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Implementing restorative approaches in the further education sector in England: successes, constraints, and limitations

Abu Zaman

School of Law and Criminology, University of Greenwich, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Institutions in the education sector regularly encounter behavioural challenges; therefore, they have adopted restorative approaches (RA) to better manage and address such situations, creating a safer environment and helping the perpetrator reflect on the impact of their behaviour. In the UK, research on RA in education focuses on primary and secondary schools but is limited and under-developed in the Further Education (FE) sector. Based on data collected over 14 months, this study explores staff experiences of successes, constraints, and limitations for a successful RA policy implementation. This study adopted a qualitative method design framework and found successes and barriers to effective and successful RA implementation in the FE sector. Findings indicate that both top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation are pivotal. RA policy is interrupted or reversed due to mergers or changes in Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). A lack of regular training and professional development programmes on RA impacts the delivery of the concept. The findings from this study will be relevant to FE institutions, their staff, and the Department for Education when planning to implement an RA policy.

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Introduction

Undoubtedly, challenging behaviour exists in educational institutions. These can vary from mere disagreements to violence, drug-related violence, and sexual assault, amongst other things (Aye Maung, 1995; Bhabra et al., 2006; Bottrell et al., 2010; Boxford, 2006; Gill & Hearnshaw, 1997; Hayden, 2011; Martin, 2008; Martin et al., 2011, 2012; McAra & McVie, 2002, 2010; Neill, 2008; Porteous, 1998; Smith, 2003; Wright & Keetley, 2003). In England, young people started progressing to Further Education (FE) institutions, which also display behavioural issues (Zaman, 2024a, 2024b). Although research and literature are scarce on behavioural challenges in the FE sector, challenging behaviours, conflicts, and exclusions are apparent in the FE sector (Attwood et al., 2004; Burnell, 2017; Lobb, 2017; Zaman, 2024a). The FE sector in England comprises 16–18-year-olds, 11–15-year-olds who

CONTACT Abu Zaman ✉ A.Zaman@greenwich.ac.uk School of Law and Criminology, University of Greenwich, Old Royal Naval College, Park Row, London SE10 9LS, UK

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have been excluded or disengaged from school and mature students (19±year-olds). The FE sector is a complex and diverse environment, which came into existence in 1821 but was formally established in 1944 by the Education Act (Lobb, 2017). When the then New Labour won the election in 1997, its principal objective was to improve quality and raise standards in education, which meant that the FE sector was reformed; occasionally, some colleges or secondary schools that deliver Level 3 courses are referred to as a Sixth Form (Burnell, 2017). FE colleges admit students at compulsory school age (Attwood et al., 2004), and enrolls permanently excluded students from schools, Pupil Referral Units (PRU) and Special Schools. PRUs are an alternative to mainstream schools, specialising in supporting students whose behaviour causes problems. Students who attend a PRU might have been excluded from a mainstream school for behavioural issues or are experiencing behavioural difficulties, amongst other things. Special Schools support students with communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health, and sensory and physical needs. Some Special Schools further specialise in supporting students who are on the Autistic spectrum, visually impaired, or have speech, language and communication needs. PRUs and FE colleges also accommodate students with educational needs and disabilities (Pirrie et al., 2011; Solomon & Thomas, 2013). On recommendation from the Woolf Report (Department for Education, 2011), and supported by the 2012 coalition government, FE colleges started to enrol students from the age of 14 years old. This enrolment change led to an increasing number of young learners in FE, and it is seen as a strategy to prevent 14- to 16-year-olds from exclusion (Macnab et al., 2008). The FE sector attracts many disengaged students from mainstream schools (ibid). For these students, the FE industry provides an alternative qualification that primarily focuses on vocational courses. Zaman (2024a) found that the FE sector is a diverse community with an unstable environment, and is often referred to as a 'melting pot'. Behavioural challenges within the FE institutions ranged from possessing a knife or gun to gang-related issues, bullying, conflicts on social media, and physical fights. Restorative approaches (RA) are adopted to manage challenging behaviour and make educational institutions safer. Systematic reviews have identified a lack of research on RA in the education sector (Katic et al., 2020; Lodi et al., 2022; Mayworm et al., 2016; McCluskey et al., 2008; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Typically, these reviews only list eight empirical peer-reviewed studies conducted in the UK (Bevington, 2015; Bonell et al., 2018; Boulton & Mirsky, 2006; Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Kane et al., 2008; Leach & Lewis, 2013; McCluskey et al., 2008; Short et al., 2018; Standing et al., 2012), some of which are argued now to be quite outdated. Mayworm et al. (2016) only cite the Scottish Executive-funded pilot project conducted in the UK (Kane et al., 2007, 2008; McCluskey et al., 2008). This is not to say that RA evaluations in UK schools are not available; Katic et al. (2020), Lodi et al. (2022), Mas-Expósito et al. (2022), Mayworm et al. (2016), and Zakszeski and Rutherford (2021) only identified peer-reviewed studies. As a result, findings and data from studies outside of the UK are relied upon, 'this raises concerns regarding the applicability of the research' (Mayworm et al., 2016, p. 387). In the UK, research in RA in education predominantly focuses on primary and secondary schools, and such focus is limited in the FE sector (Zaman, 2024a, 2024b). Using RA in education merits further exploration and research focus, particularly in the FE sector (ibid).

This study explores staff experiences of successes, constraints, and limitations for a successful RA policy implementation in FE institutions in England. This paper first

discusses a few definitions available in the literature and research for educational institutions to adopt or adapt. Next, the paper will review the literature on RA implementation in the education sector. After which, the methodology adopted in this study will be followed. The Findings section discusses the data collected, which is consolidated in the Discussion section. This paper argues that both top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation are pivotal. RA policy is interrupted or reversed due to mergers or changes in Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). Finally, a lack of regular training and professional development programmes on RA impacts the delivery of the concept. Findings from this study will be relevant to FE institutions, their staff, and the Department for Education when planning to implement an RA policy.

What are restorative approaches in education?

