representation across the school. As suggested by the coaching Coordinator, 'your top band, super bright, high ability kid – we don't necessarily want that, because some kids on the corridor wouldn't necessarily listen to that kid anyway'. Rather, the aim was to ensure 'a full cross-section across the school' (Coaching Coordinator) when allocating restorative practice rep roles. Similarly, CGs employed a non-hierarchical structure on an organisational basis purely because there were not enough teaching staff to manage CGs of eight to ten pupils across the whole school, with administrative staff being co-opted into leading their own groups. In addition, there was an ethos of mutual support where 'the staff will try to empower you to resolve conflict ... rather than sending them to more senior staff – everybody's empowered to support each other' (Teacher). This lack of hierarchy was also evident in the use of assistant coaches where students were given opportunities to take on a leadership roles within the CG, a role that students were reported to 'take ... really seriously' (Teacher):

[One of my assistant coaches] she almost sees herself as like the mother of the group ... she will lead the check out and check ins, and she'll ask 'why have you not got a tie on' and things like that ... so, it's more powerful for a child when something comes from one of your peers.

As a result, the system of discipline in Auden Downs can be understood as a rupture in the established order, because it was distributed across the whole school. Non-teaching staff members reported that having their own CG gave them 'more confidence', helping them to 'feel more equal in the school ... like you had more impact' (Learning Support Worker). A key element of the approach was that both adults and students engaged in CGs: the senior leadership team and staff members had their own coaching circles on a Monday morning before they joined their CGs with students. In these staff circles, there was an emphasis on informally sharing personal information or reflecting on challenges or successes through coaching. As a result, the nuances of 'how to respond in circles, how to behave in circles' (Coaching Coordinator) was being continually modelled alongside important time for personal and professional reflection being built into the start of the school week.

Bonding across difference

This final theme explores the ability of CGs to create opportunities for social connection, repair and reconciliation by providing students with deliberate exposure to diversity through coaching.

Repair, reconciliation and difference

In the CGs, difference and diversity were key elements of how the groups operated and were put together, with 'deliberate exposure to diversity [being] a function of the complex process that surrounded group composition' (Hibbin, 2023, p. 9). This involved a 'really big thought process' (Coaching Coordinator) at the start of the school year, where social demographics such as ethnicity and gender were considered alongside academic ability and the individual interests of each child 'to make a proper blending across the school' (Coaching Coordinator): 'There are children in Coaching Groups who would not be friends ... they could be different parts of the same postcode socially, economically ... one of your Coaches is there deliberately because she's then exposed to a bunch of children that she wouldn't be exposed to socially' (Teacher).

This deliberate choice of student allocation resulted in CGs being diverse communities of students that 'levelled the playing-field' (Teacher) and reduced social barriers. This came across strongly in student responses, most notably in relation to the different age ranges they experienced in the vertically structured CGs. But there was also recognition of exposure to social difference within CGs and how this impacted on the sense of community throughout school: 'Every Coaching Group is one tiny community, like a lot of people say family and things like that, but I think it is a community because communities are meant to be diverse ... Like there are several different backgrounds, religions, races ... inside one Coaching Group' (Student).

Students also talked about the importance of empathy and 'understanding and seeing what someone could be dealing with from their point of view' (Student), reinforcing the importance of perspective-taking when understanding difference. As suggested by one student, CGs created the conditions for repair to become non-negotiable because 'you can't go to their Coaching Group and go "these people have had a falling out, stick 'em in a separate room to rebuild the relationship" – it doesn't do that, you've had a falling out with someone, go make it up'. In addition, while students were occasionally moved to a different CG when the relationship with their coach or group was not working, this was viewed as an option of last resort, with the priority being given to trying to work through those difficult relationships. This perspective was echoed by the coaching lead, who positioned coaching as the 'reason restorative practice works ... the reason it's so well embedded': 'The experience in the CG is it creates a model of what it looks like to get on with people, a diverse group of people ... And so it becomes like a microcosm where it kind of legitimizes and establishes that this works, because they see that it works.'

