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Research Paper

Restorative Practices in Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools: A Qualitative Study of Practitioners from India

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ABSTRACT

The Indian education system is well known for the "Reward" and "Punishment" method of teaching. Recent times have seen a shift in teaching methods in some schools with restorative practices. This study deals with understanding how restorative practices help create safe and inclusive spaces in schools. Data has been collected from practitioners' who have been incorporating circles. The findings reveal that behavioral issues in children can largely be dealt with using these methods while capacity building of practitioners' and time constraints are major challenges to be addressed. The findings shed light on the need for restorative practices in schools to ensure value based learning and holistic development and growth and informs policies to integrate restorative methods in schools from lower grades to promote value based learning and substantial development of children and young adults.

Keywords: *Restorative, Safe, Inclusive, Schools, Qualitative*

The Right to Education Act (RTE), enacted by the Government of India in 2009, calls for free and compulsory education for all children, irrespective of sex, gender, caste, religion and race below the age of 14 years. Though recognised as a fundamental right, research shows a clear disparity in learning gap of educational outcomes between India and other developed countries (Harshvardhan, 2014). The issue with schooling pertains not just because of the discrimination with respect to religion, caste and race (Das, 2019), but becomes even more amplified when viewed with the perspective of corporal punishment in schools (Deepak et al., 2022). Extensive research conducted by Agrasar (2018) concluded that around 88% of a large proportion of children in government schools are beaten up on a daily basis, in spite of India being one of the 128 countries to legally prohibit corporal punishment. Despite the majority traditional beliefs that corporal punishment is an acceptable means to impart learning to a child, data suggests that it can have detrimental impacts on the mental health of the child (Gershoff, 2010). School punishment violates children's right to education, health, development, freedom from violence and negatively affects educational consequences (Dr Adity, 2021).

In relation to peer-to-peer bullying, a UNESCO (2019) analysis drawing on data from 96 countries and territories participating in the Global School-based Student Health Survey

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(GSHS) found that 16.1% of students had experienced physical bullying, while 11.2% reported being subjected to sexual jokes, comments, or gestures. Additionally, 8.2% of children faced cyberbullying through images, and 5.5% reported being bullied through social exclusion. Overall, the findings indicated that nearly one-third (32%) of students had encountered at least one form of peer bullying within school settings. Furthermore, 36% of students reported involvement in physical fights, and 32.4% stated that they had been physically attacked by peers at least once in the year preceding the survey (UNESCO, 2019; Enfold proactive Health Trust, 2025). School violence leads to further bullying, self-harm tendencies, lowered self-esteem, and dating violence (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022) while harmful psychological and physiological responses are triggered along with experiences of pain, anger, fear, guilt, and sadness (Schwartz, n.d.).

Taking into consideration the mental health and overall well-being of children, new systems of educational practices have started to be adopted into schools in recent times. The 21st century has ushered a policy shift from zero tolerance policies toward improving school climate through preventative measures (Way et al., 2007). Restorative method of schooling through circles is one such methodology that is being adopted to ensure socio emotional learning and holistic development of children. Restorative practices constitute a range of tools that make it possible to prevent, detect, tackle and resolve situations of conflict (family, educational, social, labor, and community) in order to improve coexistence and to reinforce the affective ties between the people affected by these situations (Pomar et al., 2020).

Restorative approaches in education are rooted in the principles of Restorative Justice (RJ), which emerged within the criminal justice system as an alternative response to crime. These approaches draw significantly from indigenous and community-based practices, including Family Group Conferences from Māori traditions in New Zealand, Sentencing Circles adapted from Aboriginal communities in northern Canada, Navajo peace-making courts, and Panchayat systems in India (Enfold proactive Health Trust, 2025). In the educational context, Restorative Approaches focus on fostering learning communities that strengthen individuals' capacity to engage with one another and their environment in ways that uphold and respect the inherent dignity and worth of all members (Evans & Waandering, 2016).