Restorative approaches (RA) have roots in restorative justice (RJ) (Bevington, 2015; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022). RJ is argued to be reactive, which responds to crime after it has occurred (Wachtel, 2016). However, RA is argued to precede wrongdoing and conflict because it is implemented in organisations or institutions as a framework to build relationships, create a sense of community, and prevent conflicts and transgressions (ibid). RA also has roots within social science, building on individuals' social capital and discipline by participating in learning and decision-making (Fronius et al., 2019; Pointer et al., 2023; Wachtel, 2013; also see; Zaman, 2024b). Mas-Expósito et al. (2022) agree with Bevington (2015), who explains:

[RA] has its roots in restorative justice, an alternative to the punitive paradigm within the field of criminology. Restorative Justice primarily focuses on some form of mediated encounter between the perpetrator and the victim following an incident of harm. The principles underpinning restorative justice are now being more widely applied to practice in various non-judicial settings, including schools, where they are referred to as RP or, more broadly, as RA. (pp. 105–6)

Scholars argue that RJ can be too narrow to utilise outside the criminal justice system (Song & Swearer, 2016), especially in schools. It should be noted that defining and differentiating RJ, and/or RA has been problematic (Gavrielides, 2008; Pointer et al., 2023; Zaman, 2024b) because it 'means different things to different people' (Fattah, 1998, p. 393), as well as 'all things to all people' (O'Mahony & Doak, 2009, p. 167). Research has found that confusion and a lack of understanding of the concept have made it problematic in theory and practice (Stockdale, 2015a, 2015b; Zaman, 2024b). In education, institutions are free to adopt, employ, or adapt RA definitions available in the criminal justice system. However, scholars have offered RA definitions specific to the education sector. Hopkins (2004, p. 29) refers to Wright's (1999) definition of RA, who states that: '[RA] constitutes an innovative approach to offending and inappropriate behaviour that puts repairing harm done to relationships and people above the need to assign blame and dispense punishment.' McCluskey et al. (2008, p. 211) define RA as:

... where staff and pupils act towards each other in a helpful and non-judgemental way; where they work to understand the impact of their actions on others; where there are fair

processes that allow everyone to learn from any harm that may have been done; where responses to difficult behaviour have positive outcomes for everyone.

Wachtel (2013, p. 1) defines RA as:

... a social science that studies building social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision making. The use of restorative practices helps to: reduce crime, violence and bullying; improve human behaviour; strengthen civil society; provide effective leadership; restore relationships; and repair harm.

Bevington (2015, p. 106) argues that the RA definition from the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2014) is holistic and appropriate for a school setting:

[RA] is a relational approach to school life grounded in beliefs about equality, dignity, mana and the potential of all people. Restorative practice ... focuses on building and maintaining positive relationships across the school community and offers school staff best-practice tools and techniques to restore relationships when things go wrong.

More recently, Zaman (2024b) offered a definition. This study found that institutions implement RA to build relationships, create a sense of community, and prevent conflict and transgression. Thus, in the FE sector, RA is defined as:

An educative, inclusive, and democratic process allowing parties who have volunteered to share and understand their experiences in conflict or broken relationships, where responsibility is taken, relationships are repaired and built, and a resolution and closure are achieved peacefully. In addition, the process enables parties to learn to coexist in safe shared spaces and develop social, emotional, and conflict-resolution skills. (Zaman, 2024b, p. 21)

Pointer et al. (2023) argue that the values better explain the understanding of RA. Kirkwood (2022) differentiated between ethical and prudential values. Ethical values focus on how practitioners practice RA, whereas prudential values focus on the desired outcomes when practising RA. For Kirkwood (2022), ethical values include voluntariness, safety, inclusion, dignity, respect, responsibility, accountability, truth-telling, and honesty. Prudential values include mutual understanding, repair of harm, agreement, truth, trust, healing, recovery, rehabilitation, reintegration, restoration, transformation, desistance, reconciliation, forgiveness, and individual choices.

Implementing restorative approaches in the education sector: what do we know so far?

RA offers schools practical tools to deal with challenging behaviours and create a haven for students (Kane et al., 2008). While there is evidence of institutions utilising RA interventions to support managing challenging behaviour, there is a lack of research on RA in the education sector, particularly in the FE sector in the UK (Katic et al., 2020; Lodi et al., 2022; Mas-Expósito et al., 2022; Mayworm et al., 2016; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021; Zaman, 2024a, 2024b).

The research literature on RA implementation in education, while limited (Dhaliwal et al., 2023), underscores several successes and limitations, and findings reverberate amongst studies. For a successful implementation of RA in schools, direction and commitment from the school management team and inclusion of all school staff and administration, community and parents in the awareness of RA is paramount;

thus, a whole-school buy-in is critical (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2011; Kane et al., 2007, 2008; Kervic et al., 2020; McCluskey et al., 2008; McQueen et al., 2023; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stahl et al., 2023; Stewart & Ezell, 2022). A strong culture of collaboration between staff, families, and the community supports and encourages staff to implement and practice RA (Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Gregory et al., 2021; Kervic et al., 2020). Gonzalez et al. (2019) argue that implementation is successful when it is student-led, rather than adult-led, and has the commitment from the entire school community, including the leadership team and students. Involving students means the school has more RA practitioners supporting RA processes. Continuing professional development, inclusive of quality training, ongoing support, availability of dedicated RA coordinators, and positive modelling allows staff to learn, practice, and build confidence (Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2021; Kane et al., 2007, 2008; Kervic et al., 2020; McCluskey et al., 2008; McQueen et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2023; Stewart & Ezell, 2022). According to Gonzalez et al. (2019) study, due to a non-hierarchical structure and democratisation of RA processes, staff and students regularly engaged in decision-making processes, thus decentralising power and protecting RA from oppression and marginalisation. The school in this study successfully implemented RA due to community-wide education, which helped embed RA within the community and democratise RA approaches. Gonzalez et al. (2019) contend that this model enables RA's organic growth within the school, as there was evidence of positive outcomes from RA processes and improved relationships.

