# Restorative Conferences as a Conflict Resolution Tool: An Action Research Project in a Zimbabwean High School

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## Abstract

Conflicts, violence and breaches of discipline are common in Zimbabwean schools. Teachers have always used retributive practices, particularly corporal punishment, to deal with these problems, but this approach has been outlawed since 2013. Since then, teachers have struggled to handle indiscipline without using corporal punishment. Restorative disciplinary practices such as restorative conferences, peer mediation and peacebuilding circles are possible alternatives but to date have been little used in Zimbabwe. This article reports an action research project that introduced restorative conferences with Form 2 learners in one large urban high school between October 2022 and May 2023. A short-term evaluation of the use of such conferences found strong support from learners, teachers and parents. This finding suggests the potential benefits of restorative conferences and related practices as a way of building more peaceful school communities.

**Keywords:** restorative justice, restorative practices, restorative conferences, schools, violence, Zimbabwe

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## 1. Introduction

Zimbabwean teachers have always used retributive practices to discipline learners, the most common being corporal punishment, which has been supported by compulsory manual work, detentions, withdrawal of privileges, suspensions and expulsions. Under the Zimbabwean *Public Service Circular* P.35 of 1999, school headmasters were allowed to use corporal punishment but only in the presence of a witness and with the punishment being recorded in a logbook.

Retributive approaches have important drawbacks. Drawing on worldwide experience, Winslade et al. (2014), Kyriacou (2018), Jean-Pierre and Parris-Drummond (2018) and many others assert that such practices have not built a culture of good behaviour and effective learning. Rather, they promote an inappropriate model for human relationships; they foster anxiety and resentment; they are short-lived in terms of their effect; and they do not deal with the causes of the misconduct. The ineffectiveness of these approaches is shown by the fact that punished learners often repeat the same offences. Overall, learners subjected to this form of punishment feel angry, resent authority, take out their frustrations on peers and do not do the work assigned to them. Empirically, there is very strong evidence worldwide (Gershoff, 2017; Gershoff, Sattler and Holden, 2019) that corporal punishment in schools has negative consequences for children in terms of their physical and mental health, behaviour and academic performance, and that these consequences continue to affect individuals during their adult years. This may well be linked to the fact that Zimbabwe is becoming an increasingly violent society, as confirmed by the most recent report of the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZNSA) and UNICEF (2019).

In line with international practice, Zimbabwe's constitution was amended in 2013 to state that no person may be subjected to physical or psychological torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment. Moreover, the 2019 *Education Amendment Act* (Section 68A, paragraph 5) does not allow teachers to beat a child under any circumstances. Alternative forms of discipline have not been provided, and this has left teachers in a dilemma regarding the disciplining of learners. Some still use retributive approaches, including corporal punishment, while others have chosen to allow misconduct to continue unchecked. Zimbabwe's teacher training colleges and universities provide little by way of training to student teachers on how to discipline learners once they are employed as teachers (Sibanda and Mpofu, 2019). This leads teachers to rely on the same retributive

disciplinary approaches to which they themselves were exposed to as learners. In short, despite its negative consequences, the retributive cycle is continuing.

There is little published research on non-retributive forms of discipline in Zimbabwe. There are a few sources: Chiramba and Harris (2020), who reported the use of peer mediation and peace circles in three primary schools in Harare; Chiromo (2021), who compared and contrasted forms of restorative discipline practised in an elite secondary boarding school and a typical rural high school; Ziwanai, Harris and Davis (2024), who established and evaluated peer mediation programmes in four Harare high schools; and Rukuni, Harris and Davis (2024), who established and evaluated peace circles among Form 2 learners in a typical urban high school. To our knowledge, there has been no published research on restorative conferences in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, this article reports an action research project aimed at improving discipline among high school learners by using restorative conferences. The specific objectives were to:

- Explore the nature, extent and consequences of indiscipline in one Zimbabwean high school, as perceived by learners and teachers.
- Implement restorative conferences in the school as one alternative to retributive practices.
- Evaluate the short-term outcomes of the intervention, as perceived by learners, teachers and parents.

Peer mediation and peace circles were also introduced into the school at the same time but these are not discussed here, although peace circles are the subject of a companion article (Rukuni, Harris and Davis, 2024).

