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“You fight your battles and you work out how you’re going to change”: the implementation, embedding and limits of restorative practices in an Australian rural community school

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that the use of Restorative Practice (RP) in schools can foster more positive and inclusive school communities, yet there remains limited research regarding how to embed such practices. As part of a wider study, we present data from school leaders who describe their perspectives on RP and their struggles with implementing it in one rural Australian community school. This school is distinctive because of how it adopted a RP approach in an effort to change both the culture of the school and the culture of the wider community. To better inform our understanding regarding how RP was implemented, we focus on two overlapping dimensions – informing practice and embedding practice – before reflecting critically on some of the issues and limitations involved with using RP as a means of combating structural inequality.

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Introduction

Schools today continue to grapple with the consequences of student disengagement and issues with student behaviour, including concerns regarding social conflict, bullying and, in some cases, violence. How to proactively manage these challenges to foster more inclusive schooling environments remains a perennial question for school leaders and staff. Restorative Practices (RPs) have become an increasingly popular approach to conflict resolution and community building in schools around the world (Karp & Breslin, 2001; McCluskey et al., 2008; Mirsky, 2007; O’Reilly, 2019; Short et al., 2018) suggesting these efforts have emerged as a promising alternative to traditionally punitive school discipline measures. RPs are derived from Restorative Justice (RJ) programs designed to replace (or at least, reduce the need for) punitively retributive approaches within the criminal justice system.

There remains much ambiguity and variation regarding the definition, practice and implementation of RPs in schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Song & Swearer, 2016). While this article adopts the terminology of Restorative Practice (RP), or Restorative Practices (RPs), to designate these approaches it should be noted that a variety of terms are used and

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sometimes used interchangeably. These include the composite term Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) and Restorative Justice Programs (RJP) (Darling & Monk, 2018; Drewery, 2016; Hashim et al., 2018); contextualising descriptions including RJE (Restorative Justice in Education) (Brown, 2021; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Morrison, 2015); along with more specific language such as School Wide Restorative Practices (SWRPs) (Brown, 2017). In many ways, this variety of terminology reflects the wide-ranging field of RJ which we understand as encompassing "a growing social movement to institutionalise non-punitive, relationship-centred approaches for avoiding and addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and collaboratively solving problems" (Fronius et al., 2019, p. 1). Indeed, the diversity of RJ has expanded over the last several decades, with "interest in more comprehensive applications, including proactive practices, growing alongside the evolution of school-based prevention and MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Supports] frameworks" (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 372). Clearly, the implementation of RPs in educational settings has broadened their remit beyond simply addressing the effects of particular disruptive or dysfunctional behaviours. Current iterations aim at encouraging the development of proactive, community wide frameworks for embedding effective communication and reciprocal relationships between staff, students and all community members (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). School communities working to embed RPs often emphasise "taking responsibility" for acknowledging, understanding and finding ways to "restore" trust and social bonds damaged by behaviours perceived as breaching communal standards.

Researchers studying school-based RP programs consistently note that for them to be effective requires "a fundamental paradigm shift that addresses not just discipline but the entire school climate and community as well" (Payne & Welch, 2015, p. 541). McCluskey et al. (2008) similarly note this difference using a terminological distinction between RPs in schools and RJ as such, writing that "RP in education differs from restorative justice in that the latter involves professionals working exclusively with young people who offend. In utilising RPs in education, the whole school community, all school staff, pupils and sometimes parents, can be involved" (p. 407). Moreover, there appears to be growing awareness that for RPs to be effectively implemented in schools requires not just the inclusion and "buy in" of all students, staff and parents but, also, engaging community members and institutions beyond the schoolgrounds. For example, Drewery (2004) observes that the "restoration" RP seeks to achieve involves "a recognition by the staff and management of the important linkages between school and community, and an openness to the contributions of persons not usually considered part of the immediate school community" (p. 337). Similarly, in their study of UK schools implementing RPs, Warin and Hibbin (2020) note one particular secondary mainstream setting in which:

> the sociocultural context necessitated a holistic approach where organisations outside of school also utilised RP so that pupils experienced a restorative approach in a variety of contexts. In this setting, the school, the local youth club and also the police, all utilised RP and worked together to create a joined-up approach and a consistent level of exposure to RP overall (p. 11).

It is precisely the importance of – and staff efforts to enhance – such links between their school and its surrounding community that we are interested in exploring, along with some of the broader structural issues contributing to problems shared across both.

In this article, we do not intend to document the effectiveness of RPs as such, nor supply any formal assessment of or recommendations regarding existing practices and

programs, although we acknowledge that such evaluative concerns frame the wider literature on RP in schools (Acosta et al., 2019; Ingraham et al., 2016; Warin & Hibbin, 2020). Furthermore, we remain cautious of how RPs are often powerfully informed by psychologising discourses (see Bekerman & Zembylas, 2018), along with their limitations when considering wider structural issues shaping the community. Drawing on interviews with leadership staff in a rural community school, we foreground their accounts regarding the implementation of RP aimed at fostering a more inclusive environment not just within the school itself, but also within the surrounding township and rural community.