Problematizing restorative practice through coaching

The approach taken at Auden Downs was not without its challenges. While a key strength of coaching was safeguarding through the higher levels of disclosure within the secure family base of the CG, there were also dissenting voices. Notably, there was a danger of betrayal when disclosures were reported:

It was with one of my old Coaches, and I think that was probably one of the reasons why I wasn't as close with them ... at some point something got told to my parents and my mum ended up having to take me to the doctors which I wanted to avoid. So, I get worried that something's going to be said. (Student)

However, for another student there was an understanding that although it had not felt good at the time, in the end the decision to inform safeguarding had been correct:

- Student: One time I told my Coach about something and ... she told the Safeguarding Team ... and I was thinking 'oh snake', but then I realised it was probably the best thing ... I spoke to the Safeguarding Team and it turned out it was the better thing. But I was thinking, 'why did she do that?'
- Interviewer: So you felt a bit betrayed?
- Student: Yeah, but then I spoke to her about it ... I was like 'why did you do that, I told you out of confidence!' ... and she was like 'but did it not help?', and she apologised for telling them but she felt it was her job.

In addition, disclosure was not forced and coaches were seen as being respectful of student's privacy and their right to silence:

They try not to pry into peoples' personal business unless you personally want them to know and for them to help you ... if the Coach does get ... a sense that something is wrong, they will ask you. But if you don't want to say anything, the Coach has to be accepting of that. (Student)

Another element that students struggled with was coach retention, particularly when they had formed a strong bond with their coach:

I really connected with [teachers name] but she left and I kind of blamed her ... I was like why did you leave me? ... we had a really strong bond, stronger even than some of my friends. And then she left ... I was so gutted ... And then I was ill the day they actually were leaving, so I didn't get to say goodbye. (Student)

However, within the loss of trusted members of staff there was also a sense of resilience, with one student reporting it taking 'time to connect with people as anyone does' and another suggesting that 'it was a bit weird getting used to a new coach but she's really nice, it's easier now'.

For one teacher, dissent involved failures of the approach to identify every safeguarding issue, where they knew of 'at least two cases of ... a child [being] a young carer, and nobody else in school has known'. Overall, however, the evaluation picked up very little dissent from staff members in relation to

the efficacy of the model as a whole. Supplementary data indicated that this lack of dissent was related to 'value aligned interactions' (Coaching Lead), with high levels of agreement with the core values promoted in school. This centred on the idea that Auden Downs' approach was 'in sympathy' with the six principles of restorative practice (restoration, voluntarism, neutrality, respect, safety and accessibility), alongside the values associated with coaching (for example, participation, security, dialogic skills, disclosure and modelling), while being cognisant of the limits of neutrality or disclosure as two conditions that can be 'either impossible or inappropriate in a school context' (Coaching Lead):

We work to set the conditions [for inclusive values] where these are possible. Children and staff are in contexts that are kept psychologically safe – there are no expectations that people disclose (emotional vulnerability) or occupy neutrality (avoiding responsibility or assuming responsibility for something that is not appropriate). This means we say we are committed to, as far as possible, putting inclusive values into practice. This means setting the conditions for value aligned actions (practice and activity).

The four core values are captured in: know our children well, partners in learning, character for learning and enjoy and achieve. This means there can be dissenting voices [and] there are processes for responding to these that are value aligned. (Coaching Lead)

Discussion

Bell hooks (1994) suggests that 'we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students how to listen, how to hear one another' (pp. 149–50). This dialogic principle is central to the social pedagogical notion of *Bildung* as an inherently relational practice, one that refers to the 'inner development of the individual ... through education and knowledge' (Watson, 2010, p. 53). The dialogical approach was similarly central at Auden Downs, where students were taught how to undertake a restorative conversation and to uphold the core values of restorative practice. However, it was in the context of coaching that those skills were modelled and enhanced, where restorative practice could be practised naturally within a trusted community of peers over time and where coaches were seen to 'orchestrate' and facilitate 'the space for dialogue ... in the classroom' (hooks, 1994, p. 151). In addition, coaches were expected to connect on a personal level with their coachees, getting to know them on an individual basis and attending to their 'emotional climate' (hooks, 2003, p. 133). It is this aspect of restorative practice through coaching that was transformative. hooks (2000) defines love as 'a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust' (p. 131). However, she goes on to highlight that convention teaches us that the presence of love in the classroom context is often frowned on:

To speak of love in relation to teaching is already to engage a dialogue that is taboo ... When we talk about loving our students, these same voices usually talk about exercising caution ... Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world ... where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount. (hooks, 2003, p. 127)

hooks (2003) acknowledges that 'teachers are not therapists', noting that educators are sometimes 'fearful of engaging students with love because they worry about being engulfed' (pp. 127–8). However, she contrasts this with the idea that preoccupation with objectivism can frequently act as a screen for 'individuals who ... simply could not connect' (hooks, 2003, p. 127–8). This need for connection through communication in 'beloved community' (Brosi and hooks, 2012) was central to the formulation of the CGs, where students reported feeling safe within the secure family base of their peers over time. Student voice was amplified in CGs, supported by the interlocutory role of the coach, who would encourage students to share information to enable students to 'connect ... emotionally' (Student) with their CG. As suggested by hooks (1994), the 'inclusion of confessional narrative or of digressive discussions, where students are doing a lot of the talking' (p. 151) is of immense importance to community building. Here, individuals are facilitated by capable guides to be open and honest, deepening relationships and personal understanding of vulnerability, to undertake the difficult work of 'nam[ing] our pain, to make it a location for theorizing' (hooks, 1994, p. 74): 'Community is the coming together of a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other; whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure' (Peck in hooks, 2003, p. 196).

This 'collective participation and dialogue' (hooks, 1994, p. 186) connects to social pedagogy's assertion that the role of the pedagogue is to facilitate 'dialogue between the child and the world, by not only using her head but also her heart' to support meaning making and 'dealing with the resistance of the world' (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017, p. 14). As suggested by Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (cited in Moss, 2013): 'Bildung's most important subject is people as a whole and not ... the individual ... The acquiring of knowledge must be understood as a process that assumes an active interaction with other people and phenomena in the environment' (p. 29).

hooks (1994) goes on to flesh out the importance of dialogue that goes beyond 'a shallow emphasis on coming to voice' (p. 186) through equal airtime. Rather, the emphasis is on the more complex role of dialogue in students feeling valued, in learning from one another and reflecting on individual experience, highlighting a dialogic approach that creates 'spaces in the classroom where all voices can be heard because all students are free to speak, knowing their presence will be recognized and valued ... Just the physical experience of hearing, of listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together' (hooks, 1994, p. 186).

The importance of student voice links in with hooks' (2003) view on love as an essential element of conscious teaching requiring close attention to the emotional climate in the classroom and any 'psychological conflicts ... blocking the student's capacity to learn' (pp. 127–8). A culture of disclosure was therefore encouraged at Auden Downs, but it also was not forced; rather, it was a by-product of the secure family base through coaching that was part of the organisational infrastructure, offering a disproportional level of support from both peers and coach over time. This is something that hooks (1994) notes in relation to her own teachers, who made sure they 'knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family' (p. 3). The emphasis here on knowing the child well stands in contrast to the 'politics of domination' (hooks, 1994), which is perhaps the best way to conceptualise hooks's thinking in relation to disciplinary systems in school. While class politics in the democratic classroom was more a focus of her writing than student behaviour and its management, she was clear that banking models of education, 'where students are objectified and managed in an effort to fit into boxes that benefit adult expectations' (Vaandering, 2010, p. 152), require a reorientation that challenges the existing order. She promoted love as core foundation of teaching: 'My awareness of class ... has helped me to employ pedagogical strategies that create ruptures in the established order, that promote modes of learning which challenge bourgeois hegemony' (hooks, 1994, p. 185).

An alternative to the politics of domination (hooks, 1994, 2003) is at the heart of the non-hierarchical system of discipline at Auden Downs, one built on coaches knowing the child on an individual basis in school. In addition, the disciplinary system was based on the democratic delivery of restorative practice across the whole school, providing explicit training and opportunities for students to take on restorative practice rep and assistant coach roles. This approach created ruptures in the established order by bringing students from all cohorts, backgrounds and abilities on board with the wider approach. These ruptures worked towards reducing the adultist agendas in restorative practice (Vaandering, 2010), allowing restorative practice to be done with, rather than to, children and young people, working within the social discipline window (Wachtel, 2013). The ruptures also extended beyond the rank and file of whose job it was to mete out discipline, to incorporate a notion who was best placed to deliver a sanction or advocate for a student, through familiarity with individual needs uncovered through coaching over time. This relational system of discipline that centred on equity rather than equal treatment contrasted with the 'blunt tool of broad-brush, de-individualised behaviour policies' (Hibbin, 2023, p. 15) so frequently seen in school. It also contrasted with overly punitive responses to misbehaviour devoid of learning opportunities that frequently result in the reasons for misbehaviour being entirely missed (Golding, 2021; Kupchik, 2010). Overall, this whole-school use of restorative practice through coaching, with everyone taking responsibility for behaviour, supported emancipatory and social activist elements of social pedagogy through 'a commitment ... to ending submission to authority, the achievement of consciousness and sustaining the process of self-formation; creating the subject as a protagonist, a self-determining actor' (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 397).