## 2. Managing, resolving and transforming misconduct in schools

Conflict management involves the imposition of order by an authoritative party, often by separating the conflicting parties. In a school context, it might involve corporal punishment, the temporary removal of learners from the classroom or their expulsion from the school. Each of these examples is based on retribution, that is, when misconduct occurs, punishment is necessary for the sake of justice and also to act as a deterrent to future misconduct. It may be a quick application but, as already noted, it is likely to have only a limited effect in reducing future misconduct. It certainly does nothing for the relationship between teachers and

students, and it educates learners to use retributive tools as the socially accepted way of handling conflicts they face as young people and later as adults.

Conflict resolution involves the collaboration of the parties in conflict, sometimes with the help of a mediator, in the hope of finding an outcome acceptable to each party. However, there may be limited scope for collaboration to deal with misconduct in schools given the power imbalances between teachers and students, notwithstanding the expansion of student rights in recent decades. One exception concerns conflicts between students outside the classroom, where resolution can be assisted by the intervention of trained peer mediators.

Conflict transformation has increasingly become the hoped-for outcome of peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts since the 1990s, following the lead of Jean Paul Lederach (1997), among others. It emphasises transforming the relationship between the parties in conflict, which includes components such as truth, justice, mercy, forgiveness and, ideally, reconciliation. Conflict resolution may remain as a generic term, but if the desired outcome is improved relationships between the parties, then conflict resolution, as Lederach (2012) explains, may fall short. One or both of the parties may agree to an outcome but continue to mistrust and hate the other and resultantly make sustainable peace difficult to achieve.

How can conflict transformation be promoted in school contexts? In the next section, it is argued that responses to misconduct based on restorative justice and practices are relevant if the aim is to move beyond managing conflict to transforming the relationships between teachers and learners and between learners. Three restorative practices that have been used to transform school climates have been examined.

## 3. Restorative justice and restorative practices

The criminal justice system in almost all countries is heavily based on retribution. That is, people who commit crimes are prosecuted by the state on behalf of society, and punishments are applied as a deterrent to future criminal behaviour by those convicted and others who might be tempted to engage in crime. Victims are largely sidelined. An alternative approach in the form of restorative justice is applied to some types of crime in some countries. Restorative justice focuses on repairing the damage done to relationships, redressing the harm done to the victims, holding offenders accountable for their actions and involving the community in deciding on the way forward for offenders. Classic references include Johnstone (2011;

2013) and Zehr (2015a, 2015b) and the professionalisation of the concept is well documented by the European Forum for Restorative Justice (2021).

Restorative justice in the West emerged during the 1980s and initially focused on juvenile offenders and drew strongly from traditional conflict resolution practices used in Indigenous communities throughout the world, with the primary goal of maintaining social harmony. Murithi (2006:20-21) lists the typical stages of traditional African conflict resolution as follows:

- In public gatherings open to the entire community, there is presentation of evidence by those affected.
- Offenders are encouraged to accept responsibility for their offences, to express remorse and to promise not to reoffend in the future.
- Offenders are expected to ask for forgiveness from the victims, and victims are expected to forgive the offenders.
- Depending on the nature of the case, an offender may pay some form of reparations to the victim.
- A symbolic act of reconciliation between the representatives of the offender and of the victim takes place to signify the efforts made to restore societal harmony and trust.

Kiyala (2024) provides a wide-ranging review of such practices in Sub-Saharan Africa. There has been little written on the use of such traditional practices in Zimbabwe, but useful contributions include Mandikwaza (2018), Sithole (2020) and Murwira (2022).

Restorative practices have developed on the foundation of restorative justice. O'Dwyer (2021:vii) defines these practices as

> … an approach to building and maintaining interpersonal relationships, preventing and resolving conflict, and responding to harm where it occurs; the approach is based on a set of key values and principles, and is underpinned by a set of skills and techniques; it is applied in a variety of settings including school, workplace, community, family and criminal justice ... Restorative practices include … [peer mediation], family group conferences and circle processes.

Two recent studies of restorative discipline practices in Zimbabwean schools provide important background to the research reported in this article. First, peer mediation programmes were introduced in four high schools in Harare and closely observed over a 10-month period (Ziwanai, Harris and Davis, 2024). Fifteen Form 3 learners in each school were trained as peer mediators and operated under the supervision of the researcher and designated teachers. An evaluation of outcomes showed that a very high proportion of cases handled by the mediators were successfully resolved and that there was a dramatic reduction in the incidence of five forms of violence – fighting, gang violence, bullying, gender-based violence and vandalism.