In Australia, discourses of rurality often position "the rural" as backward or disadvantaged in relation to a progressive mainstream (Pini & Bhopal, 2017). Within this framework, the complex social problems that may be experienced within rural schools can be coded, not as structural problems that transcend the site of their emergence, but problems *of* the rural school and/or community. Arnold (2001) highlights the challenges facing rural schooling and emphasises how schools often provide a focal point in these communities. Cuervo (2014) warns researchers against viewing the rural through a deficit lens while, simultaneously, noting that young people living in rural communities have been impacted "by a weakening of traditional structures and pathways to work enjoyed by previous generations, as well as by the significant lack of economic and cultural resources available in their communities compared to major urban centres" (p. 544). Likewise, Pini and Mills (2015) note there is a need for an increased "understanding of the dynamic and dialectical relationship between rural educational spaces, subjectivities and power" (p. 577). We return to these ideas in the concluding sections.

This article is structured in four parts: first, we briefly recount some of the main dimensions framing current research on RPs in schools. Specifically, we highlight the importance of relational or "whole community" approaches for RP, focusing on the history of and research into implementing RPs within Australian schools. Second, we summarise our methodological approach drawing data from a wider study focused on disengaged young people and school-based methods to foster inclusivity. Third, we present data from one school, Salter Springs High School, which was arguably a unique case study because leadership aimed to not only implement and embed RPs within their classrooms and schoolgrounds, but also within surrounding feeder primary schools, the wider local town and surrounding rural community. In attempting to capture the implementation of RPs, we address two overlapping themes from the data in our findings section: informing practice and embedding practice. We focus especially on what the RP approach offered in terms of opportunities for transforming schools and the local community, in part through a "ripple effect" which sees positive changes in behaviour and mindset gradually spread and embed themselves within various institutions and social elements of a particular community, including schools, sporting clubs and within families. Fourth, we deepen the criticality of our analysis by looking at the relationship between RP and the socio-cultural context in which it is applied, utilising two key examples to demonstrate the limits of RPs when responding to complex behaviours rooted in structural issues. Here, and in our concluding section, we consider the role and challenges of RP with regard to problems of whiteness and the racialisation of rurality, patriarchal gender norms, and the marginalisation caused by poverty – that is, class inequality. In this critique we seek to highlight the limitations of RP and caution against those proponents who may see it as a cure-all, rather than accounting for the nuances involved with implementing and embedding

restorative approaches as one part of achieving structurally sustainable culture change within schools and their communities.

Literature review: restorative programs in schools

Restorative programs, which vary in terms of their methods, nevertheless all subscribe to the ideology that institutions must focus heavily on relationship building and repairing the detriment caused by acts of transgression (e.g., misbehaviour, delinquency and/or crime). Within the RP framework, student misbehaviour is viewed as the violation of a relationship founded on trust, where the offender has violated the acceptable norms present in the overall school community (see Drewery, 2004; Morrison, 2003). Importantly, the restorative approach seeks to rebuild those norms in dialogue with all members of a community, rather than imposing them from above in more hierarchical ways. That is, a "restorative domain combines both high control and high support and is characterised by doing things with people, rather than to them or for them" (Wachtel, 2005, pp. 86–87).

Internationally, research on RPs in schools continues to document the ways in which they can be integral to an improved "school climate" (Augustine et al., 2018), with foci including teacher-student relationships (Gregory et al., 2016) and social emotional learning (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Most of the research on RP is conducted in North America and Great Britain, including early studies in England and Wales (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004), the United States (Ierley & Ivker, 2002; Minnesota Department of Children, Family and Learning, 2002; O'Brien, 2005) and Canada (Calhoun & Borch, 2002). More recently Ingraham et al. (2016), researching in the United States, focus on school-wide implementation in an urban elementary school, emphasising the importance of community involvement in school-based RP initiatives. Their research also emphasises the importance of students and parents taking on leadership roles in the RP process. As students were able to demonstrate both deep understanding and enthusiastic embrace of RP approaches, they were able to open up space for parents to learn and speak about intergenerational patterns of violence (Ingraham et al., p. 376). In other research conducted in the United States, Acosta et al. (2019) evaluated, over the course of two years, "a whole-school intervention designed to build a supportive environment through the use of 11 restorative practices (e.g., communication approaches that aim to build stronger bonds among leadership, staff, and students such as using 'I' statements, encouraging students to express their feelings)" (p. 876). They found difficulties with the intervention which limited its level of effectiveness; namely that it did not, in fact, create a substantively "restorative" school environment. The study did find, though, that "students who reported having the greatest restorative practices experiences because of their teachers' actions [. . .] reported more positive outcomes" (Acosta et al., 2019, p. 886). These findings highlight the complexity of implementing a RP approach, specifically in terms of the importance of buy-in from staff and students, as well as the potential for the implementation of RP to have unpredicted consequences.