The principal barrier to RA implementation reported is the lack of investment in time to train, learn, implement, and practice (Augustine et al., 2018; Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Gregory et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2011; Kane et al., 2007, 2008; Kervic et al., 2020; McCluskey et al., 2008; McQueen et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2023; Stewart & Ezell, 2022). The difficulty in changing culture is also a highly cited limitation. Staff continue to utilise punitive measures, and RA is used alongside punishment; thus, staff are reluctant to dispose of punitive measures. RA and punishment are seen as different but compatible approaches to managing behaviour. Staff showed reluctance in using RA and the language used and suggested that staff should have the prerogative to choose the method used for behaviour from a range of options available to them (Gregory et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2011; Kane et al., 2007, 2008; Kervic et al., 2020; McCluskey et al., 2008; McQueen et al., 2023; Rainbolt et al., 2019; Stahl et al., 2023; Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

Methodology

This research adopted an interpretivist exploratory case study design framework and mixed qualitative methods. It is grounded in constructionism, based on the view that there is no objective reality or truth – the reality is constructed through interactions with the world. According to constructionism, there are no absolute truths, knowledge is not limited to being created by the senses alone, and research must focus on constructing meaning (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 38). Interpretivism is the epistemology underlying constructivism. Interpretivists believe that reality is created by social actors and people's perceptions (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 40), and that human understanding and experiences are subjective and contribute to the construction of reality in the social world, while social

reality can change and have multiple perspectives (Hennink et al., 2011). Data collection was conducted in three stages, from April 2018 through May 2019. Although this research was conducted a while ago, it is not unusual to use such data in academic research papers (Martinez et al., 2022; Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

Research sites and participants

Restorative College (the case study; FE college)

Located in West Yorkshire, Restorative College has six campuses that serve over 16,000 students aged 16–18 and 19+, providing Higher Education, Higher Skills, and apprenticeships. It offers arrangements and courses for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). In 2017–2018, it committed to becoming a ‘restorative’ institution and invested in training the entire staff. Initially, the senior members of the ‘Safeguarding and Behaviour’ team received a three-day external training and then provided in-house training for the other staff. Trainers provided copies of the training materials and resources to the institution, which were available to the staff. The RA policy was fully implemented, as part of the behaviour policy, using a whole-school approach, from the academic year 2018–2019 onward. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 staff members; see Table 1 for a list of all participants, institutions, and their roles.

Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

This Pupil Referral Unit is located in London and has four centres. Students enrol at various points during their secondary schooling, usually due to their previous school placement breaking down due to ill health, behavioural issues, or other difficulties. This institution serves up to 200 students on individualised or reduced teaching timetables to meet their needs and employs RA as a reactive approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two staff members.

Sixth Form – Special School

This Sixth Form Special School is located in North London and serves approximately 170 students aged 11–19 years with learning, emotional, behavioural, autistic, communication, medical, physical, sensory, and social issues. This institution employs RA as a reactive approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four staff members.

North-East London College (FE College)

This Further Education College is located in North-East London; the institution underwent a merger during the data collection process. The institution serves up to 9000 students aged 14–18 and 19+ with education, and apprenticeships, and provides arrangements and courses for SEND students. It employs restorative justice as a reactive approach. A semi-structured interview was held with a staff member.

South-East London College (FE College)

This college, based in South-East London, serves up to 13,000 students aged 16–18 and 19+ at its two campuses (during the data collection process, the institution was in talks for its second merger). It provides Higher Education, Higher Skills, and apprenticeships, and

Table 1. Research sites, participants, and their roles.

Name of participants (pseudonyms)	Role
Restorative college (the case study; FE College)	
<i>Sophia</i>	Manager
<i>Jack</i>	Manager
<i>Jennifer</i>	Manager
<i>Mary</i>	Manager
<i>Isla</i>	Manager
<i>Jessica</i>	Manager
<i>Maggie</i>	Teacher
<i>Bethany</i>	Teacher
<i>Mia</i>	Teacher
<i>Ava</i>	Teacher
Pupil referral unit (PRU)	
<i>Aroon</i>	Manager
<i>Anna</i>	Manager
Sixth form – Special school	
<i>Damian</i>	Manager
<i>Ethan</i>	Manager
<i>Thomas</i>	Manager
<i>Olga</i>	Teacher's Assistant
North-East London college (FE college)	
<i>Musa</i>	Manager
South-East London college (FE college)	
<i>Oliver</i>	Manager
<i>Rose</i>	Manager
<i>Megan</i>	Manager
North London college (FE college)	
<i>Lily</i>	Manager
<i>Monika</i>	Teacher
<i>Ayodele</i>	Teacher
<i>Sophie</i>	Teacher
<i>Linda</i>	Teacher
West Midlands college (FE college)	
<i>Susan</i>	Manager
<i>Rhys</i>	Manager
<i>Charlie</i>	Teacher
<i>Tanya</i>	Personal Tutor
<i>Tracy</i>	Personal Tutor
Total number of participants	30

provides arrangements and courses for SEND students. It employs RA as a reactive approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three staff members.

North London College (FE College)

This college in North London has five campuses where it provides Higher Education, Higher Skills, apprenticeships, and facilities for SEND to up to 16,000 students aged 16–18 and 19+ annually. It introduced RA in one department in 2017–2018, but not as part of the behaviour policy. The department head is externally trained to facilitate restorative justice practices and has provided internal training for the department staff to enable restorative justice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five staff members.

West Midlands College (FE College)

The college in the West Midlands has three campuses where it provides Higher Education, Higher Skills, apprenticeships, and SEND facilities to 27,000 students aged 16–18 and 19+.

It introduced RA in 2017–2018 as part of its behaviour policy. The Safeguarding and Behaviour managers were externally trained in restorative justice, and then provided internal training for some of the staff to become facilitators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five staff members. Unfortunately, this institution did not offer permission to use the data due to anticipated management changes or provide a copy of their behaviour policy, as it was being reviewed.

