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The Sefton Centre for Restorative Practice: A Restorative Community in the Making

BY LAURA MIRSKY

The Sefton Centre for Restorative Practice has a goal—to create a restorative community. The brainchild of Sefton Youth Offending Team (YOT) manager Steve Eyre, the center may be the only building in the UK dedicated to restorative practices. (There are 154 multi-agency YOTs under the guidance of the Youth Justice Board in all of the local authorities in England and Wales, made up of representatives from probation, education, social services, health and police. Their principal aim is to stop and prevent young people from committing offenses by providing programs and interventions to both the court and the young offenders themselves.)

For nearly two years, with training and assistance from IIRP affiliate Real Justice UK, the center's team—including Eyre, line manager John Gibbens, restorative justice facilitator Paul Moran, restorative justice development officers Mark Finnis and Paula Downes, police officer Malcolm McConchie, senior prevention manager Carol Jenkinson, victim inclusion officers Sylvia Bouqdib and Sharon Jones and support staffer Carla Cunningham—has been implementing restorative practices across the board in Sefton.

The team has brought restorative practices training and support to hundreds of education, social work and criminal justice personnel, in schools, the youth justice sector, looked-after children's homes and neighborhoods. Said Eyre, "If there's one principle that we're trying to adhere to, it's to view restorative practices as a way of life." Added Gibbens, "One of my aims is to make restorative



Students at St. James Primary School participate in a restorative circle facilitated by Mark Finnis, restorative justice development officer at the Sefton Centre for Restorative Practice.

practices indispensable—to link it to the government's preventive agenda."

A borough with a population of about 300,000 on the northwest coast of England, Sefton is quite diverse, encompassing some of the most deprived communities in northern Europe, such as Bootle, as well as very affluent areas, such as Formby and Southport. Many of the restorative practices efforts have focused on the more disadvantaged areas, and the most extensive of that is happening in schools. "I decided early days that I wanted to work within schools and that's really what's made a big difference here," said Eyre.

According to Mark Finnis, the center is delivering restorative practices training and support to staff and students at 35 of Sefton's 110 primary and secondary schools. Director of Real Justice UK Les Davey said that staff at these schools have had the full four-day Real Justice UK Accredited Facilitator Skills Training course, which covers the informal use of restorative practices, restorative conferencing with and without victims present

and more. Some have also received the SaferSanerSchools Introduction to Restorative Practices day.

Secondary school students are being trained in restorative practices, too, said Finnis—to be peer mediators, to use restorative questions to help each other sort things out ("What happened?" "What were you thinking about at the time?" "What can you do to make things better?"), in listening and communication skills, body language, understanding relationships, confidentiality, child-protection (i.e., what issues are safe to talk about) and role-playing.

For a primary-school anti-bullying project, children who volunteered to be mentors or "special friends to other children" were trained "to conduct a friendship on restorative lines," said Eyre. The schools installed brightly colored "Friendship Benches" in the playgrounds. "When a kid's feeling unhappy or being bullied they just go and sit on a bench. Then one of these mentors finds them and they have a conversation. The children are solving their own problems,

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we hope, and learning new skills.” In the term prior to this initiative, said Eyre, one primary school had 30 disruptive lunchtime incidents, and in the term following it, they had none.

Restorative conferencing is used for such school incidents as bullying, theft, assaults on staff and student fighting. Finnis talked about a conference that involved two learning mentors (who support students with emotional behavior) and three 15-year-old boys, at St. George of England High School, in Bootle. “According to the school, they were three of the most challenging lads in the school—should have been excluded—but had a good relationship with these learning mentors,” said Finnis. Then the boys kicked in the door of the learning mentors’ office and tried to steal a laptop computer.

Finnis facilitated a conference that included the boys, and the learning mentors and the year head, who all felt terribly let down because they’d gone out of their way to support the boys. In the conference, the mentors expressed their hurt and disappointment. “The boys hadn’t taken much responsibility, but within the conference they really did,” said Finnis. “One of them had tears in his eyes.” As part of the conference agreement, the boys were asked to remove graffiti and to volunteer at a younger boys’ after-school club. “They turned up, bang on time, did double the time, cleaned all the graffiti” and volunteered at the boys’ club, said Finnis. “Their relationship with the learning mentors had been repaired, and the school saw them differently. They’d always let people down, and now they’d actually followed through with something and were really sorry. Every year they have a school disco, and every year before they attended drunk and under the influence of drugs and caused a heap of carnage. But about three months after the conference they attended their final one, at a really posh hotel. The school were really worried and



Sefton Centre team members pictured here are (from left) Carol Jenkinson, Mark Finnis, John Gibbens, Sylvia Bonqdib, Paul Moran and Sharon Jones. Additional team members not shown are Paula Downes and Steve Eyre.

were going to tell them that they weren’t allowed to come, but because of the conference, they saw them in a different light. So these three lads attended and stayed sober and were really good throughout. They also finished school without being thrown out.” Added Finnis, “It’s better to build bridges than brick walls.”

In 20 schools, in the most deprived areas of Sefton (including Bootle), the Sefton Centre has partnered with the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) of the Department for Education and Skills of England and Wales. Under the auspices of BIP manager Helen Flanagan, the BIP supplemented the YOT’s funding to bring restorative practices to these schools. Flanagan believes that restorative practices fits well with approaches that the BIP has introduced, including solution-focused therapy and improving emotional literacy, saying, “Sometimes where a child has done something that’s harmed someone else, while we can look at in a solution-focused way, the harmed person needs a voice and the wrongdoer needs to know the effects if we’re going to be truly emotionally literate.”