While there has been a focus internationally on the implementation and effectiveness of RPs in schooling, there has been significantly less of a focus in Australia. Varnham (2005) notes that since the 1980s, an important advocate for restorative justice has been Australian criminologist John Braithwaite who, in 2002, conducted "a comprehensive re-examination of the implementation of restorative justice" in which he singled out the

reduction of criminal violence and school bullying as particular outcomes of RJ (p. 93). The first RJ conference was held in Australia in 1994 and since then, limited studies have documented the effectiveness of such approaches in a range of Australian school contexts (see Blood & Thorsborne, 2005; Queensland Department of Education, 1996). However, research and reflection on these early attempts to implement RPs also highlights the limitations of narrowly reactive responses to wrongdoing, where Thorsborne (2013) notes that dealing only with "high end" incidents "could only influence outcomes for a very small proportion of the school population" and that such initiatives thus had a limited capacity "to influence and create culture change within an ultra-authoritarian system" (p. 45). Similarly, Cameron and Thorsborne (2001) argued that truly effective RPs must "focus our attention on relationships between all members of the school community" and emphasise "the value of relationships in achieving quality outcomes for students" (p. 193). Another study of eighteen schools in the Australian state of Victoria, conducted between 2002–2004 by Stokes and Shaw (2005), considered how RPs contribute to change in terms of school culture, finding evidence that RPs "can be used in schools to address such things as bullying, conflicts, breakdown of relationships, alienation, and reintegration of marginalised students" (Shaw, 2007, p. 134). Additionally, Shaw (2007) also noted that while the approach did make for more inclusive school cultures, there were persistent struggles in terms of the "best way to include families or the community" (p. 134). Shaw highlighted the complexity in terms of implementation and the importance of understanding the relationship between the school and the wider community and how this relationship needs to be taken into consideration when adopting RP.

Methodology

This article draws on a subsection of findings from a study - *Vulnerability, Resilience and Extremism: Investigating the Restorative Practice Framework* - funded by an Australian university, which explored the impact of small-scale, state-level grant funding of restorative justice training to school leaders (Baak et al., 2022; Schulz et al., 2021; Stahl et al., 2021a, 2021b). Implementation of the grant targeted four state schools (one rural/regional, one outer suburban and two metropolitan). The schools were deemed eligible for the funded intervention due to their being identified as having significant levels of disengagement (e.g., absenteeism, anti-social behaviours, etc) which coincided with Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) percentiles in the lowest quartile of schools nationally, characterising them as "educationally disadvantaged."

We have singled out this case for specific examination because, uniquely among the schools in our study, leaders at Salter Springs High School sought to implement RPs both within their school *and* in the surrounding local community, with the aim of creating a consistent approach to support young people experiencing conflict. During the research it became evident how much school leaders identified with restorative justice and championed its implementation. When we began collecting data, the participants were beginning to see significant changes in their school culture, which they attributed to the RP approach. Creswell et al. (2007) write that: "Case study research builds an in-depth, contextual understanding of the case, relying on multiple data sources rather than on individual stories as in narrative research" (p. 245). We understand that case studies work

within bounded systems (or cases) and that through detailed data collection we can attempt to establish deeper understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Merriam, 1998).

Ethical approval was obtained from the university with a letter of support from the Department of Education. All names in the data have been anonymised and – given that participants disclosed details about their professional lives and what they perceived as the difficulties in executing their job within various constraints – each participant was supplied with a copy of the transcript of their semi-structured interview so they had the opportunity to retract any information they felt was inaccurate or problematic. This occurred prior to the summative focus group we hosted with all participants where we shared our preliminary analysis. In terms of data analysis, we listened to the interview audio files several times and checked them against transcripts to ensure accuracy. Re-listening to the recording and reading the transcripts also facilitated a deeper interpretation of the data. As the research team individually read and analysed the transcripts, we identified key themes and then we came together to see where there was overlap. This fostered deeper conversations between the research team, allowing for a collective approach to analysis. The researchers were a team of three academics who all had expertise researching marginalised populations and extensive expertise working in diverse school settings, along with one research assistant. The research was both iterative and exploratory and we did not apply pre-existing themes present in RP scholarship to the data.

For the purposes of this paper, we draw on the words of the leadership team, primarily Cassie, the principal, and Julia, the assistant principal. We also interviewed Hannah, the health and wellbeing coordinator and Finn, a youth support officer who had all used the RJ approach. Salter Springs High School is a disadvantaged regional state school where the ICSEA percentile is 24, meaning it is in the bottom quartile of socio-economic advantage across all schools in Australia, and 49% of students are in the bottom socio-educational advantage (SEA) quartile. According to the members of staff we spoke with, they were often in a struggle with generational poverty, a transient student body due to an agricultural economy, and students with substantial commutes to and from school which affected both the school's general sense of community and communications between staff, students and parents more specifically. One staff member spoke of how conflicts between various satellite communities the students came from often "came to a head" either at the school or during local sport. The school has a mental health doctor that visits bi-weekly as well as a mental health nurse that comes in once a week. The area has a population that is overwhelmingly Anglo and English speaking, with lower-than-average levels of educational attainment but levels of income and employment only slightly below the state average.