Ethics

This study strictly adhered to the British Sociological Association (British Sociological Association, 2017) statement on ethical practices. Ethical approval was obtained from the Middlesex University School of Law Ethics Committee before data collection. The real names of all participants, institutions, specific staff roles, data, and department names were withheld to protect participants' identities. The rationale behind conducting semi-structured interviews with the staff rather than focus groups was to minimise the inconvenience for the participants and the institution. Teachers/lecturers and other staff are extremely busy during term, and their timetables differ, making it almost impossible to bring together a group of teaching staff. Asking staff to give up their time outside of their teaching timetable could inconvenience them, especially teaching staff who usually spend that time preparing lessons, marking work, or dealing with other teaching- or student-behaviour-related issues. Asking staff to participate during holidays or outside of the term would also be unreasonable, and such proposals would likely be declined. Semi-structured interviews were ideal, suitable, and convenient, as appointments were made at the convenience of both sides.

To obtain consent from the participants, the researcher introduced themselves and their background and explained the purpose of the study, either face-to-face or through email. Ethical approval forms and processes were fully disclosed. The participants were invited and asked to sign a consent form that contained their contact details, a description of the study, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time (British Sociological Association, 2017). Participants were also explicitly informed that signing the consent form and participation were voluntary (British Sociological Association, 2017; Creswell, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews are a popular data collection method (Sarantakos, 2013), particularly for case studies (Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014). The duration of the semi-structured interviews for this study was 30–60 minutes.

Sampling and data collection process

A non-random and purposive sampling technique (Thomas, 2011) was used to identify the participants for the semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling allows researchers to 'think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample ... carefully on this basis' (Thomas, 2011, p. 141). Stage 1 consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews with staff members from a PRU, a special sixth-form school, and four

FE colleges on their experiences of RA implementation and practices. Stages 2 and 3 involved an interpretivist exploratory case study of Restorative College. The case study incorporated mixed qualitative methods, including documents and 10 semi-structured interviews with staff members. Stage 2 explored the staff's initial experiences of RA implementation and practices. Stage 3 involved reinterviewing the participants from Stage 2 later in the academic year to follow up on their experiences of RA implementation and practices. [Table 1](#) consists of a list of participants, their roles, and their respective sites.

Analysis

Based on the methodological framework adopted in this study, an interpretive enquirer must study the meanings constructed by social actors to understand the social world. Thus, the ideal tool to analyse data was the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), used primarily by interpretive enquirers (Thomas, 2011), which is governed by the basic principle that researchers immerse themselves in themes that capture or summarise the essence of the data, as reflected in [Table 2](#). [Table 2](#) demonstrates and illustrates the constant comparative data analysis process.

Findings: successes

A top-down, bottom-up, and whole-school approach

A common theme among the participants of this study is that implementing an RA behaviour policy must be a top-down and whole-school approach. Support from the Executives and SLT is fundamental. Sophia states:

I can absolutely guarantee that any kind of initiative will be either impossible to embed or really, really, really difficult to embed if you haven't got whole college buy-in and complete support from your Senior Leadership Team. – Sophia

According to Sophia, any initiative or policy is impossible or difficult to implement without support from the institution and its front-line staff. It is argued that not only is a top-down approach needed, but a bottom-up approach is also required. This resonated with

Table 2. The constant comparative data analysis process.

Process	Activity	Description
1.	Data Collection	Preliminary data analysis commenced in this stage.
2.	Transcription	Immersive study of data; created temporary constructs.
3.	Analysis: Step 1	Listened to interviews, read interview transcripts, and created important ideas or temporary constructs.
4.	Analysis: Step 2	Read through the data again alongside the temporary constructs, removed constructs and added new ones (second-order constructs), and summarised the essential themes from the data.
5.	Analysis: Step 3	Revisited the constructs and refined them, ensured the constructs captured the essence of the data, and formed the final themes.
6.	Analysis: Step 4	Reflected on the themes: How do they connect? What matches with what? Are there areas of agreement? Are there any contradictions or paradoxes?
7.	Mapping themes	Mapped the themes and quality quotations from the data to be used to support these themes.

others, too. Jennifer explains that, '... amongst the Executives and our SLT, there was a lot of interest and backing for it. (Jennifer)'

Aroon went on to argue that, 'Anna and I led it. If we're optimistic and say that we want this, our staff will see it coming from the top and start implementing it. It was sold well, and there was a consultation with it' (Aroon). The acceptance of an RA behaviour policy is dependent on how it is sold to the institution and its members. The quality of pitching and delivery, supported by consultation and evidence, is crucial. Aroon explains how SLT drove the RA policy, and staff in this institution were optimistic and willing to implement RA practices due to it being led by the SLT, which was inclusive of a consultation process. According to Jack, 'What has helped is that the local authority began using restorative approaches, and so, we're sort of shadowing that and taking that template' (Jack). For the Restorative College, a borough-wide initiative helped with implementation. Jack describes how shadowing and modelling, or using the local authority's template for RA, helped implement RA behaviour policy and maintain consistency.

Training and practising restorative approaches

A prevailing consensus among the study's participants is that ongoing training opportunities and dedicated staff development days are essential for the effective implementation of a RA behaviour policy. The presence of an internally trained RA team was identified as a significant contributor to the success of practical training initiatives. Jennifer states, 'We got the training out on staff development day and started with a small team with the skill set. We're quite lucky that we have an RA team and could have two full days of training with them' (Jennifer). Isla expresses, 'We've already had the training opportunities, and if there is anything else we want training on, we just ask, and our managers will try and implement it for us as much as they can' (Isla).

In the academic year 2017/2018, Restorative College committed itself to training all staff. Initially, senior 'Safeguarding and Behaviour' team members received three-day external training. Then, the senior members of the 'Safeguarding and Behaviour' team provided in-house training for all staff in the institution. Having an in-house trained RA team had a positive impact on practical training. In addition to training and staff development opportunities, further training opportunities on demand are positive for successful RA behaviour policy implementation.