In these 20 schools, permanent exclusions have been reduced by 70 percent since 2003. Said Flanagan, “The schools are saying, before we will consider an exclusion, if there is a very serious incident, we will conference it first and then moni-

tor that.” Recidivism has been reduced as well. “We’ve run 59 conferences this term among the 20 schools and there has been no recidivism for bullying or assaults on or swearing at teaching staff,” she said.

It’s also clear that a change in culture has occurred in Sefton schools that have introduced restorative practices. Eyre said that the government’s Office of Standards in Education, which he described as “tough, top down and rigorous,” wrote a report noting the “evident change in the atmosphere in the schools they visited since we’ve been involved.” He added, “It’s not just about behavior: It’s a far more positive learning environment for the kids, a happier, more relaxed school, where the kids can engage with education more successfully.”

School staff seem keen on restorative practices. Said Judith Rankin, Bootle High School learning support manager, “It works on the corridors, it works in the playground. It is actually seeping through. You can bring parents in. You can bring everybody that’s affected by the situation to tell the child how they feel, how it’s affecting their life. We never did that before. An absolutely brilliant concept.” Steve Wilson, deputy head teacher, St. George of England High School, said, “We are the sort of school that always has to be looking for initiatives that might help and support our pupils. It’s proving ef-

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fective with some of the more challenging pupils, particularly in the interpersonal relationship side. It encourages staff, it helps people listen and it gives people a voice, even at the lowest level. The impression from pupils is that 'someone at least is letting me have my say.' It seems to have taken the confrontation out of situations, because victim and perpetrator both feel that they've had a fair airing. With bullying, one thing the victim always wants to know is that they'll be safe and it won't happen again."

Paul Moran runs conferences and training for the YOT and its affiliated agencies, as well as children's homes and the Community Safety Team, which addresses crime and disorder. Over 160 people in these sectors have been trained in the Real Justice accredited course, said Moran. The Community Safety Team now recognizes conferencing as a good model of conflict management.

YOTs oversee a local community panel referral order system for youth going to court and pleading guilty for the first time. Victims of youth crime are contacted to attend these panels to help determine a plan for the youth. This system is supposed to be based on restorative principles, said Eyre, but "most of them are not very faithful to them." Eyre believes that Sefton's YOT is more committed to restorative principles than most. The 2005 Youth Justice Board report on Sefton's YOT noted "a serious and radical attempt to bring about a major change in the way conflicts were resolved," stating: "There was a dedicated team who were enthusiastic about restorative practices employed to deliver work with victims."

Asked what is the most important thing about his work in Sefton, Moran said, "A change in culture—a shift away from punitive to restorative. We have these antisocial behavior orders that are very popular with some authorities, and which are quite punitive in their outlook.

We want a more inclusive approach. It's literally getting people to talk to each other again, rather than standing behind barristers, solicitors or complaint procedures or police officers."

Moran talked about a community conference he ran with a young man being released from a young offender institution (a young person's jail, usually on the grounds of an adult prison). "He'd been the scourge of the neighborhood; he'd had many offenses against many people in the local community." The youth was under an antisocial behavior order that incorporated an electronic tracking system. "The community were living in fear of this young man coming out, and the young man had sworn a debt of vengeance against the police officer who had prosecuted him," said Moran. "The police officer he'd sworn to kill was at the meeting, along with various other agencies and family members. By the end of the four-hour conference, the policeman and the young man were playing pool together and sharing bags of crisps. They had come to a shared understanding. It allowed the young man to live quite successfully in the community."

The Sefton Centre has attracted attention from leaders in the UK's restorative justice movement. Sir Charles Pollard, board member of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, formerly chief constable of the Thames Valley Police, said, "We've been looking over here for an example of an RJ approach in schools that was not just one school but a whole group of schools where they've really implemented it well, and therefore you can see what the results *should* be when you do it properly." He views the decrease in school exclusions as vitally important to reducing youth crime. "After permanent exclusions, you've lost them. They're on the street and much more likely to be getting into trouble with the law. Whenever a school excludes a student, the cost to

the school is huge, about £1,000. Apart from keeping thousands of young people in school, it would save the government millions. That's merely the cost of exclusion, nothing about the cost of having young people on the streets, committing crime, taking drugs, having very unhappy lives, all the impact on public services in the future. The cost of that would be billions."

Pollard values Sefton's implementation model because it employs a multi-agency team, highly trained as both practitioners and trainers, working full time, with funding to enable them to run low-cost training courses quickly and effectively. "If you've got a core of people trained to a high level of professionalism in RJ working together, some really good learning can go on. The standards increase and people get better and share experiences and practice. There's a critical mass where if you do that, you really do move forward very fast and very well in RJ," he said, adding, "I know enough about RJ to recognize something good in Sefton."

Graham Robb, Youth Justice Board member, former head teacher, now seconded to the Department for Education and Skills of England and Wales as an advisor on behavior improvement and violence reduction in schools, concurs with Pollard on Sefton's success: "First of all it's in a multi-agency setting, and secondly, there's the impact on exclusion. And I think it's really important that it's not just one school trying to do this on its own."

"We need to build on our own success now," concluded line manager John Gibbens. "We took an off-the-shelf training package and delivered it. Fortunately it was the Real Justice training. You need to get a group believing it and that's what we've done. We called ourselves a center and got a building in the middle of town, so people have an image then. We're a team. It's all about perception." ☉