As previously stated, this school is distinctive because of how it adopted RP in an effort to change both the internal school culture *and* that of the wider community. In terms of resource allocation, as part of the federal grant each member of staff at Salter Springs High School received one day of training in how to utilise RP when conflict arose within the school community. Within this whole-school approach, we found that RP was used for both high level incidents such as acts of violence, as well as low level incidents such as interpersonal conflict – whether between staff and students, or among the students themselves. Implementing a RP approach was not without its complications, but over

time the adoption of such an approach led to a significant drop in exclusions. To better inform our understanding regarding how restorative practice, as a framework, was implemented, we focus on two overlapping dimensions present in the data: informing practice and embedding practice.

Findings

Informing practice

The first dimension we focus on is informing practice, which encapsulates the factors driving a desire for change and motivating school leaders to seek out alternative approaches to behaviour management, such as RPs, in order to develop community cohesion within their school. As Blood and Thorsborne (2005) note, proactive RP approaches "are often informed by what is happening within the school environment" and this aligned with our data. When we spoke with Cassie, the school principal, she was only part way through her first year in that role having faced, as she put it, "a really difficult start to the year. We had a lot of extreme behaviours, particularly violence, starting from very early, like week two or something like that in the year." This situation, according to her, was apparently unusual for the school, and while Cassie did not directly elaborate as to why atypical violence had emerged, as the conversation unfolded various dynamics came to light that started to illuminate the school-community nexus and its contours.

Before we analyse what RP offered Cassie, we draw attention to how she saw the broad nature of her responsibilities as principal and how these responsibilities resonated with her goal of developing an integrated and inclusive school using RP approaches, whereby the interconnected relationships between staff, students, parents and the wider regional community are acknowledged and cared for:

> I said to someone the other day that I am responsible for nearly 50 staff, 320 students, and a six point something million-dollar budget. In that, I do all of that stuff plus I need to be an expert on curriculum, facilities, grounds, budgeting, things that I'm not actually an expert in but the role demands it. It can change from one minute to the next. I'll be talking about Christian pastoral support workers and then kids who've had a fight in the yard. So, many and varied things and I can't predict what's going to walk through my door during the day.

In terms of Cassie's integrated and inclusive, "restorative" vision, however, what most directly prompted and informed the adoption of RPs at the school was a need for new and more effective ways of dealing with extreme, often violent behavioural issues. What concerned Cassie was that the issues which manifested overtly – or "came to a head" – on school grounds appeared to be motivated by broader conflicts within the extended regional community. Indeed, she even observed that much of the violence involving students and perpetuating animosities between them actually occurred elsewhere: "the vast majority was outside of school, but this is the place where they get together." Elaborating further, Cassie noted:

> Two tricky things then. One is that they see each other at sport and things like that, but school is the time they get together. Then, if they had a beef, that's where it erupted. The other thing with being in a school is, of over 300, pretty good audience out there. We are sure, but we can't prove it, but we're sure that some of the fights that happened were planned. Then, if you've already got 30 people standing around and you hear yelling and whatever, you very

> quickly have another audience. That was an issue, in that this is just where they got together, but the secondary issue is how do we have people feel connected to this school and to each other as a community when we have 11 buses[1] and I think it is 90 something percent of our kids who catch them.

From the beginning of the RP implementation process, Cassie viewed the behavioural problems and interpersonal tensions she confronted at the school as fundamentally bound up with the entire region's socio-cultural dynamics and therefore felt they could only be truly, effectively addressed at a community-wide level.

A significant emphasis of most RP approaches is the role of shame in driving behavioural responses (Harris & Maruna, 2005; Nathanson, 1992). Shame is a complex emotion that involves feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and unworthiness in response to a perceived failure, mistake, or violation of social norms or personal values. When speaking about shame, individuals can often feel vulnerable. We accept that not all models of RP embrace the compass of shame or Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming, though the particular RP approach discussed in this study did. Cassie – and the wider leadership team – discussed how shame influenced not just school students, but also the wider community. The role of shame was particularly salient when Cassie recounted her recent interaction with the father of a student who avoided acknowledging or engaging with the consequences of his son's behaviour:

> We've got a student here at the moment who is doing a part-time timetable, who's been excluded for much of the year. His dad doesn't answer our phone calls [. . .] But one of the days this week, when his son rang. . . We had tried to ring him, not about a bad thing, but he didn't know that. We had tried to ring him and he didn't answer and so we said to his son, "Can you just ring dad?" He answered immediately. It is, because the deal is his son can stay at school until lunchtime, unless his behaviour is poor, and then we'll ring dad and he'll take him at whatever time we need. He obviously didn't want to come and deal with that, and so he wasn't answering his phone. But then when his son rang. . . So, that's interesting.