Three outcomes from this study are worth noting. First, exploratory data collected from learners before the intervention highlighted the top-down approach to indiscipline and the use of corporal punishment. However, during and following the operation of peer mediation, they noted that teachers had begun to engage in dialogue when resolving school conflicts and violence cases, with a focus on clarifying behaviour and its consequences, and encouraging solutions from the parties involved. It is evident that some aspects of the peer mediation culture influenced teachers as well as learners. Second, there was a reduction in the use of punitive methods to deal with disciplinary issues. Corporal punishment was still used (with parental consent and full documentation) but in progressively fewer instances, and there were no cases of suspension, expulsion or the use of police to address cases of violence during the intervention period. Third, interpersonal relationships within the schools improved. Learners reported that a more friendly and respectful atmosphere had developed between learners; in particular, girls were treated more respectfully, with learners using appropriate language. Teacher-learner relationships also improved, and learners felt more able to approach and consult their teachers.

The second study (Rukuni, Harris and Davis, 2024) concerns peace circles, the most widely used restorative practice in schools worldwide. These circles go by various names – peace circles, peacemaking/peacebuilding circles, community/community-building circles, proactive circles, responsive circles and restorative circles – which suggest differences in purpose and practice across different contexts. As a general rule, peace circles afford each class member freedom of expression and respectful listening. A 'talking stick' or similar object may be used to encourage one person to speak at a time without interruption. Research on

circles (see, e.g., Evanovich et al., 2020; Parker and Bickmore, 2020) suggest that they can enhance speaking and listening skills and build empathy, co-operation, appreciation of diversity and interpersonal trust.

Peace circles can be preventive, restorative or both. Their preventive aspect results from building connection and community between class members as a result of sharing. Finnis (2021) and Needham (2021) explain that this typically begins with teachers and learners welcoming each other to the circle followed by learners sharing something about their lives. Sometimes, the teacher might provide a discussion question, which enhances problem-solving abilities and collaboration. These activities allow class members, including the teacher, to know each other better and to build better relationships. Peace circles can also be used to resolve conflicts involving class members and to restore harmony (Fellegi and Szegö, 2013). A typical procedure would be for the victim(s) to identify the incident, indicate how it has affected them and what they want to happen in the future. The facilitator then invites the offender(s) to explain their behaviour at the time, express remorse for their behaviour and commit to better behaviour in the future. This procedure has the potential for the whole class to be involved in restoring damaged relationships. The parallels with traditional African methods of dealing with conflicts and antisocial behaviour are strong.

Rukuni, Harris and Davis (2024) evaluated the short-term outcomes of the operation of peace circles in a Zimbabwean urban high school over an eight-month period between October 2022 and May 2023, based on data collected from learners and teachers. Four positive short-term outcomes were identified – an increase in the quality of verbal contributions in the circles; an improvement in relationships between learners and between learners and teachers; improved problem-solving and conflict resolution skills; and a reduced resort to disciplinary interventions by teachers. While both learners and teachers attributed these outcomes to peace circles, the authors note that other restorative practices were introduced at the same time, thus making it difficult to be too dogmatic about the effects of peace circles.

Rukuni, Harris and Davis (2024:53–54) reflect on why sitting in a circle listening to one another is so attractive to learners and apparently effective in building better relationships. They suggest that,

> [There is] a great divide between adults and learners in Zimbabwean society and therefore limited opportunities for learners to share with each other, let alone adults, about non-trivial matters. As with society in general, the education system is top down and authoritarian, with the role assigned to learners being as recipients of information imparted by teachers. They are starved of opportunities to participate ... [because] participative methods are little used … not in schools, not in homes, not in churches.

The third type of restorative practice is family group conferences – more commonly known as restorative conferences – which is the focus of this article. These involve a structured meeting in which people affected by learner behaviour have a conversation to correct the wrongdoing and to repair the harm that has occurred. The important point is that whoever is involved – learners, teachers and families – can engage in a meeting that feels safe enough to allow them to talk through what has happened, explore the impact on each other, discuss any unmet needs and come up with a plan to prevent a recurrence (Finnis, 2021).