Restorative justice in education facilitates creation of spaces that enhance the capacities of children to engage with one another and their environment in a manner that upholds the dignity and respect of all (Evans & Waandering, 2016). Under the restorative approach, misbehavior in the classroom is viewed as a social and emotional learning opportunity for children. Instead of punishment and exclusion, restorative processes focus on value-based dialogues to set things right and repair relationships (Enfold Proactive Health Trust, n.d.). Restorative practices are increasingly used as a means for strengthening and empowering individuals, promoting resilience, and as diversion away from potentially harmful situations which are specially relevant in the context of supported housing, where individuals are often struggling to build or rebuild relations to each other, their communities and, at times, in the context of harm and criminal behavior (Hobson et al., 2021).

This approach works on the basis of three central ideas: repair (the harm must be repaired), encounter (communication and decision-making by all the persons affected), and transformation (profound changes in the participants and in their relationships) (McCold & Wachtel, 2016). The roots of restorative practice can be traced back to ancient indigenous

traditions, where restitution was key in the search for justice (Vaanering, 2010). This history has encouraged interest in many countries in the use of restorative practices, particularly as an alternative to retributive methods, which gives prominence to punishment. It could be said that social and emotional competencies are at the core of restorative processes which are by and for the community that provides tools so that it can take care of itself (Costello et al., 2009).

Restorative practices therefore encapsulate the concept of peaceful coexistence of individuals, groups and communities with interpersonal relationships forming the backbone. Relationships in which cooperation, knowledge of others, respect, and concern for holistic wellbeing are fundamental elements, as well as the awareness of how one's behavior affects the emotional wellbeing or distress of the people around (Pomar et al., 2020). There is substantial success with these approaches in a number of other similar institutional settings across the world. For example, in schools, where restorative approaches are an alternative to detentions, expulsions, and suspensions (Teasley, 2014), the same approach is used in prisons, to develop thinking, reasoning, and positive cultures (Calkin, 2021; Kim, 2021) and across broad applications in social work, social care (Kate et al., 2018) and probation (Kirkwood & Hamad, 2019).

Restorative practices have widely been implemented in schools to test efficacy and impact in many countries all over the world. With respect to the field of education, restorative practices strengthen relationships between all the members of the educational community (Hopkins, 2011). Students who had been effectively engaged in restorative practices reported the ability to share without inhibition (Lustick et al., 2020). They represent a way of managing conflicts in education centers as opposed to the predominant retributive model, providing a new perspective in which pupils learn from the situations of conflict and from problems by taking responsibility and repairing the harm caused (Reimer, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2008).

A study conducted by the Department of Education in India mentioned that 97% of schools rated restorative practices as effective in preventing bullying and in creating a positive climate for teaching and learning (India Today, 2022). A study from Ireland by Elaine et al (2025) revealed how restorative practices can be implemented using modelling approaches, staff training and encouraging peer involvement. A study conducted by Kane et al (2009) to test the efficacy of restorative practices (RP) in Scottish government schools concluded that implementation of RP was successful, for it was able to create a positive school ethos and a sense of value with the survey indicating that a large majority of pupils felt they had someone to go to if they had a problem. A systematic literature review by Lodi et al. (2021) of 34 studies across seven countries showed that RP has led to an increase in students' social skills (e.g., empathy, awareness, responsibility), fostering the ability to express and manage emotions, promote the development of fair and positive relationships. The circles were found to facilitate creation of safe relational spaces in which students could tell their own stories of life and experiences, thus encouraging learning and mutual knowledge. Surveys conducted by the Youth Justice Board of England and Wales (2001-04) before and after implementation of RP in schools over a three-year period portrayed a substantial decrease in the instances of bullying in the schools surveyed while the staff surveys indicated a significant change in students' behavior compared to the non-programme schools (IIRP, 2007).