In discussing this particular example with us, Cassie emphasised the importance of understanding and having empathy for the father's position – that his avoidance of phone calls was likely driven by a sense of shame and uncertainty about how to deal with his son's behaviour, or the school's reaction to that behaviour. Here we see how RP contributes to an approach whereby staff are encouraged to be reflective about the role their own behaviour and shame reactions might play in relationships with students or parents. As Cassie explained:

> We talk a lot about the Compass of Shame.[2] I recognize it in myself. I know that my fallback is to withdraw if something goes wrong that I feel embarrassed about shame or whatever. "Oh gee. I don't want anyone to see me. I don't want to talk to anyone." It's interesting just to recognize ourselves on the Compass of Shame as well. We see it with kids all the time and now that we've done the training, we just have the language to recognize that. In the past, we'd say, "Oh, Mr So-and-so doesn't answer when I ring," but now we go, "Well, that's actually probably his shame because he doesn't know how to deal with his son any better than we do." The Compass of Shame has been good learning for us all, I think.

Cassie's observation is significant as it suggests that the staff's personal engagement with the principles of RP is a significant aspect of how they "buy in" to the approach, informing their practice. These sorts of strong personal connections also echo broader research into RP approaches, which are "rooted in opening up lines of communication across groups to

examine and understand harm created and to seek opportunities to transform that harm into good for a community" (Bhandari, 2018, p. 100). Part of this "opening up" requires different groups and individuals to develop more precise and honest language in which to express their emotions, thoughts and motivations.

Julia, the assistant principal, commented on how implementing a RP approach felt "better," suggesting it resonated closely with her own personal beliefs regarding conflict management, because RPs allowed young people to feel agentic and more in control:

> kids leave the meetings feeling that they've been heard, that they're okay with their consequence and we know how to move forward from there. You know, when we isolate them and keep them, you know, "stay home, come back and you've missed out on a whole lot of stuff." Then they're back already on their shame compass. They haven't changed anything. They're not in control of their situation.

The difference Julia describes suggests an effort at communication and understanding between all parties, compared with more traditional punitive approaches that do not account for the specifics of a situation. Certain forms of punishment can isolate students from the school community and thereby intensify conflict because nothing has changed in terms of the relationality between the parties in conflict. Furthermore, similar to Cassie, Julia highlights that self-reflection among staff about their own "shame" responses was an integral part of maintaining relational (rather than reactive) communication within the restorative process:

> . . . it's not, just because you know about it [shame] doesn't mean that you don't go there yourself. But being aware that that's where you are and knowing that kid is pushing my buttons and has really knocked me into, "I want to attack," not physically, but give him a serve or tell him off for knowing that that's just going to meet you with the same behaviour. You fight your battles and you work out how you're going to change that behaviour long-term rather than nipping it in the bud. Sometimes straight away. Or try to nip it in the bud and end up with a to and fro.

For Julia, the implementation of RPs was a "process" which was "time consuming" and required students, parents and staff alike to change their mindsets. This reinforces previous research showing that if educators collaborate and align their practice with the school culture, collaborative relationships with students are more likely to follow.

A particularly powerful example of this, which speaks generally to the need for more connected, collaborative school communities, was Julia's description of one particular incident involving a student who had punched through her office window: "obviously I was fearful of this student once he came back from his suspension,[3] but now [I am one] of the few teachers that he will come to when he is on the verge of feeling like that again to talk to. It's only through building that relationship slowly when he, when I've seen the opportunity, when he's in a good place to build that relationship again." This resonates with the idea of rurality's "social spatial character" (Robertson, 2009), or what Pini and Mills (2015) describe as "the dynamic and dialectical relationship between rural educational spaces, subjectivities and power" (p. 577), which has often been absent from analysis of regional schooling. In other words, the complex dynamics of power and subjecthood that shape students' lives beyond the school gate unavoidably shape relations inside of schools, and teachers/leaders have little choice but to work within these conditions. After the incident, Julia engaged in RP with the student which, according to her, allowed

them both to be vulnerable. When conflict or violence emerges and community values are brought into tension, this can be a critical time for implementing RP and testing its limits.

Embedding practice

Implementing RPs in any school site involves a set of procedures, processes and policies. For our purposes, embedding practice refers to how those elements might be made sustainable within a school and community. Successful embedding of RP is often dependent on a "holistic" deployment of and engagement with RPs throughout schools and communities. In their recent study, Warin and Hibbin (2020) argue that "a whole school approach that was led from Senior Leadership down through all staffing levels was central to embedding RP" (p. 4). This study also highlighted the interconnection of school and community in terms of restorative outcomes, where evidence of successfully embedded RP can be seen

> in both behavioural measures of success such as reduced rates of fixed-term and permanent exclusion or increases in attendance, and also through sociocultural measures of success such as transferability into the community context or organisational change across the whole institution (Warin & Hibbin, 2020, p. 4).

