

Longhill School's restorative rise

Longhill High School is a co-educational, state-funded secondary school in Brighton. As part of Longhill's vision, the school "prepares young people for life". To support this aim, Longhill has been using a restorative approach to help resolve conflict and mend damaged relationships for seven years.

Tom Cannell is an Accredited Practitioner with the RJC and Longhill High School's restorative co-ordinator, based in the Focus Centre – the school's on-site inclusion unit. Tom said: "Using a restorative approach in education is the most powerful way to remove barriers to learning. At Longhill, we really believe that the best way to create a positive and happy environment for our students is to encourage them to take ownership of their actions – and then give them the skills to put things right."

Longhill started using a restorative model in 2010 after initial training from West Sussex Police. "It was clear that there was a need for change," Tom said.

"I found that

when I would talk through incidents and exclusions with students, it would sometimes seem that structure was not in place at home and that they often saw exclusion as a bonus time off school. It seemed that we were pushing some of the more vulnerable members of our school community further away from school without working with them enough to help put things right."

When students returned from their exclusion, issues frequently remained unresolved and the problems they were having in class would continue. Tom said: "It was also frustrating that there were frequent patterns of students being removed from lessons regularly. Often what was needed was a solution-focused approach and I believed that using a restorative approach could help."

Initially, conferences within the school did not always run smoothly. Tom explained: "At first, remembering the script was tricky at times, and it was hard to get the tone and pacing right. Looking at what we had been taught and putting it from a criminal justice setting to an educational context was difficult." There was also resistance from some of the staff team, who were habitually reliant on punitive sanctions as a way to deal with negative behaviour. With perseverance, however, things started to fall into place. "Around the third meeting I facilitated between a teacher and

student something clicked," Tom said. The meeting had been requested to help resolve multiple occurrences of disruptive and challenging behaviour in a maths lesson.

Tom continued: "I realised that proper preparation time was the key to making this work. By sitting and talking about what had happened with both of them individually before the meeting, I would be fully prepared, as I knew what needs would need to be met in the meeting. Both parties also understood that this wasn't a judgement on them or a punishment. Instead, we talked about how the conference was an alternative way of trying to make things better, and that we would look at what harm had been caused and what could be done together to repair their relationship."

For the student, this was an opportunity to speak openly about his perspective on what had happened, and it quickly became apparent that it was not a 'soft' option compared to detention. Tom said: "It was hard for him and took bravery and courage. He was able to talk about the fact he often deliberately misbehaved to sabotage the lesson. It emerged that this was because his self-esteem in terms of learning was so low.

"For him, it was an easier option to misbehave than to try the work and feel inadequate. He admitted that he had caused harm to the teacher and the class, and said that he wanted things to improve."

Tom then took the teacher through the restorative questions. "She admitted that she had often become frustrated with the young person's behaviour and spoke about the difficulties of getting through a lesson plan. She felt that sometimes she had jumped to remove him from the lesson too quickly. She talked about how she often felt guilty for removing him as it felt like a failure on her part to be able to keep him in class,



and that what she wanted for him was to be learning and succeeding in her class."

Tom continued: "As the meeting progressed, the mood became quite electric in the room. The body language was different – they were leaning forwards in their seats and were engaged and listening to one another. There was a dialogue that didn't exist before. Both of them were seeing each other on a far more human level and understood each other's perspective."

Jointly, a practical, strategic action plan around how to move forward was developed. Tom said: "I felt a real sense of pride and achievement. It seemed that this was the solution to the problem of how to deal with negative behaviour in a way that taught respect, accountability, empathy and emotional awareness." In the weeks following the conference, the maths lesson improved significantly with the young person arriving on time and working hard. "He felt a sense of achievement through the teacher's encouragement," Tom said. "They had found common ground and had healed their damaged relationship."

Word began to spread through the school about the success of the early conferences. "As people experienced the power of restorative practice, they saw it less as an easy option and more as a way to actually deal with the underlying causes of behaviour. Staff and students understood one another on a more emotive and human level, and also saw the benefit of working collaboratively." In the first five years of running restorative interventions, Longhill's attendance rose from 91.4% to 94.2%. Exclusions were reduced dramatically, and repeat occurrences of negative behaviour fell by 85%.

Gradually, various mechanisms were put in place to embed the restorative ethos across the school. Now, students are encouraged to request a restorative meeting through their head of year, and conferences are run on a daily basis between groups of students, and students and staff to resolve conflict.



Tom said: "We have made our lesson removal room a calm space where staff have been trained to use restorative questioning to help our students break down a situation, reflect on it and find a way to put things right."

He continued: "We've also introduced this idea into our alternative to exclusion sessions, in which each student has a one to one restorative discussion with a member of inclusion staff. This means that any serious behavioural incident is dealt with restoratively."

With restorative practice fully embedded, the school has also been able to respond to more serious incidents restoratively, and recognises the risks associated with permanent exclusion. "Often the students involved in these incidents are some of the most vulnerable," Tom said. "These young people are often at risk of disengaging completely from education and becoming criminalised in later life. By going through the restorative process, we have avoided permanent exclusion in a number of cases and taught communication skills for our students to take forward in adult life. They have become accountable through accessing a restorative framework."

In 2010 Tom was the only facilitator at the school but his role has now shifted to co-ordination on a strategic level. "I facilitate the more challenging and sensitive cases that arise, and co-ordinate a team of trained facilitators

in the school to look after daily issues that emerge," he said. "I also work closely with primary schools in our catchment area to help introduce restorative practice. This means that students are familiar with the language and concepts by the time they reach us in Year Seven."

The school recently ran a 'Restorative Week', which featured a set of assemblies to promote and share information on restorative culture. Tom said: "These assemblies began with the deputy head and assistant head having a staged argument in the assembly hall in front of the students, who found it really engaging and hilarious! We then talked about what feelings and emotions can come from this type of confrontation, and what approaches could be used to unpick the situation and sort things out."

Tom also runs a city-wide Restorative Approaches in Schools network meeting each term. This gives representatives from schools, pupil referral units and other agencies like the Youth Offending Service a chance to meet and share practice. "I'm consistently impressed and proud of the outcomes we can achieve for young people in our city," Tom said. "There are so many passionate and skilled people who are really pushing a restorative approach in not only mainstream primaries and secondary schools, but also in more specialised educational settings like pupil referral units."

Tom concluded: "Restorative practice is massively important and central to how we work. We believe that schools aren't just exam factories – instead educators are responsible for the holistic development of young people so they can be accountable members of society." As word spreads about the success of embedding restorative practice at Longhill, Brighton's young people can only benefit.

Longhill High School is keen to share examples of best practice with other schools. If you would like to get in touch, please email tcannell@longhill.org.uk