Restorative practices in Indian schools are a rare sight to behold, not taking away the fact that "Punishment" is still the most widely accepted form of teaching children across the country. However, in recent times, there have been certain schools in urban and semi urban regions which have undertaken RP and have reaped positive results with regards to improved behavior and emotional awareness in children. Organizations like Enfold Proactive Health Trust and Agarsar have continually worked towards capacity building and promoting RP in schools and in various communities. The number of schools that have adapted restorative practices in proportion to the population, although, is negligible. Therefore, there are very few or barely any studies that deal with the impact and efficacy of RP in Indian schools.

This study, hence, deals with understanding of how RP enables creation of safe and inclusive spaces in schools in India through its various methodologies, from the practitioners of RP across the country. This would throw more light on the optimum methodologies that are being adopted with respect to the Indian scenario, the challenges and opportunities available and what else could be done to bring this practice more into the limelight. This study conceives the concept of RP as an interdisciplinary approach in the educational and social work settings, where empowerment of individuals, groups and communities form the core encapsulated around value systems. This study also perceives RP through the lens of Contemporary Restorative Ideas, where sanctions are compensatory rather than punitive, primarily intended at restoration and rehabilitation.

Objectives

- To understand/learn the restorative approaches and strategies that practitioners apply to ensure inclusivity in schools.
- To understand the effectiveness of restorative practices in creating inclusive and safe environments in schools.
- To identify the barriers and drawbacks that practitioners face while implementing restorative practices.
- To suggest suitable interventions regarding how these practices can be employed in more effective ways to ensure better inclusivity.

METHODOLOGY

This study is of a qualitative nature. In-depth interviews were used to collect the data from RP Practitioners to understand the various methods and practices that they employ to create safe, inclusive spaces in school settings. They serve as an effective means to bring out the perspectives, opinions and ideas of people from various walks of life. Telephonic in-depth interviews were conducted by the author in different phases. A healthy rapport was built with the participants during the first phase to ensure a smooth, sustained relationship. The second phase comprised in-depth discussions related to the topic. The interviews were completed across two to three sessions, depending on the duration. An overall time of 45 minutes to 60 minutes was taken for the interviews.

Complete confidentiality of data collected was guaranteed to all participants by the author beforehand. The participants were also assured that the information provided would only be used for official research purposes and not otherwise. Participants were free not to answer any question if they felt comfortable or end the conversation as per their will at any time. Permission to record the interviews over call were also taken from the participants before the start of each interview. The participants were thoroughly informed about the intention, scope

and objectives of the study beforehand and the interviews were only conducted after informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The interview format was semi-structured and included both open and closed-ended questions. The interview schedule was carefully designed to answer the objectives mentioned above. The guide comprised socio demographics information followed by a structured outline of the topics to be covered. Referring to the previous research conducted and the gaps identified, the interview guide was meticulously designed so as to extract maximum information from the participants. The core areas of the guide included the various methods that practitioners employ in their respective settings, the effectiveness of those methods, the challenges and drawbacks the participants perceive, if any and suggestions on how this could be improved and implemented more effectively in schools. The guide was primarily prepared by the author in mid-2024 which was validated by experts from Enfold proactive Health Trust, Bengaluru. Inputs and suggestions from experienced researchers and practitioners were considered and incorporated to enhance the quality and authenticity of the interview guide before the interviews were conducted.

Purposive sampling was used to collect data and thematic analysis was undertaken. The data collected over call was transcribed using online softwares. Thorough reading of all the transcripts were undertaken to arrive at common themes after analyzing repeated data patterns. Coding of data and division into themes was done manually after reading over the transcript's multiple times. The most common and repeating ideas, perspectives and statements of the participants are encapsulated and analyzed under one common theme. The themes that emerge from pattern recognition in the data were the different categories for analysis. The findings of the study throw more light into the themes identified and what they imply. Certain verbatims from participants have also been added to add more credibility and enforce the analysis of the author

RP practitioners from India were only considered for the study. This study included practitioners only from an urban setting (Bengaluru). Practitioners who had any type of mental health disorders were excluded from the study. Practitioners who were currently practicing RP methods were only considered for this study.