Restorative practice has been criticised in recent years in relation to deteriorating discipline in UK classrooms, particularly in Scotland, where restorative practice in schools has been vigorously pursued (Stewart, 2023). It is important to contrast the use of restorative practice through coaching in Auden Downs with the use of restorative practice in contexts where it represents just another 'broad-brush and de-individualised' behaviour policy (Hibbin, 2023, p. 15). As already described, the roots of restorative

practice can be traced back to conflict resolution within the criminal justice system (Braithwaite, 1989). As such, restorative practice can be seen to lie on a continuum from tick-box reactive forms that are more in line with notions of negative peace and the absence of violence (Bevington and Gregory, 2018) to preventative and pro-social forms, as seen in Auden Downs, that support the creation of positive peace through community building over time (Bevington and Gregory, 2018; McCluskey et al., 2008).

Gregory and Evans (2020) suggest that restorative practice is unlikely to work well in school contexts where:

1. it is mandated in top-down initiatives that are 'misaligned with values' of restorative practice;
2. a narrow approach is taken, 'focused on a single restorative practice';
3. a 'colorblind or power blind' approach to marginalising dynamics is taken;
4. a 'train and hope' approach is taken that offers 'few implementation supports'; and
5. 'under-resourced and short-term initiatives' are predominant. (p. 12)

As a result, restorative practice that has suffered at the hands of poor implementation is unlikely to see the kind of results witnessed at Auden Downs, where both a top-down and bottom-up approach utilising a variety of practices, cognisant of power dynamics and marginalisation, with multiple implementation supports over the long term (Gregory and Evans, 2020), was in evidence. This resulted in an environment where positive peace through active prevention was predominant.

As suggested by Parsons (2005) "'goodies for baddies' is hard to sell' (p. 192) and is often seen as a soft option (Warin and Hibbin, 2016) in societies where retributive and distributive notions of justice tend to hold sway. However, in Auden Downs a subversion of the established order, based on restoration and relational repair in a community context, was a core element of institutional identity (Hibbin, 2023; Hibbin and Warin, 2021; Warin and Hibbin, 2016, 2020). Wilson and Wilson's (1998) notion of relational responsibility where the 'individual is responsible for his or her own actions, but not in isolation' (p. 157) is relevant here. A core feature of Indigenous systems of accountability, relational responsibility reframes blame for poor behaviour from a solo to a collective pursuit 'the tradition of individual responsibility – in which single individuals are held blameworthy for untoward events – has a chilling effect on relationships. It typically isolates and alienates and ultimately invites the eradication of the other – a step toward non meaning' (McNamee and Gergen, 1999, p. xi).

Reconciliation in the context of community is a central focus of hooks' (Brosi and hooks, 2012) teachings, linking in with the idea that the reason why restorative practice worked so well in Auden Downs is because it was modelled and practised through the community, in the secure family base of the CG. hooks suggests that community is central because 'no one is healed in isolation' (Brosi and hooks, 2012, p. 86), and because it is important to undertake the difficult task of creating trust across difference rather than merely prioritising commonality:

Creating trust usually means finding out what it is we have in common as well as what separates us ... Lots of people fear encountering difference because they think that honestly naming it will lead to conflict. The truth is our denial of the reality of difference has created ongoing conflict ... We become more sane as we face reality ... and learn both to engage our differences, celebrating them when we can, and also rigorously confronting tensions as they arise. (hooks, 2003, p.109)

Ultimately, the approach taken in Auden Downs resulted in an increased emphasis on forgiveness, reconciliation and 'bonding across difference' (Brosi and hooks, 2012, p. 79), where CGs could be understood as a site of 'unity within diversity' (hooks, 2003, p. 109). In a published conversation between George Brosi and hooks (2012), family is located as the site where individuals 'learn that struggle of bonding across difference' where 'profound differences of opinion and belief' (p. 79) do not preclude closeness but rather foster the ability to reconcile. The creation of diverse family groups in Auden Downs was a very deliberate ploy by the school where exposure to diversity in community was a direct result of a deliberate attempt to create a strategically organised community through coaching. This was the basis of the interspersed harnessing by John Fee during the racial planning of Berea, where hooks was honorary professor, a process that goes beyond integration and a 'pseudo-sentimental idea of community' to emphasise 'community that is a practice, and as Fee understood, a community that had to be strategically organized' (Brosi and hooks, 2012, p. 78). This strategic organisation links to social pedagogic principles in important ways; as suggested by Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011):

a social pedagogy, which aims to encourage a strong sense of community, educates both children and adults to ensure positive relations between ... the individual and society, and fights to close the gap between rich and poor. All of these aims are significant for societal well-being and people's sense of responsibility for each other. (p. 40)