Julyan and Durham (2017) emphasise that these conferences must focus on the harm that was done rather than a rule that was broken, with the hope that the offender will accept personal responsibility for their actions and to commit to improving their future behaviour. To determine who should participate in a conference, prior interviews are carried out with the offenders, victims and key participants. Ground rules for the meeting need to be established. The type of questions that are likely to be asked include: "What happened?" "What were you thinking at the time?" "What are you thinking now?" "Who has been affected?" "What needs to happen to repair the harm that was done?" and "What can we do to support you?" In summary, restorative conferences allow learners to meet face to face with other learners and teachers and to discuss what happened and why, how each person feels, how things could be resolved and how similar situations could be avoided in the future.

To Finnis (2021), a major benefit of these conferences is that they enable the offending learners, victim learners and teachers to solve problems by using dialogue. Learners are given the opportunity to take responsibility for some of the decisions taken during the conferences. Finnis (2021) contrasts this with a retributive approach to misconduct where teachers take over, leaving the victim with no chance to interact with the perpetrator and perhaps causing damage that retribution has not been able to repair.

Restorative conferences involve a quest for justice and the building of social harmony. Conferences are typically part of a school-wide application of restorative practices of various kinds, all of which emphasise listening to one another. The seminal work by Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2002) is instructive in this regard. Restorative conferences require time and careful planning and tend to be used when lower levels of conflict resolution have not succeeded. Their use means that retributive disciplinary methods such as corporal punishment, suspensions and expulsions can be reduced and perhaps avoided altogether.

Lodi et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive overview of restorative justice and practices in schools using research articles published between 2010 and 2021. Peace circles were the most commonly used restorative practice, followed by restorative conferences and peer mediation. Their findings concerning the effectiveness of restorative practices in general are noteworthy:

> Sometimes, conflicts are an integral part of community life, such as school, and can represent valid opportunities for growth, but very often the inability to manage and face them or manage them and deal with them with punitive practices leads to an opposite effect. However, it is fundamental to promote alternative and nonviolent methods that can favour the possibility for people to confront each other with respect to different opinions, beliefs, and values as well as have greater awareness of the situation and work together to find solutions. Restorative processes can be a nonviolent response: they help to prevent and reduce conflicts and resolve them peacefully ... [S]chools that implement the restorative approach and practices achieve improvements in school discipline, reduction in injuries, disciplinary postponements, and school offenses. Consequently, there are greater positive behaviours and lower suspension rates and disciplinary sanctions and less need for punitive measures (2022:15).

The authors of this article exercise caution in linking peer mediation too strongly to conflict resolution and restorative conferences to conflict transformation. This points to the different emphases that these practices can take in different contexts. Peer mediation can focus on the straightforward defusing of a conflict to prevent it becoming violent (as it was in the research reported by Ziwanai, Harris and Davis, 2024) or it could be the first step in trying to restore the relationships between the parties. Moreover, restorative conferences can enable all parties to contribute to building relationships or they can operate under authoritarian

guidelines not far removed from teacher-dominated retributive justice. The ways in which restorative practices operate in particular contexts are critical to their effectiveness in transforming relationships as well as to reducing indiscipline. Restorative practices might be best thought of as being located on a continuum running from less to more transformative. Where a restorative practice finds a good fit in a particular school, it depends on its aims, how the practice was designed and how it operates in practice.

## 4. Research methods

This research was carried out between October 2022 and May 2023 at Masvingo Christian College in the city of Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The school is a private Christian-based secondary school with over 1,000 learners but is required to follow the directives and standards of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. It faces the same disciplinary problems experienced in schools throughout Zimbabwe, including bullying, truancy, theft, vandalising school property and drug and alcohol abuse.

The research followed an action research approach. Action research was popularised by Kurt Lewin (1946), who emphasised that simply understanding a social problem was unlikely to bring about change. Change, he argued, comes about by a well-designed and well-executed intervention. He also emphasised the importance of participation – that is, the need for researchers to work with those affected in order to bring about change, rather than imposing their own ideas and solutions. Standard texts on action research (e.g., Johnson, 2011; McNiff, 2013; Bradbury, 2015) typically identify four stages: exploration, planning an intervention, implementing the intervention and evaluating its outcomes. Recent uses of action research in the area of African peace and conflict studies have been documented by Harris et al. (2024); the problems addressed include managing inter-community conflict, resolving land ownership disputes and trauma healing.