As part of embedding RPs at Salter Springs High School, the staff invested in "norming" the circle format – an approach used to develop connections through sharing of experiences and concerns, along with teaching social competence skills, respect and responsibility (Evanovich et al., 2020) – across the entire school. In norming this practice, participants were invited to consider RP not only as something used when social norms were transgressed, but as an essential life skill and aspect of well-being. As Julia put it:

> We've all been doing some circle work, building relationships. That's where we decided we would start [. . .] before we could delve into, you know, running meetings, or conversations with students that we needed to build trust and relationships between staff and students. So that's where we went as a whole school. All of last term I would wander around and there'd be classes out doing circles and . . . just checking in.

The circle format, involving structured discussion when a restorative conversation needs to occur, prompts a structured discussion designed to facilitate effective restorative conversations. Julia speaks about the importance of such semi-formalised structure:

> Then because we're all doing circle work, kids are used to that process now, it's like "circle" and they're up in and they're ready to rock and roll straight away and you know, same with the meetings, they're just going to get used to the questions. They're up in my office. I make it very clear. These are the questions we're going to be asking you. I'm going to ask you first and then I'm going to give you a chance, make the rules very clear of the conversation and the routine and the structure, give them that safe place to then open up and be a bit vulnerable.

Julia's efforts to embed this practice demonstrate a sense of urgency and focus on the importance of both a shared language and clear communication. Moreover, staff at the school were far more involved with restorative techniques, such as circle work, than in many other school-based RP programs where the focus is more exclusively on students (Reimer, 2019; Vaandering, 2014). Staff not only ran meetings and participated in circle work at school, but in some cases adopted these approaches in their personal and family

lives. As Julia told us, RPs might be applied in "any situation" including "with staffers, student conflict" and "at home, blended family, my husband and my daughter, his stepdaughter don't see eye to eye. So I've used it with them." The words of the leadership team suggest they think strategically about how to best implement and ensure the continuity of their approach at Salter Springs High School, where they appear to reflect deeply on the importance of ensuring it becomes fully embedded, rather than being attempted in a piecemeal fashion. As Cassie notes:

> I don't want it to be a failure. I don't want it to be one of those things. Because people say, "Oh, we've done restorative practices. We've done literacy. Tick that off the list." That just means we've done the training but until we're actually living and breathing it, and that's what I'm finding with restorative practices that it is actually a way of life.

Here Cassie shares her sense of conviction, which drives her agenda to embed RP in the culture of Salter Springs High School as well as the wider community.

In contrast to schools in large urban centres, rural schools are often close-knit and personalised spaces (Arnold, 2001). Therefore, by implication, such contexts can potentially open up unique opportunities in terms of effectively embedding RPs and benefiting from the cultural changes they encourage. Part of embedding RPs at Salter Springs High School involved working closely with local feeder schools to lay the important foundational work for RPs among younger students, before they even arrived at the secondary school. Cassie described how she invited staff from nearby primary schools to participate in the RP training available through the grant:

> We wanted to get the message out to them. The primary schools, I decided that I would spend some of our 15 places on them because, yes, it will help us when the year sevens come, but imagine if we spread this to the community and we can get parents [. . .] It's more of a community thing than "It'll benefit us just next year when the year sevens come." It will hopefully. . . And it'll take time. This is not going to happen overnight, but if we can start spreading it then everyone will benefit. I feel like we have a moral obligation to help these students who struggle, because their parents just don't have the skills. They're not going to miraculously just think, "Let's resolve this conflict peacefully." If we don't teach them, they're not likely to get that anywhere, and it will just perpetuate and the cycle continues. That was my thing with primary schools.

Moreover, this "whole community" approach to encouraging the adoption of RPs went further than just educational spaces. Under Cassie's leadership, another important aspect of the embedding process was making RPs integral to other community sites that young people experienced daily. For instance, Julia spoke of having the RP training extended to local football clubs:

> We are a small community and everybody knows. . . You know, one degree of separation. So, getting that footy club on board, if other footy clubs see there's a difference in the behaviour between their lads, "What are they doing?" It's just going to be [. . .] you know, that drop, the ripple impact. If it's a positive thing, works negatively as well. But that positive, this is our droplets, you know, work on our rings and how we're going to spread it out.

The rural location of Salter Springs High School and its community is, we suggest, a notable factor regarding the potential for such a "ripple effect" to take hold. That is, the relative geographical isolation of the township means there is a necessarily greater degree of circumscribed community interconnectedness, potentially at least providing

more "fertile ground" (Warin & Hibbin, 2020) for holistic, "whole-community" changes to take effect than might be the case in more disparate, structurally complex urban areas. When we spoke with Finn, a youth worker, who managed the school's enhanced learning hub, he reiterated his hope of a "ripple impact" when working to embed RPs throughout the community, such as within families:

> I've had kids who have taken [RP] home and had conversations with parents because I do touch base, say, "How's it going?" They said, "Oh, it went all right." Mum was a little bit hesitant, but Mum could say, "Yeah, I'm a bit like this," and Dad would go, "Yeah, I'm a bit like that one there." [indicating quadrants on the compass of shame]. It's good. Again, community-wise, getting the parents in to do the training around time and travel and everything, there is that difficulty.