Clearly, differences between some students on an individual and demographic basis created social separation; as described by the coaching Coordinator, 'they would not be friends'. However, the complex work that went into balancing the CGs by providing a deliberately diverse mix was considerable. The impact of this on processes of forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be overstated. It is our exposure to difference in pro-social contexts where conflict resolution is modelled and taught that enables us to 'hear difference' (Brosi and hooks, 2012, p. 86) and build community:

The truth is that you cannot build community without conflict. The issue is not to be without conflict, but to be able to resolve conflict, and the commitment to community is what gives us the inspiration ... that critical exchange can take place without diminishing anyone's spirit, that conflict can be resolved constructively. This will not necessarily be a simple process. (Brosi and hooks, 2012, p. 76)

Despite the positives that were seen in the delivery of restorative practice through coaching, it was not devoid of flaws. Returning to hooks's (2000) description of love as a 'combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust' (p. 131), some students highlighted that they had felt a sense of betrayal when disclosures were passed on; as suggested by hooks (2000), trust and respect are key elements of love. However, she also foregrounds the importance of care, knowledge and responsibility. As such, disclosures made in the context of a trusting student relationship sometimes require a teacher to violate that trust when their responsibility to act based on potentially harmful knowledge is apparent. Teaching with love in relation to safeguarding requires healthy boundaries to be set within the student-teacher relationship to enable the key elements of love – care, knowledge and responsibility – to come to the fore. This is not to say that issues of power and privacy are not cause for criticism when considering restorative practice through coaching at Auden Downs, with adultist agendas (Vaandering, 2010) through safeguarding impacting on students who may have legitimate reasons to withhold information in school. Here the tensions and informed choices that social pedagogy draws our attention to (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017) need to be recognised. However, the balance between the 'value aligned interactions' – the requirement to keep staff and students 'psychologically safe' (Coaching Lead) – and the limits of the social discipline window (Wachtel, 2013) become apparent; sometimes things have to be done 'to' and 'for' rather than 'with', particularly in the context of safeguarding.

Students also highlighted the difficulty of losing trusted coaches. Again, hooks's (2000) definition of love is useful here, as clearly those students felt that key elements of care and commitment were violated through the loss of their coach. This critique is less easy to refute than disclosures made in the context of safeguarding. Sometimes teachers need to move on for a variety of reasons. However, the way that this transition is handled by the organisation and the individual coach – with transparency and sufficient opportunities for closure – is key to ensuring that any sense of betrayal does not become a developmental wound. But perhaps more than any critique of organisational responses to staff and student transition, the difficulty students experienced through the loss of a trusted coach highlights the 'exercise of *Bildung* [as] a relational practice' (Moss and Petrie, 2019, p. 401) alongside the accuracy of hooks' (2003) call for a pedagogy based on community, hope and love.

Finally, the limits of coaching to pick up every safeguarding case has been noted by Smyth et al. (2011), who identify the issue of young carers that 'remain "hidden" and beyond the reach of services and supports' (p. 145) through a lack of self-identification. While it is beyond the scope of this analysis, future research exploring ways to support disclosures in school from this highly vulnerable cohort is urgently required.

Implications for social pedagogical practice

The social pedagogical potential of restorative practice through coaching relates to processes of social integration, emancipation, community for human development and the alleviation of social ills (Hämäläinen, 2015). The *Haltung* (ethos, mindset, attitude) of the whole-school community at Auden Downs centred on a deep understanding and practice in restorative practice, modelled through coaching

and combined with equally deep levels of support from the relationships formed in school. Importantly, they were very far down the road of embedding restorative practice as a highly preventative model focused on the promotion of positive peace (Bevington and Gregory, 2018) across school, and the extent to which actions aligned with core values and beliefs seemed to be high. This was evidenced through the nuanced differentiation between setting the conditions for inclusive values in school and the need to create psychological safety for both staff and students. Here, the limits of neutrality and disclosure within the complex milieu of school were acknowledged. There was no expectation for individuals to make themselves emotionally vulnerable through disclosure, just as there was no forced neutrality in terms of avoiding or assuming responsibility 'for something that was not appropriate' (Coaching Lead). At its heart, this was a highly pragmatic approach where the tensions created by subjectivity and mutual understanding through meaningful participation (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017) were supported by the creation of 'a model of what it looks like to get on with ... a diverse group of people' (Coaching Lead).

