

'Relational practice is not a trend...'

How one West Sussex Headteacher is shaping culture in two primary schools.

Four years ago, to address the impact of COVID-19 on pupils' communication and emotional wellbeing, our then SENCO at Singleton CE Primary school introduced the Zones of Regulation. Through staff, pupil, and parent training, **children progressed from identifying basic emotions (happy, sad, angry) to recognising a wider range of feelings** and understanding that emotions are transient and influence behaviour. They learned that all feelings are valid, but not all are optimal for focused learning. Resources were embedded in classrooms, and this approach became part of daily practice.

By 2023, Ofsted recognised the significant impact of this work, particularly for pupils with complex needs and those struggling with regulation. Building on this success, we focused on relationships and pupil agency, introducing restorative practice (RP).

The Year 5/6 teacher and I began training in restorative practice. As with any new initiative, the teacher trialled aspects in her classroom, introducing morning circles where children could share their Zone of Regulation, explore ways to support peers who might be struggling, and discuss a 'question of the day.'

Our goal was for children to start each day feeling connected, with a sense of belonging and an opportunity for their voices to be heard. We also wanted them to learn active listening—a skill that is far easier to practice in a circle. Circles have been used by communities for hundreds of years as a way to communicate collectively; even recently, the campmates on *I'm a Celebrity* gathered in a morning circle!

After trialling RP, we visited two Liverpool schools from the original RP pilot. In the first school, we met an inspirational headteacher who, having brought together two communities into one amalgamated school, decided the way forward was restorative practice. She needed to **build community, understanding, and tolerance—and most importantly, introduce a system where fairness and justice were central to managing conflict.** We observed their morning circle, listened to children speak with conviction and passion about the impact of restorative practice, and saw how it was used proactively to resolve classroom issues. We were bowled over.

The second school shared with us the risks when RP is not consistently embedded, reinforcing the importance of fidelity. Leaders were aware and eager to improve, but this was an important message for us to take away: **consistency is key.**

Following this, we launched RP at Singleton with staff INSET, pupil and parent workshops, and structured circles. Morning circles were complemented by end-of-day circles focused on reflection of the day.

We then implemented six scripted questions across the school to manage challenges and fallouts. We use the same language, same body language, same approach—creating consistency. Children quickly embraced this, often anticipating the questions. Peer mentors were trained to support younger pupils, though embedding takes time.

Restorative practice does not eliminate conflict—it teaches children how to respond, repair, and rebuild relationships. This is essential for resilience and future readiness. At Singleton, we believe these practices future-proof our children, equipping them with emotional literacy, empathy, and problem-solving skills for life.

Recently, following a pupil fallout, three boys were engaged in a restorative conversation. One Year 6 pupil addressed a child who had hurt a friend: *"Why did you do that? It's not the Singleton way—it's not how we treat each other."*

When the child who had caused harm began to cry, the same boy quietly fetched tissues and said: *"It's okay, I do forgive you, but pushing isn't going to help."* Then, with remarkable sensitivity, he gently asked: *"Is everything okay at home?"*

I was humbled beyond words in that moment—Year 6 boys communicating, repairing, and caring with maturity and empathy. **Children have these abilities; we just need to teach them and give them the tools.**

Looking back at my own practice as a teacher just six short years ago, I cringe slightly at some of my approaches. I was the teacher—I had all the answers. My mindset was: you don't need to solve the fallout because you simply aren't going to do that. Time out was given without meaningful restoration. I told children what their mistake was, asked them to say sorry because that's what you do, but never gave time for them to think about how their actions affected others. Ultimately, if you fell out, the message was: go and find somewhere else to play.

It's not just the children who have grown through this training—I have too. Best of all, having become Executive Head at Boxgrove, it is now possible to grow this practice and impact even more children.

Restorative practice, Zones of Regulation, and relational approaches are not fluffy buzzwords—they are the foundations of how we communicate. They sit alongside firm boundaries and the expectation that children consider the impact and consequences of their actions.

This journey shows that **relational practice is not a trend—it's a leadership commitment** to building communities rooted in fairness, accountability, and care. I believe that **when we teach children the language of emotions and restoration, we don't just change classrooms—we change futures.**

Mrs Theresa Smyth

Executive Headteacher of Boxgrove C.E Primary School and Singleton CE Primary School