Monika shared:

People are coming forward to help people across the College, not just in the department. We have the Behaviour Officers making sure that we understand RA, and sometimes they facilitate it to make sure that we are doing it in the right way, especially when we are doing it for the first time and if we are not one hundred per cent sure what we're doing. So, I have seen it used in many departments. – Monika

Monika explains how staff support others across her college; it is not limited to local teams or departments. Behaviour Officers proactively ensure that staff understand RA principles, and occasionally support with facilitation. Staff from other institutions also argued that assigning a dedicated staff or a team to support RA processes positively affected implementation and practice. Isla asserts:

Having a supportive team as well, so when we've got a situation we're not quite sure about, we'll go to someone within our team and just throw the ideas out and have a bit of a chat around it to see what they would do and if they're thinking the same as us. – Isla

For Isla, sharing good practice is paramount to strengthening one's understanding and practice of RA. A recurring theme amongst the participants of this study was that staff felt they were already dealing with or managing challenges restoratively. Staff explained how they dealt with problems restoratively without knowing the terminology; thus, they embraced the policy because values were already practised. Aroon explained how, after RA training, his practice was enhanced as it was theoretically and philosophically supported and driven. Aroon explains:

We did a form of [RA] anyway; I mean, after receiving the training, I knew that a lot of the things I did anyway. But intuitively and experience-wise, I was doing that stuff anyway, so it was easy for me to sort of slip into it . . . Now, there's this terminology behind it, and there's a label. It enhances a teacher's practice; it has enhanced my practice. – Aroon

As with Aroon above, Bethany states that the RA policy was embraced because values were already practised. Bethany expresses, 'When the new Positive Behaviour Policy came in, we embraced it because we do that anyway' (Bethany). Lily also echoes what Aroon and Bethany have stated. She argues that most teachers deal with students' problems in a restorative manner, especially with low-level behavioural issues. Lily explains:

A lot of people are using [RA] without even necessarily knowing that's what they're doing. I would say the majority of teachers approach student problems in that way. If it's a low-level problem, they will approach it by asking the student what is going on and trying to get their perspective. – Lily

Findings: constraints and limitations

Funding cuts and mergers

Since 2010, the Institute of Fiscal Studies has found that funding and investment in the FE sector have diminished compared to primary and secondary schools (Department for Education, 2019; Weale, 2018). Spending for an FE student was reduced to 21% since 2010, and FE institutions saw an 8% cut, which meant course closures, job losses, and cuts to student services, amongst other things (ibid). In the same period, funding for adults was reduced by 45%. These funding cuts have had a devastating impact on FE institutions and the implementation of RA. Due to funding cuts and institutions' financial health at risk, mergers have been more prevalent since 2010 and during this period of economic precariousness (Department for Education, 2019). Participants explained that funding cuts and mergers had caused disruptions and instability in the institution, and implementing an RA policy was due to a lack of resources and changes in senior managers and mergers. This is prevalent in the sector, as explained by Megan:

Our senior team has been changing and changing, we've merged twice, and there's been a lot of disruption going on, so we haven't had much stability over the last sort of five, six years in terms of a solid leadership team. And cuts, lots of cuts, so many departments have shrunk, so people have less time to focus on the things that don't seem to be immediately necessary. – Megan

Oliver resonated with Megan and stated that, 'The difficulty has been funding cuts to the FE sector; we've lost practitioners who would be able to deliver RA' (Oliver). There are collateral consequences to mergers, as Musa explains:

Because of the merger, policies changed, and we had to take on their policies; we had no choice. The behaviour policy has changed with that; obviously, there hasn't been much emphasis on [RA], as we had in the past six years. There would be a central person who would oversee behaviour management; unfortunately, that's gone. With budget cuts continuously happening, more and more pressure is being put on local departments. – Musa

One consequence of institutional mergers is that the less dominant party often adopts the policies of the more influential institution in the interest of maintaining consistency. Consequently, if the subordinate institution had integrated RA into its behaviour policy while the dominant institution had not, the former would likely be compelled to abandon its practices to align with the latter. This dynamic suggests an underlying power imbalance; although a merger ostensibly implies an equal partnership, the process can resemble a de facto takeover by the dominant institution.

Staff turnover and application of restorative approaches

We have seen how unstable the FE sector is; this instability is percolating into staff retention and turnover. Rose expresses:

A lot of our staff are visiting lecturers or part-time. So, they won't all know. But the turnover is so just in terms of needing to use quite a lot of visiting lecturers and part-time staff on several sites that we're on. – Rose

A typical FE institution's staff are predominantly visiting lecturers and part-time or zero-hour contract employees. Training and monitoring to ensure consistency in adopted policies can be arduous due to staff being on different contracts and staff turnover. Jack describes how the Restorative College recruits new staff, and inductions or training do not occur immediately, as they are scheduled at specific times in the academic year. This raises concerns regarding non-restorative measures implicitly finding their way back into an institution that implements RA policy as a whole-school approach. In effect, this impacts consistency in dealing with behavioural challenges and uncertainty on what measures and tools are perceived as restorative and non-restorative. Jack states:

Turnover of staff is a barrier to implementing restorative practices. We get new staff to come in, we get new staff starting quite regularly, and there's not always that induction within a week. I think inductions take place at set times of the year. So they might not be fully aware of it. – Jack

Oliver reiterates staff turnover issues, exhibiting how ensuring new staff are informed of new policies is usually lost in communication. New staff rely upon their previous training and methods, which can be deemed punitive, disrupting the successful implementation of an RA behaviour policy. Oliver conveys, 'We've got new staff all the time. And we've had a lot of changes over the years, so there'll be a lot of staff who don't know about the approach, and we'll still use a punitive response in these situations' (Oliver). Musa contends:

Because of the merger, we have a departure of old members of staff and the recruitment of new members of staff who are not aware of [RA]. There were three of us, but after the college merged, people moved on, and I am the only one left. – Musa

Organisations and institutions typically undergo restructuring to reduce costs, often resulting in staff redundancies or voluntary departures by those seeking change. Mergers may also lead to the recruitment of new staff. However, ensuring that all staff are adequately trained in the institution's behaviour policy can be challenging. New staff often bring their own approaches to behaviour management, which can lead to a gradual divergence from established policies and practices. Jack argues:

With any organisation this size, it's going to be difficult to get that consistency across. I think that's what we need to be aiming for, so that if something happens in a curriculum area off-site, in the engineering centre, say, and it's dealt with in the same manner that it would here or at another site, or construction. – Jack