We used a mixed-method research design, with quantitative data drawn from questionnaires and qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). For the exploration stage, questionnaires on the nature, extent and consequences of conflict and violence in the school – including the current ways of handling these – were filled in by all 300 Form 2 learners. All 14 teachers involved in Form 2 teaching participated in the teacher FGDs and 12 of these were also interviewed. In addition, 24 learners were randomly selected to participate in

learner FGDs from those who indicated their willingness to do so in their questionnaire responses. And 12 parents of the learners with disciplinary problems who took part in restorative conferences were also interviewed. We used unstructured interviews with teachers (in English) and parents/guardians (mostly in Shona). The data collected from the interviews and FGDs was qualitatively analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) which, following Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006), involved familiarisation with and immersion into the responses, identification of themes, coding, elaboration and interpretation. The quantitative data from the survey was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

In terms of research design, we acknowledge that the research could have been more engaging if it had offered a comparative analysis of peace circles, peer mediation and restorative conferences. While this study also involved the introduction of peer mediation and peace circles, these are outside the purview of this article. Peace circles are the subject of a companion article (see Rukuni, Harris and Davis, 2024).

This paper recognises, as did Rukuni, Harris and David (2024) in their study of peace circles, that it is difficult to assess the relative effectiveness of different forms of restorative discipline when several are in operation concurrently. That said, the research was set up as a 'whole-school restorative intervention' involving multiple forms, as recommended by Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2004) and others as the most effective way of reducing indiscipline. We discuss the comparative aspect further in the final section.

The research project scrupulously followed the protocols and requirements of our university's Institutional Research Ethics Committee. Its approval number is IREC 133/21.

## 5. Findings

### Exploration

The survey responses from almost 300 Form 2 students and the comments by teachers during FGDs and interviews were remarkably consistent. Over 95 per cent of learners reported high levels of conflict and violence in the school and believed that the disciplinary methods typically employed were ineffective in reducing bad behaviour and resulted in strained relationships between teachers and learners.

In the words of one teacher (Participant A, 20 November 2022), the retributive methods "are just not working – the same learners keep on repeating the same behaviour". Virtually all teachers regarded the ineffectiveness of disciplinary methods as having significant negative consequences for educational outcomes. In close consultation with the school authorities, we decided to implement restorative disciplinary practices with a strong emphasis on restorative conferences.

## Intervention

The intervention began with training sessions for teachers and learners on restorative conferencing, following the general directions of Winslade et al. (2014) and Julyan and Durham (2017). The main topics covered during the training were:

- The disciplinary practices currently used in the school, their purposes and their effectiveness in meeting these purposes.
- Restorative justice as an alternative to retributive justice, its purposes and widespread use in African communities as a way of maintaining and building social harmony.
- Restorative practices that can be used to build harmony in schools, with particular reference to restorative conferences, peacebuilding circles and peer mediation.
- The effectiveness of these practices.
- How to introduce restorative practices in a school.

During the implementation phase, there were 11 conferences involving Form 2 learners facing various disciplinary offences, the most common of which were bullying, alcohol and drug abuse, and being absent from school to spend time with girlfriends or boyfriends; a typical offender was engaged in a mix of these offences. Attendance at the conferences varied according to the type of indiscipline but they typically involved the offending learner, several of their friends, victim learners and several of their friends, three teachers, including the school's Guidance and Counselling teacher and often, the learner's parents. Several aspects were common to all 11 conferences: all participants were able to say how the behaviour affected them; offenders would commit to desist from such behaviour in the future; and

agreements were reached about what the offenders would do to repair the harm they had caused.

### Short-term outcomes

Given the time constraints of the research project, the evaluation focused on its short-term outcomes, as reported by learners, teachers and parents. This was based on a period of about five months when disciplinary problems in the school were handled largely by the use of restorative conferences. Given that there were also other restorative interventions (peace circles and peer mediation) going on at the same time, it would be difficult to attribute any changes unequivocally to restorative conferences. All 300 learners were asked to complete an evaluation survey and three FGDs were held – with seven male learners, eight female learners and eight teachers. In addition, six parents/guardians of offenders were interviewed. In each case, participants were asked for their opinions about the effectiveness of restorative practices, with a specific focus on restorative conferences. The responses quoted below can be regarded as representative of the views of each group, unless otherwise stated.