FINDINGS

- **Elemental takeaways in practise**

Participants stated that the essence and principles of restorative practices could be applied to the school setting based on the need and context. The prime aspects of value setting, voluntary participation, enabling a "power with" approach and encouraging everyone to hear and be heard are some of the key aspects that would be included as a part of restorative circles in schools. Participants also stated that the talking piece and a circular seating arrangement might not be possible in certain schools, owing to time and space constraints, but that would not alter the need and importance of the practice altogether. Some participants also exclaimed that values could themselves be a theme for the circle to enable students to think, apply and practice those values in their day to day lives. Peer learning would be possible through sharing and hearing the real-life experiences of colleagues in a safe and non-judgemental setting. There was also mention about helping the schools and management with the prompt questions needed for a particular issue or concern to be addressed, which was also found to be effective. This enables the fact that despite the entire process of restorative practises might not be feasible or practical in schools, the essence and

effectiveness can always be maintained by using the key elements and principles of the practise.

Participant 1 stated, " It's not like we can't hold a circle and hence the restorative practices go out altogether. We are taking what we can of this whole practice and philosophy and applying it in different ways and contexts, how much we can."

Participant 4 had a unique take on the value setting part. They said, ''When we did the circle with children, we took each value, for example Kindness, that itself has become the theme for the circle. So, just mentioning or listing the values may not help children to understand and internalize the value of those values. Value setting was the most important thing that was useful for children.''

Participant 5 exclaimed, ''The talking piece that goes around is very important, and also how the circle keeper begins the circle. The point is that you are experiencing the circle, whether you speak or not. The whole thing is to see that you are vulnerable. Once they see that you are honest and genuine in sharing, they will also open up. Transparency is the key''

- **Addressing concerning behaviors and building strong relationships**

Participants proclaim in unison that implementation of restorative practices in schools has helped address behavioral issues of students, particularly instances of teasing and bullying. Positive attitudinal changes have been reported by teachers from schools engaging in restorative practices. Sensitive cases of sexual harassment have also been dealt with through the "Harmed Circle" practise as mentioned by one of the participants. Participants also mention that resolution of these underlying attitudinal issues and behavioral concerns among students helps foster a better relationship with peers and helps them to identify, manage and maintain healthier interpersonal relationships moving forward.

Participant 2 mentioned the basic goal of enabling healthy relationships as the prime focus of these circles. They said, ''Building relationships is the base – that is the larger overarching goal. But how we reach there is by addressing the issues.''

Participant 4 proclaimed, ''From teachers we have understood that there are a lot of changes in their attitude and behavior, like respecting others, being helpful and instances of bullying have reduced considerably.''

Participant 5 stated, ''We did not know that there were so many ego clashes happening within the classroom. After the circle on the theme of ego-clashes, there was a change. The conflicts were addressed in a positive manner, though the conflicts didn't stop altogether.''

- **Time and Space constraints**

Participants mention that time and space constraints are one of the biggest drawbacks hindering successful and long-term implementation of restorative practices in schools. Most schools usually have less space, and an increased number of students which makes it difficult for practitioners to hear everyone out and create a safe, inclusive space. The lack of time due to academic and other concerns of the school management only adds to the lack of space and increased number of students in each class.

Participant 1 mentioned, ‘‘Many classrooms don’t have space, so they can’t sit in a circle. They don’t have time. There are too many participants. There are sometimes 35-40-50 students in a classroom. So, you need to have one more teacher or another classroom. Space and time are the biggest concerns for restorative practices in a school setting.’’

Participant 2 stated, ‘‘Time is the biggest constraint, especially for the higher grades with the academics to be completed and the other things to be looked at.’’

Participant 4 said, "We will do the circles but might not be able to see any behavioral changes in children because we will be there only for a limited period of time.’’