This could perhaps explain the lack of dissenting voices from members of staff; due to 'value aligned interactions' (Coaching Lead) being so well communicated and embedded, there was a shared *Haltung* connected to core school values (know our children well; partners in learning; character for learning; and enjoy and achieve). Implications for social pedagogical practice here relates to the idea that pursuing 'value-aligned' integration, emancipation and community building (Hämäläinen, 2015) is a long-haul process requiring structure, commitment and deep levels of reflection over time (Blood and Thorsborne, 2005).

Despite the beneficial potential of restorative practice it is only through a critical stance that restorative approaches can become transformative (Morris, 1999) rather than just another tool to manage student behaviour. As such, attention must be paid to ensure that the alleviation of social ills (Hämäläinen, 2015) does not eclipse students' right to privacy; disclosures made through coaching might represent a blurry line for students who see the CG as a safe dialogical space where they can engage the head, heart and hands to navigate the resistance they encounter in the world (Biesta, 2012; Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017), rather than somewhere information might be passed on. This may benefit from more consideration when setting the ground rules for coaching, to manage tensions arising between heartfelt student disclosures and adult safeguarding decisions.

Limitations

Auden Downs was one school out of nine included in the final report (Warin and Hibbin, 2020) that formed part of a larger two-year qualitative study exploring the whole-school implementation of restorative practice in a variety of educational contexts. As such, it has limitations in relation to generalisation to the wider context and should be taken as an exploration of alternative models of education rather than evidence of impact.

Conclusions

The transformative potential of restorative practice through coaching in Auden Downs was realised through the value placed on creating the conditions for positive peace (Bevington and Gregory, 2018) in school. The pro-social skills required to undertake a restorative conversation were explicitly taught and practised within the secure family base of the vertically structured CGs. These carefully composed groups represented sites of unity within diversity (hooks, 2003) that reduced social and age-related barriers between students across the whole school. As a result, conflict became a learning opportunity that was pre-emptively planned for (Hibbin, 2023; McCluskey et al., 2008) rather than something to be actively avoided and suppressed, and blame was reframed to support a collective path to reconciliation and repair (McNamee and Gergen, 1999; Wilson and Wilson, 1998).

Alongside the dialogical requirements of restorative practice through coaching, there are important associations between hooks's (2003; Brosi and hooks, 2012) teachings around conflict, forgiveness and reconciliation, and the respect and care elements of hooks's (2000) definition of love, that are a primary focus here; it is these associations that link in with the sense of community created at Auden Downs in fundamental ways. In addition, hooks's (Brosi and hooks, 2012) notion of beloved community was upheld through the horizontal and strongly democratic disciplinary system, based on relationship and knowing the child rather than on whose role it was to manage behaviour, creating a distributed

network of relational accountability (Hibbin, 2023) where everyone took responsibility for behaviour. Overall, restorative practice through coaching at Auden Downs represented a challenge to the politics of domination (hooks, 1994, 2003), resulting in an increased emphasis on forgiveness, reconciliation and bonding across difference (Brosi and hooks, 2012).

Students were an explicit part of the whole process, resulting in a transgression of the banking system of education (hooks, 1994, 2003) and affirmation of agency through relationship with others in community through the social discipline window (Wachtel, 2013). Here, 'those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning' (hooks, 1994, p. 13) were crossed. In their place 'education as the practice of freedom' was upheld and 'unity within diversity' was inculcated (Brosi and hooks, 2012; hooks, 2003), with the mutual respect established through the secure family base of the CG supporting students to see difference and critical exchange as essential elements of reconciliation, community and love.

Notes

- 1 What happened? What were you thinking/feeling at the time and now? How has this impacted you? Who else has been impacted and how? What's been the hardest thing for you? What do you need/can you offer for the harm to be repaired? What do you need in order to move forward? (Vaandering, 2010, p. 154).
- 2 The victim–offender dichotomy reinforces the power dynamics and structural inequalities inherent within society that are perpetuated within the context of school (Pali and Maglione, 2023; Procter-Legg, 2022). As suggested by Pali and Maglione (2023), this dichotomy leaves 'no room for (social, personal, cultural) overlaps between those two positions' (p. 518). However, despite these stigmatising labels, there is still a need to work within the system of mainstream schooling and the criminal justice system that routinely employ such language, until a critical restorative approach that walks a more nuanced middle ground can be enacted.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Lancaster University ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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