### Learner perspectives

In response to the question 'Did you find the restorative conferences important in changing the behaviour of the high school learners?', 297 of the 300 learners replied that they were very important (140) or important (157). Typical comments in the FGDs were the following:

> They changed my behaviour by teaching me respect for both the victims and the offenders (Participant B, 7 May 2023).
>
> They enhanced our academic performance by actually finalising bad behaviour once and for all (Participant C, 7 May 2023).
>
> They changed me as a whole, because after being involved [in a restorative conference], I was able to open up and see how to change my behaviour for the good (an offender who went through a restorative conference) (Participant D, 7 May 2023).

The learners felt that the restorative conferences offered a positive alternative to the traditional punitive disciplinary methods such as corporal punishment and were effective in facilitating two-way communication within the school

community. In the FGDs, several learners said that the conferences allowed teachers to better understand why learners misbehave and that,

> Restorative conferences allow teachers time to ask questions and learners time to speak and be heard on what happened (Participant E, 7 May 2023).

More widely, learners felt that the conferences

> … have reinforced openness and transparency and taught them how to resolve conflicts outside the school (Participant F, 7 May 2023).

Learners spoke about how conferences had fostered good relations across the school community. One learner emphasised that:

> They have created better relations between learners, teachers and parents, and have built respect between those who participated in them (Participant G, 7 May 2023).

### Teacher perspectives

Overall, in their FGD, teachers felt that restorative conferences were an effective disciplinary tool as compared to the punitive methods such as corporal punishment. They identified four main benefits. First, they found that the use of questions such as, 'How have others been affected by your behaviour?' helped offenders think deeply about the effects of their actions on others and how to solve problems that they create when they misbehave. They became more conscious of the effects of their actions on others and how negative effects could be addressed. Second, the use of the question, 'How can you repair the harm that you caused?' helped offending learners to pull back from behaviour such as bullying, thus providing benefits to their victims. In their FGD, a typical teacher statement pointed to "victim satisfaction" as a result of apologies by the offender. Thus, both victims and offenders received benefits from successful restorative conferences. Third, teachers argued that the conferences built better relationships between learners and teachers because of the two-way communication involved and that resulted in the better understanding of each other. Finally, teachers believed that the use of restorative conferences had taught both learners and teachers the skills needed to handle conflicts outside the school environment more effectively.

An interesting discussion in the teachers' FGD concerned the relatively longer period taken to organise and carry out a restorative conference, as opposed to the

short time involved in administering retributive punishment. On balance, the majority view was the greater effectiveness of restorative conferences in finalising an issue and hopefully helping it stay finalised outweighed the quicker retributive approach where the indiscipline was more likely to recur. Although most teachers felt that these conferences had a positive influence on the school community, it needs to be pointed out that around a fifth were sceptical that restorative processes could ever replace retributive approaches. These teachers urged that the latter be retained, at least as a fallback in cases where restorative processes did not produce the desired outcomes.

### Parent/guardian perspectives

In their interviews, parents expressed satisfaction with the way the conferences were facilitated and asserted that their children had changed their behaviour due to their participation in restorative conferences. In the words of one father,

> If the child is not pretending, we are seeing a great change in his behaviour (Participant H, 13 May 2023).

However, the mother added:

> He has changed, but he still needs to concentrate more on his schoolwork (Participant I, 13 May 2023).

Another mother stated:

> The child is no longer misbehaving like what he did in the past. I am not seeing him involved in drug abuse and he is now going to school all day (Participant J, 13 May 2023)

Yet another mother heard from her daughter's teachers that,

> Now she is always marked present in the register. She is no longer pretending to be ill, and she attends all lessons and comes home at the right time (Participant K, 13 May 2023).

The behavioural changes were not confined to the school environment. One mother reported that her son

> … has stopped misbehaving. He is even coming home early and helping others with the chores at home (Participant L, 19 May 2023).

Another mother spoke of how their son used to resist doing anything to help around the house,

> … but now we can ask him, and he does it (Participant M, 19 May 2023).

The mother of a female learner who used to absent herself from school and hang around with men stated that,

> After [the conference], there is a great change in her behaviour; she is no longer lying that she is going to do homework when in fact she is away with sugar daddies (Participant N, 19 May 2023).