Maintaining and monitoring consistency in practices can be a challenge, given the size of most FE institutions. It is paramount that behavioural cases are dealt with consistently across the institution and in different departments. Consistency in applying and implementing an RA policy is a barrier to successful implementation. Staff will always construct and interpret behaviour according to their views; thus, staff will manage behaviour as they see fit. The behaviour policy is there for staff to rely upon, but staff may choose to depart from it and deal with behaviour on a case-by-case basis. Ava elucidates:

I think it's inconsistent. Certain people follow the behaviour policy and see different behaviours as acceptable and unacceptable. And I think that will always be there because things that I tolerate, you may not. So, the behaviour policy is just a blanket policy, really. It works and is appropriate for some students, and for others, no! – Ava

Authority and power struggle

Mia communicates,

This morning is an obvious example of how they treat teachers, and I don't mean this to sound like I'm venting about it because it's just happened. One of my young men assaulted somebody ... I saw it in the video. But he's a good kid; I see a different side to him; he made a mistake, a massive mistake. We've just had a meeting now, my manager, she is great, she is all for it, as well, so she said I want you to be in on it because you know him, we need to give a good side to him as well because that's only fair. So, we did, we were in the meeting, and they showed the violence, it was horrible, his dad and uncle were there as well. Now we thought we were in the meeting, but seemingly, we were just there to support him. So, when it came to making a decision, we were told to step outside. My manager could stay, but not me. So, it's just like teachers in all of this behaviour policy; we're just not regarded as even important. And that made me feel like a right idiot. And then when I went back in, she said, 'You didn't need to have stayed; you could have gone back to your class.' So, most teachers feel we're completely disregarded, and what we say or do doesn't make any difference. And we have to deal with it day in, day out. – Mia

One consequence of Mia's role being limited to that of a supporter was her exclusion from the decision-making process; she was asked to leave the room during deliberations, a practice that contradicts the core values of restorative RA. This experience left Mia

feeling unimportant, disregarded, and irrelevant, reinforcing the perception that decision-making authority rests solely with those in positions of power.

Staff often demonstrate reluctance to relinquish their authority and the power to impose sanctions, as these are seen as symbolic of their professional status. Institutions attempting to implement RA for behaviour management frequently retain authoritarian and hierarchical structures. While the Restorative College made concerted efforts to adopt RA as a whole-school approach, evidence suggests the continued presence of power imbalances, hierarchical dynamics, and resistance from staff, all of which undermined the policy's implementation. Lily states:

As a teacher, I would send somebody out to go and see SLT, but they would bounce back in again, and as a teacher, I had no authority to do anything or question anyone. Students would do awful things, and nothing was done about it. – Lily

Lily explains how teachers remove students from the class, but they would return without any accountability, thus questioning teachers' authority in the classroom. On the other hand, Rose explains:

If there's a breakdown in relationships between a student and a staff member, that's trickier. Because we have to support staff members, we have to be seen as not eroding their authority or confidence. But at the same time, we're supporting the student in understanding. – Rose

The power dynamic between students and staff is questioned. When a relationship has broken down between a student and staff, according to Rose, the institution implicitly supports the staff to ensure their authority and confidence are untethered. This stance is problematic, questioning the legitimacy of the process, especially if the staff was genuinely wrong and whether relationships between staff and students can ever be repaired. There may be a rationale to this stance, and Ava explains this:

Regardless of how challenging they are and what they do, we need them for funding reasons. We are overruled by people higher up who don't know the students and the situation, and the circumstances. Often, ninety-nine per cent of the time, we're overruled by somebody who has never met the student. The fact that we've got to retain them, and we can't get rid of them. – Ava

A commonly held view is that staff are discouraged from punishing or excluding students primarily for financial reasons. Each enrolled student represents government funding, which is vital to the institution's budget. As previously noted, FE institutions are facing significant financial pressures due to funding cuts. From this perspective, it is understandable that SLTs may be inclined to override staff decisions to retain students who exhibit challenging behaviour.

Culture change

This research found struggles in changing the culture from traditional practices to RA in institutions. Ethan explains:

Students and teachers don't always buy into it; the parents don't always buy into it. It will take time, and I need to be realistic and recognise that there are limitations to implementing any one philosophy. Unfortunately, there's a need for a quick fix, quick outcome, and

this happens, this should be the consequence, this should be the punishment, this person has done this, this is what should happen, it's a philosophy which is widespread within society. – Ethan

Ethan describes how punitive methods are masqueraded as RA initiatives.

Being in a school environment where behaviour presents as challenging quite often. Staff are using a range of punishments and sanctions. Because philosophically, they don't buy into restorative practices. So, whilst people still say they're giving somebody detention, informally, formally, it's called reflective time. – Ethan

Damien explains:

There's that traditional way of dealing with the consequence. And I think there needs to be consequences; our traditional view is of a punitive process where, like you do this, you have detention ... and that's life, outside if you get angry and beat someone up, you might be prosecuted and go to prison for GBH ... I don't disagree with that, but I think it might take a little while to get people on board with [RA] because it's a slight departure from the traditional method. Everyone's got different opinions about behaviour management and discipline and those kinds of things. For some people, it would be a soft option. – Damian

The traditional practice is to punish students for misbehaviour, which is the default practice of the wider society. Departing from normative practices can be a culture shock as it is a departure from tradition. For a successful RA implementation, particularly as a whole-school approach and culture change, it is paramount that the entire school community, including the leadership team and students, are committed to RA. That said, any change or new idea will always attract resistance. Jennifer states:

We're at the start of a three-year implementation, and I think it's a very different way of working for many staff. I would say 70% are receptive to it and grateful for the new ideas and approaches. And we've got maybe 30% that are a little bit resistant at the moment; they think that we need to stick to the punitive approach they're used to. – Jennifer

Staff forgoing their authority is challenging, and institutions implementing RA maintain an authoritarian and hierarchical structure. Despite ensuring that the RA behaviour policy is implemented fully, there will always be a few instances where staff continue to rely upon the old policy. Whether this is done studiously or unintentionally due to the message or training not being received is unknown. Sophia postulates that staff will always attempt to exclude students.