There is, in other words, an argument to be made that RPs – with their heavy emphasis on "relational" approaches to conflict resolution and general well-being – are inherently better suited to being embedded within already more "relational" rural and regional communities. This reflects what Malatzky and Smith (2022), in their introduction to a special journal issue on "rural futures" describe as "the possibility that social enterprises contribute to a more relational approach to community wellbeing in regional cities" (p. 5).

In considering the importance of relationality and how rural schools have certain aspects which can allow RP to develop, we do not discount how young people living in rural communities have been impacted "by a weakening of traditional structures and pathways to work" (Cuervo, 2014, p. 544). Many of the problems faced by the young, often vulnerable students at Salter Springs High School – along with its broader community – cannot be reduced only to problems of attitude or culture but are driven as well by structural, material issues of marginalisation, such as racialised and gendered identity norms, along with poverty and other forms of class inequality. Instead, the case study suggests that this social and economic change only foregrounds the need for RP approaches to be implemented and drawn upon. In the final section before concluding, we reflect further on the implementation of RP at Salter Springs High School, with an emphasis on where the implementation of RP may require caution.

Restorative practice and structural power relations

As the participants have highlighted the importance of community cohesion, in this section we utilise two key examples to demonstrate the limits of RPs in responding to more complex behaviours rooted in broader social issues such as racism, homophobia, misogyny and class inequalities. We have written elsewhere (see Schulz et al., 2021) about the limits and dangers of RPs when their underpinning conceptual approach, powerfully informed by psychologising discourses (see also Bekerman & Zembylas, 2018; Gray & Smith, 2021), is brought to bear on structural issues that cannot (and should not) be rescaled to the individual. A useful example appears earlier in this paper when, referencing the "Compass of Shame" model, school principal Cassie discusses the inclination of one parent to avoid phone correspondence from the school, owing to a deeply internalised sense of shame over his son's behaviour:

> In the past, we'd say, "Oh, Mr So-and-so doesn't answer when I ring," but now we go, 'Well, that's actually probably *his* shame because *he* doesn't know how to deal with his son. [. . .] (emphasis added)

Whilst the conceptual resources offered by RPs enable school staff to shift their frame of reference and reconsider the ostensibly "poor" behaviour of students, parents and even themselves in a more benevolent, compassionate light, the above excerpt also demonstrates how the locus of poor behaviour remains individualised – the problem is the *father's* shame and *his* lack of capacity to deal with his son. Reactions such as "shame" are thus realised, not in terms of the complex structural, political and historical dynamics to which they are attached, but through what Ahmed (2004) calls an "inside-out" model of emotions built on the presumption that "feelings, which are already developed *inside* me, influence how I perceive what is *outside* me" (Anwaruddin, 2016, p. 386). On this view, in other words, intense, negative or supposedly dysfunctional emotions and behaviours stem from a person's individual psychology and character, rather than being read and responded to as manifestations of broader social contexts.

Classed, gendered and raced forms of violence become coded as problems inherent in marginalised youth, their parents/families and/or communities. A clear example of this emerged at Salter Springs High School when Hannah, the school's health and well-being coordinator, relayed the story of a student with a significant trauma background:

> Hannah: . . . one student I'm thinking of – absolute trauma background. Intellectual disability, just to set the basic scene. And [the family were] complete racists. [The student] doesn't like anyone of colour, accent, including Aboriginals. Doesn't like other people with disabilities. Doesn't like homosexuals, and not just a walking past and calling them a faggot or something [. . .]. It's like the next level, that they should die. [D]id bring weapons to school at some point [. . . so,] that one was definitely escalated quite early in the behaviour coach region as well as that psychology with the diagnosis for our special class.
>
> Interviewer: And the [. . .] deeply racist beliefs, was that reflective of the home situation that the young person was embedded in?
>
> Hannah: Absolutely. Yep, yep. So, dad was in jail for killing an Aboriginal person. [. . .] And, just follow up from there, mum had the same beliefs. Dad wasn't in the picture anymore but it's ingrained from birth, I would say.

Not dissimilarly, when discussing an encounter which surfaced the issue of sexism, the principal Cassie recalled:

> I can still picture him, a father or stepfather sitting there, mum's sitting there, and the lad, who's 13, sitting there, and the way he was speaking to me [. . .]. Then they leave and as they're walking out the kid's telling someone to fuck off and dad's saying, "Fucking waste of time. Fuck, fuck, fuck." You just go, within one minute of meeting the parent, you go, "It is all explained" [. . .] that whole family was just in denial. There's no way they're going to own it and say, "Actually, I did do that and I don't know why I did," let alone, "I did that and I want to change."