Some parents noted that their children improved in their academic performance after participating in the conferences. One father reported:

> [There is] a great change, because last term he only passed one subject, but this term he passed four subjects – what a great improvement (Participant O, 19 May 2023).

Parents made a link between improved, self-disciplined lives on the part of their children and their commitment to schoolwork. Parents were optimistic that these changes would continue into the future. In the words of one father,

> If the child is not influenced [by bad friends] again, and if he is monitored closely, he will not misbehave in future (Participant P, 19 May 2023).

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

It was argued earlier that conflict management and conflict resolution have limitations in school contexts and that conflict transformation is a more appropriate approach. This study planned, implemented and evaluated restorative conferences in one high school as a way of dealing with misconduct, which could build the relationships of the parties involved. Based on the perceptions of learners, teachers and parents, restorative conferences appear to have been effective in dealing with the common issues of conflict, violence and misconduct in the school.

However, the positive outcome evaluation results should be treated with some caution. First, restorative practices can have their own limitations. For example, the strong encouragement for victims to speak about their experiences of bullying might result in their re-traumatisation and power imbalances mentioned earlier can persist in restorative circles. Attention needs to be given to how such limitations can be handled. Second, in terms of research design, the introduction

of restorative practices at the time of the evaluation was very recent, and whether its perceived effects continue in the longer term, remains to be seen. The novelty of restorative approaches may wear off over time, and undisciplined learners and retributive teachers may revert to their previous ways. The short-term effects are also counter cultural in the sense that restorative conferences level the playing field between teachers and learners to some extent in a society where strong top-down authority is the norm in households, communities and the nation. Some resistance by sceptical teachers is to be expected.

These limitations notwithstanding, there are at least three reasons to be optimistic. First, the practices were frequently commended as facilitating better two-way communication between learners and teachers and building better relationships between them. To the extent that these outcomes continue to take root, the school is likely to continue to move towards a culture of peace. Second, the conferences bring parents/guardians into the picture; they can then work collaboratively with teachers in helping their children behave more positively. Third, those involved in restorative practices, may well become more committed to restorative attitudes and behaviour and more competent in their application. This can be assisted by ongoing training in restorative practices for learners, teachers and parents/guardians.

Restorative practices can be supplemented by peace clubs in schools, a phenomenon that has expanded rapidly in many African countries over the past decade. These have taken various forms, but most are extra-curricular and are driven by learners with little teacher involvement. They provide a safe space to discuss issues of conflict and violence that learners face both inside and outside the school environment and how these can be handled. Role play is a commonly employed learning tool, as elaborated in recent studies by Moyo (2022) and Irene (2023).

Movement towards a more restorative approach to indiscipline does not have to be driven by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, although it can certainly assist. If it is recognised that traditional methods of discipline do not work and may, in fact, be counterproductive, individual schools can adjust their own disciplinary practices. Finally, a whole-school approach involving teachers, learners and parents and using several restorative approaches in a well-planned fashion over an extended time period, is more likely to be effective in building peaceful schools than piecemeal ad hoc approaches.

The adoption of a whole-school approach, as outlined by Thorsborne and Vinegrad (2004), Vermont Agency of Education (2017), Julyan and Durham

(2017), Klevan (2021) and DePaoli et al. (2021), begins by involving learners, teachers and parents from a school in discussions and leads to the adoption of a restorative approach to disciplinary issues. A typical whole-school programme could involve a package of peace circles, restorative conferences and peer mediation. Given that the approach goes against long-standing practices and beliefs under which parents and teachers themselves grew up, its adoption and practice will require considerable re-education. Both teachers and parents will need to be willing to surrender some of the power they have over learners. They will need to be willing to learn the skills of dialogue, the purpose of which is to better understand the other person rather than trying to win an argument. A better understanding of the other is the central objective of restorative practices – to build social harmony through developing better relationships. As restorative practices develop within a school environment, they may also result in positive spillovers into households and the local community.

Finally, given the short-term nature of the evaluation, further research is needed to test the findings reported here. The same school could be revisited to assess whether the short-term outcomes have been sustained and also whether the restorative conference procedures have continued or been modified. Restorative conferences could be introduced and evaluated in different school types – primary/secondary, rural/urban, public/private – and across different student age groups.

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