They still refer to the old policy, even though we've done a massive staff briefing at the management, SLT, and Governor levels. We have had a few cases where people have tried to exclude students without following the process. – Sophia

Susan resonates with Sophia.

The biggest issue has been individuals and their ideas about how to deal with students. We still have teachers who think that their role is very much about being an authority, and students are there to do as they are told, and if they don't, then that is a problem with that student. – Susan

Time

One of the biggest obstacles to successfully implementing an RA behaviour policy is time; participants discussed issues relating to implementing and delivering RA. The time barrier is multifaceted as it impacts implementation, practice, space, and bureaucracy; participants delineate these factors.

Implementation

Jennifer explains:

Our SLT had a lot of interest and backing for it, but they wanted it done as soon as possible; they knew that it would take time to implement across. The size of the organisation is a factor in implementing it and getting it out to everybody. We sent the policy out, but that relies on people who are quite short of time to sit and read a policy, digest it, understand it, and get on board with it. – Jennifer

The barrier to implementing an RA behaviour policy in an institution is lengthy; many factors, such as its size and training, impact this process. Jennifer explains that although the SLT demonstrated much interest in implementing RA as a behaviour policy, they underestimated the time to implement it across the whole College. Jennifer expresses that the institution's size, having several campuses, and reaching all staff, impact RA implementation.

Anna explains:

If anything, it's probably time restraints and staffing restraints that keep us from doing more, doing more conflict sessions with the kids and maybe even getting the kids trained. We have many different issues in terms of timetables, space and time, and staffing. It would be nice to have a bit more space to go a bit deeper. – Anna

Anna describes how time constraints restrict her institution from investing in RA. To create or invest time in RA, the institution needs to recruit additional staff and reduce or alter existing staff members' teaching timetables or responsibilities. Ultimately, it will cost the institution to invest time in effective and quality RA. This caveat prevents the institution from working with students and training them in RA practices; in effect, to contemplate training students, the institution requires space. Training students in RA would teach the values of RA, which institutions are attempting to inculcate in students, such as conflict resolution skills, responsibilisation, empathy, amongst other things. Training students in RA will ensure more RA facilitators; consequently, the institutions may solve staffing and timetabling issues. The institution needs to invest in the former to achieve the latter.

Further, the implementation relies on staff to read and understand the policy, which is problematic as staff are already constrained for time. Participants also described how time restraints restrict their institution from investing in RA. To create or invest time in RA, the institution must recruit additional staff and reduce or alter existing staff members' teaching timetables or responsibilities. Thus, ultimately, it will cost the institution to invest in RA, which prevents the institution from working with students and training in RA.

Practice

Delivering RA is argued to be time-consuming. Staff argue that time is a scarce commodity in the sector. Ayodele states:

Timing, time! Because we are stretched, it's about time. Our timetables, we're overworked, we're stretched, and it's making that time where you can all sit together. I might have had a problem with that class, and then the next thing, I'm off to another campus, I'm unable to take the time to sit down and have these meetings. – Ayodele

To add to the above constraints, Aroon expresses:

With some, it's very quick, you know, it can be one meeting. Others, you just . . . come back to it later. The situations can be over long periods; it can be sustained bullying over social media; you know it isn't one issue you're trying to unpick. It's not one thing this person did that annoyed subject B; it was over a long period, several things, and it's so complicated. – Aroon

Some cases and RA processes can be elementary; others are labyrinthine. One incident can lead to several other investigations and RA processes. The daily life of a teacher is very bureaucratic, complex and busy. A teacher's role requires meeting the broader institutional, local departmental, student, and teaching needs; thus, teachers feel overwhelmed and stressed. Finding the time to accommodate RA can be a mammoth task, especially when teachers travel between campuses for teaching responsibilities. Ayodele explains that finding the time to accommodate RA is an issue. He argues that teachers are overworked, and the teaching timetable does not permit miscellaneous activities. Susan states that:

Because many teachers deal with poor behaviour, you're just dealing with it as it happens, and so there's no real time to say I need you to come back at the end of the session. Teachers teach twenty-five hours a week, so they're back to back; they're running from one lesson to the next. Keeping a student at the end to have that conversation is difficult at that point. Having a student come back at the end of the day, or the following morning, again, may not suit them or that student. Trying to find time to make that restorative conversation can be difficult. – Susan

It is apparent that poor behaviour, mainly low-level disruptions, occurs regularly in institutions and staff attempt to deal with challenges promptly. Scheduling an appropriate time to meet the student(s) can be problematic for the teachers and students, as students are also on a stringent timetable. It is essential to note that although RA can be implemented as a whole-school, partial, or reactive approach, institutions do not allocate specific time in the staff's timetable to deliver RA processes. Staff are required to find that time. The lack of time to accommodate and deliver RA processes was also found in the Restorative College, which has a dedicated team to provide RA. The size of the institution and the number of students assigned to a team make it impractical to deliver RA. Lily expresses, 'You need time to do it properly, it takes a lot of time, and it takes time from people who don't have it' (Lily).

Delivering quality RA requires a significant amount of teachers' time, which is a scarce commodity in the sector, and can test their determination and commitment to deliver RA. Institutions do not allocate specific time in staff timetables to deliver RA processes. Staff are required to find that time, as explained by Sophie: 'Time! There hasn't been a slot for RA, so it's as and when and teachers may have time, don't have time' (Sophie). Bethany resonates with Sophie and explains:

It takes more time than just issuing somebody a caution. So, we've got four hundred and fifty students; you can see many meetings are going on, and it is a lot of time and resources to do

this. The main problem is finding the time to have all these meetings and getting the parents in because many of our parents are not interested. – Bethany

The lack of time to accommodate and deliver RA was found in the Restorative College, which has a dedicated team to provide RA. Bethany contends that issuing a caution is simplistic. However, Restorative College has assigned a team tasked with RA; the size of the institution and the number of students assigned to a team make it impractical to deliver RA. The number of students cited by Bethany, 450, is the number of students assigned to her team; it is not the number of students enrolled in the Restorative College. The Restorative College consists of more than 16,000 students every year.