In both examples, problems of violence – racist, sexist or other forms of discursive or material violence – are individualised and so too are potential solutions. In the first excerpt, the child is removed from the RP process and relocated to a special class within the school in which "behaviour coaching" is coupled with "an assessment of normality and a technical prescription for a possible normalisation" (Foucault, 1977, p. 21). In other

words, through disciplinary power everyone's field of vision is reduced to the errant individual who must learn to regulate through self-disciplinary practice. This is problematic if we recognise racism or homophobia as complex structural issues with long historical roots. While such issues represent problems for schools and societies, they also represent educational opportunities. However, this expansive view is negated by the RP process when structural issues are rescaled to the individual, as is the case in the previous incident.

In the second incident, the problem of deeply rooted, intergenerational gendered violence and inequality is recoded as "a family in denial." While we are not suggesting that individuals be exempted from taking responsibility for racist, sexist or other violent acts or beliefs, when such phenomena are reduced to an individualistic purview – for instance, racism as "the one bad apple" (Kamaloni, 2019, p. 27) – this not only takes the power to define racism away from those most affected by it, but denies these issues as political problems with structural origins (Lentin, 2020). Importantly, as institutions for public good, it is the role of schools to educate for greater collective awareness and responsibility to advance needed structural reforms. In this, we align with the work of scholars such as Smith et al. (2021) who advocate for the importance of "critical consciousness" in effective, emancipatory RP work (p. 23), or with Schiff (2018) who argues that while empirical evidence supporting "the effectiveness of RJP in schools is important … to truly be successful restorative justice must consider its role as a movement dedicated to confronting structures that normalise social, political, racial and other injustice" (p. 134). As we have written previously regarding the critical consideration of RP in terms of both its benefits and limitations:

> It could be argued that young people [and school staff] are disciplined via RPs to adhere to a paradigm in which structural problems, such as racism or poverty, are rescaled to the individual. In this light, RPs are driven by an impulse to sustain compliance with dominant discourses of psychology [...], which limit our pedagogical and political possibilities (Schulz et al., 2021, p. 14).

Conclusion

The main focus of this paper is on the perspectives of educators in a rural state school working to implement RPs. The case study highlights how school leaders embrace the RP approach and report significant, positive changes to their working environment. As educators contending with social unrest within their school community, the leadership staff described how RPs provided a way to navigate difficult decisions – they often spoke about RP in relation to both the school and broader community culture, suggesting they saw it as an essential ingredient for improved social cohesion. These research findings echo large-scale international studies regarding the effectiveness of RP in producing certain positive changes within school communities. However, we highlight how aspects of staff accounts reveal various "embedded" structural issues at play in the school and local community – issues which both contribute to the social and behavioural problems informing their implementation of RPs, while remaining potentially beyond the ability of such practices to fully resolve. We recognise the study presented in this article has

many limitations – notably, it draws on a small set of data from one site and does not include the voices of the students involved in RP or members of the wider community.

We acknowledge that RPs tend to rely on a logic of individualism that elides the macro world of gendered, classed and raced (etc.) power relations, rescaling these elements to their everyday operations in people's lives. Our research compels us to think critically about both "problems" and "solutions" while acknowledging significant questions regarding the ways in which "community" is imagined and constructed in various social, cultural and discursive contexts (Lodi et al., 2021). Perhaps in small regional communities such questions are even more significant, as the mechanisms and dynamics of structural power are more condensed in a context where individual community members are less anonymous from one another than is often the case in larger metropolitan areas.

By avoiding punitive discipline while retaining a commitment to personal responsibility, RPs do offer many significant benefits and improvements over previously dominant forms of school discipline, yet they have also arguably become imbued with a moral veneer that often feels beyond critique. By marginalising structural understandings of violence, RPs can contribute towards a victim blaming stance that does nothing necessarily to transform the roots of social unrest. We would argue this highlights the difficult tensions involved with the work educators do to inform practice and embed RP in schooling environments. As we have already stated, the issue worth exploring further is how those structural factors contributing to violence which remain invisible can be invisible when viewed solely through an individualised lens. We advocate in favour of a balanced approach that is neither entirely individual nor structural, but genuinely relational, contextual and nuanced.

Notes

1. As there is no public transport in this rural town, the education department provides funded buses which transport students from the surrounding regions who live further than 5 km from the school.
2. The way in which one copes with, or defends against, shame has important implications in the field of Restorative Practice. The Compass of Shame Scale (CoSS) was developed to assess use of the four shame-coping styles described by Nathanson (1992): Attack Self, Withdrawal, Attack Other, and Avoidance.
3. We acknowledge this student was suspended where most schools that use RPs advocate against the use of suspensions and exclusions as this is seen to do further damage to relationships, exacerbating a counterproductive shame response.

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Ethics statement

This research was approved by the ethics board of the University of South Australia.

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