- **Concerns regarding teachers/trained personnel**

One of the major drawbacks of restorative practices in schools is the lack of trained personnel or teachers. Participants also mention that there is mostly a lack of belief in the restorative process amongst teachers, which adds to the indifferent attitude of students summing up to failure of the practice. Most teachers are only process oriented rather than outcome oriented which leads to insensitivity and lack of understanding of the issues and concerns of students. The difficulty teachers’ face in shifting from a safe, non-judgemental and calm circle space to a more pressurized, time bound classroom space is challenging to address and overcome for both teachers and practitioners. The concept of ‘power with’ would take time to sink in especially in the Indian context and be practiced in all aspects of teaching.

Participant 3 said, ‘‘Restorative practices will work if the teachers are also practicing restorative principles. If the teacher follows restorative behavior only in the circle and then in the class they behave differently, then the whole method would not work since it gives two different messages to the children. It is hence important for all teachers and the school management to have and adopt these restorative practices in all aspects of the child’s life at school.’’

Participant 2 mentioned, ‘‘Having people who believe in conducting the circles. If there is no binding to the concept, there is no way children will bind to it. So, what we need is proper training of the people which could be an issue.’’

Participant 4 stated, “I have noticed that some teachers wear different caps when they are in the circle as compared to when they are not. Some teachers also expressed that it is very difficult for them to be polite all the time, as in a circle. It is very challenging for them when they are not in a circle because children won’t listen to them”

DISCUSSION

This study noted that restorative practices in school settings indeed go a long way in enhancing socio emotional learning in students while enabling them to manage emotions and behavior. These practices go a long way in making restorative schooling the need of the hour. There are four major themes identified in this study, namely, Elemental takeaways in practice, Addressing concerning behaviors and building strong relationships, Time and Size constraints and Concerns regarding facilitators/practitioners/teachers.

The elemental takeaways in reality is a huge step towards realising the importance of restorative practices especially in the school scenario. Though the findings of Lustick

(2020), McCluskey (2008) and Reimer (2011) resonate with the perspectives of the participants in this study regarding the efficacy of Restorative practices in modelling positive behavior coupled with time constraints, the key findings of this research are the participants' view on taking up elements of restorative circles into practice based on time and space while maintaining the essence of the practice. The value-based themes for the circles are a relatively new but an effective method to ensure that the core values are instilled in children from a young age. Organizations like Enfold Proactive Health Trust have incorporated restorative terminologies and practices into their Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) curriculum in schools, colleges and universities across India. The core essence of value setting, abiding by the values, voluntary participation, "Power with" people and equal opportunities to hear and be heard have been part of the Enfold Curriculum delivery since a long time. Even though the circle in all its entirety might not be implemented in classrooms (sitting in a circle, talking piece, check-ins etc), the core essence and pivotal elements of the practice have and are being applied across settings to reap positive benefits.

The findings of Parker and Bickmore (2021) and Weaver and Swank (2020) identify the success of restorative practices in creating an alternate disciplinary approach in schools and also fostering healthier relationships amongst students encapsulated in empathy, respect and trust. The responses from the participants in this study echo similar sentiments. All the participants from this study portray that schools approach them to handle behavioral issues in students through circles and that instances of bullying amongst students have drastically reduced after implementation of these circles. Students get an open and safe space to share, observe, reflect and contemplate which builds stronger bonds with their peers. The research conducted by Parker and Bickmore (2020) and Vaandering (2014) also talk about restorative practices playing pivotal roles in nurturing peaceful school culture and promoting active engagement of students in conflict resolution and peace-making process. The findings of this study hence validate previous research regarding the efficacy of circles in any school context.

Some participants also talked about the lack of capacity building and trust regarding the process amongst the teaching faculty in schools. The participants mentioned that many teachers find it difficult to remain in a similar frame of mind during and after the circle, for students are not the same. As a result, the majority of them resort to ultimately displaying power "Over" children rather than "With" them, which is what the restorative practices stand for in all entirety. The study conducted by King Lund and team (2021) talks about the ideology of teachers' aligning negligibly with restorative principles, which amounted to scanty changes in their beliefs regarding disciplinary actions, punishment and engagement with students in a more effective manner. The data collected from the participants of this study are also on similar lines, with the teachers not being able to imbibe the entirety of restorative practice and thereby modifying their actions under the name of "Restorative practice." The data collected in this study also bears great resemblance to the findings of Jeznik et.al (2020) with respect to the fact that restorative principles and content must also be introduced into the teacher curriculum to build their capacity and empower them to strike a balance between their beliefs, behaviors and actions. The results of Kane et.al (2009) and Lodi et.al (2021) also talk about the efficacy of restorative practices in fostering a peaceful and empowering school environment based on values. The findings of Elaine et al (2025) also reinforce the pivotal role played by school teachers in this regard.

The constraint of time in conducting and implementing restorative practices was consistent amongst most participants in the study. Due to academic necessities and other restraints, the time given to cater to restorative principles is very minimal, thereby not reaping the full benefits of the practice. Similar results were deduced from the research conducted by Andrea and group (2023) where teachers would give up on restorative practices before the change has occurred or limit the amount of time for restorative talk and practice perceiving it as being too lenient and undermining of current behavioral accountability coupled with the vast burden of academic requirements on their shoulders. Gregory and Evans (2020) talk about how it can take anywhere between 3 and 5 years to see measurable change in this practice. Taking into consideration the history of punitive punishment and its normalisation in India, additional time would definitely be needed to see tangible changes (Goldys, 2016) in an Indian context. A survey conducted across 900 students by Enfold (Enfold Proactive Health Trust, n.d.) in a Bengaluru school regarding the efficacy of restorative circles brought out the time constraints that a circle facilitator faces, from a student's perspective. 48% of students felt that the circle time was not sufficient for them to share their true feelings and hear each other out and felt that catering more time would ensure a better and a more comfortable space for understanding.

This research therefore sheds light on the need of restorative circles and their vast potential to create a safe and inclusive space for students in schools in India and the drawbacks and lapses in current methodologies and implementation. Though a relatively new concept in the Indian education system, restorative practices have been part of schooling for a long time across many countries with positive outcomes. Some schools in India are slowly trying to shift from conventional punitive methods towards a more equal and just restorative system but the drawbacks are innumerable, only some of which were enumerated through this research. This research also serves as a foundation to understand the benefits and drawbacks of the practice in Indian school settings and hence calls for combined efforts of all stakeholders to work towards increased incorporation of these practices into the curriculum, along with adequate training for facilitators and school personnel.

Policies can be introduced at state and national levels to make the practice compulsory from primary school levels. The time catered and the contents to be covered can be meticulously designed so as to serve and address age wise behavior and issues. Continuous evaluation and redesigning of the content and methodology need to be undertaken by the schools currently implementing these practices so as to ensure that the students are not bored but take some learning from the circles. Workshops and training sessions can be conducted by experts in the field across various levels of the education system to bring in all concerned people under one umbrella. Further and extensive research can also be conducted to understand its impact, and the findings can serve as a benchmark for further improvement and betterment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study portrays the pivotal role restorative practices play in shaping the overall socio emotional learning of children in schools coupled with key life skills like emotional management, self-awareness, effective communication and coping with stress. The study emphasizes the need to work on the prevalent drawbacks collectively and come up with policies, legislations and frameworks to incorporate restorative circles and principles into the school curriculum from primary level so as to enable positive values and thereby holistic growth from a young age.

Though the study focuses on advocating for restorative practices in schools, it has its own set of limitations. This study is undertaken in an urban setting, thereby not accounting for diverse experiences and perspectives. Additionally, this study has been conducted across practitioners in one city. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample size drawn from various regions to explore region-specific factors and broader perceptions (Likith, 2024). A mixed method approach could be employed in future prospects to capture tangible data while substantiating it with experiences of people across different settings. Restorative research could be expanded to cover other settings like Child care institutions and other facilities, where the issues and the need is larger. Extended research can also be conducted to understand the perspectives of the beneficiaries and thereby contextualize, modify the work towards improving the methodology and approach.

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