Space

Rhys manifests:

We need somewhere safe for that to happen. Some of our other campuses do not have appropriate places. Then there are all sorts of other issues in terms of safeguarding and making sure that staff and students are accommodated appropriately while these conversations are taking place. We don't want any situations to be escalated as a result of this process in itself. – Rhys

While FE institutions can be significant in size, space can still be problematic. Finding an area or a room within the institution can be difficult, which triggers other issues such as safeguarding, providing a safe environment, accommodating all parties, and ensuring the room booked for the process is available for the time needed to complete the process.

Bureaucratic process

Thomas voices his frustration with the bureaucracy of the process:

I was given some forms that need filling out after the process, and the pressure of filling them out is time-consuming. I don't see myself having the time to fill out this form every single day ... it's not possible. I do not have the time for that. I've been sitting here since seven twenty, marking, and marking, and marking. – Thomas

The bureaucracy of the delivery of the process exacerbates the issue of time and practising RA. When institutions or organisations implement RA, they are inclined to evaluate the concept to monitor its impact, effect and experience, assessing and evaluating RA results in facilitators and parties completing much paperwork. The bureaucratic process can be time-consuming, adding to teachers' workload and pressure, resulting in stress and professionalisation. This time-consuming bureaucratic part can force staff to avoid utilising RA to deal with behaviour, seek alternative methods, or compel staff to omit to record RA. Either way, this puts the employment of RA in quandary.

Another dimension of RA bureaucracy is the resources to understand and deliver the process. These resources can be voluminous, wasting teachers' valuable time and adding to their workload and stress. Suppose staff omit reading these documents to enhance their understanding and practice; this can result in RA being misunderstood and convoluted with individuals' perceptions and ideas, consequently imperilling the process. Bethany states,

It's always a bit of a struggle at first because you can't remember the policy, and it's quite a big document. The problem is that they're always too big. They should be summarised because staff don't have time to sit reading. – Bethany

Bethany also identifies that the bureaucracy of implementing and practising RA prevents staff from doing what they are supposed to do: spend time with students to meet the values of RA. In lieu, staff are engaged with contraptions; thus, the inception of depreciation of RA. Bethany states:

I now see all the staff, the progress coaches; all they seem to do is sit at their computer, typing up on pro-monitor. When, actually, I'd like to see them with the bloody students, talking to the students. It seems to be the focus now is on systems rather than people. If they didn't have to type all this up, they could spend longer with the students. – Bethany

Complex environment: restorative approaches is not a panacea

The FE sector has a very complex environment of diverse students. Jack demystifies this predicament by explaining how some students demonstrate difficulties with alexithymia and other psychological and social needs. Jack explains:

Some of our students are more receptive than others; others cannot engage with it. I've had a couple of occasions where I couldn't do RA with this child because, you know, they have a neurological disorder that prevents them. They're very closed off when it comes to their emotions. They find it difficult to emphasise and reflect; that's a part of their diagnosis. We have kids with autism, so they're already detached from reality. Expecting them to be involved in something restorative like this isn't easy. You must know the child; you must know the child! I will know if they've witnessed domestic violence or been sexually abused. From that, I will gauge that it is probably not the right thing to do this week and talk about how they feel in front of another child. When you talk about their emotions, they think about the abuse they witnessed at home. So, you do have to address that before you can do anything else. – Jack

RA may not always be an ideal initiative to deal with conflict or other behaviour challenges. Institutions employ a variety of strategies to deal with disputes. RA is used alongside other interventions, which have to be refined and can include punitive methods, as mentioned by Aroon:

I have several students where it's not even an option; I can't even go down that route. I have to use a different strategy with them; it's very punitive for some, you really do have to look into their Educational Psychologist report and see whether they have the capacity to do that. – Aroon

There is always the possibility of doing more harm than good when using RA in a complex environment. Aroon continues to explain:

You might do more damage than good by trying to get a student to tap into their emotion because you're unlocking so many other things. There's a child that suffered from trauma or has a trauma disorder condition. You're tapping into how they're feeling about certain things; it can open up a whole can of worms. These things you have to look into before you kind of consider doing it. That's the thing; it's not a model that fits everything. – Aroon

A common fear of RA is the breakdown of the process and re-victimisation. Although preparation for intervention is vital, considerable background and research are required.

The facilitator's role and skills are essential when dealing with complex cases and avoiding re-victimisation. Sophia offers an anecdote where an RA process backfired. A refugee student (R), smuggled out of Syria, witnessed his parents being shot. He had been fostered and then moved into independent living. He fell out with a friend (F). Sophia offered an RA intervention, and both R and F agreed. R and F expressed wanting to be friends and put it behind them. And they were both saying that they were sorry. However, at some point in the process, F commented, 'I want to be friends, it's not like I'm no threat, it's not like I'm going to shoot you or anything' (Sophia). A comment that enraged R resulted in the RA process breaking down and the relationship being unrepaired. Sophia acknowledges, 'In hindsight, I wouldn't have done it at all, or I would have had his social worker there or his key worker there'. This anecdote reinforces the importance of research, preparation, and facilitators' training and skills. Due to the diverse needs of students in the FE sector, institutions part of this study feel that RA should be tailor-made to the student(s) or adapted to suit their needs. A caveat is that additional time would be needed to research the case and the student's needs and then deliver the process.

Due to the diverse needs of students in the FE sector, institutions part of this study feel that RA should be tailor-made to the student(s) or adapted to suit their needs. Formal and rigid RA processes and training sessions are seen to be inappropriate in an FE setting. Practices need to be adapted to the individual, situation, and circumstance. Rose explains:

I think it's adapted all the time; I mean, one of the courses I went to was very formal, you ask this, you ask that, you ask the other, and I find that you have to adapt it to the individual and the situation and the circumstance. – Rose

Training

Training in RA in the education sector is critical; external RA trainers should offer ongoing support; one or several workshops are insufficient. However, a cause of concern highlighted by this study is the irregular and arguably outdated training some participants possess. Limited RA training can question facilitators' understanding and skills in implementing, delivering and applying RA processes and values. For example, Oliver disclosed that he undertook training in 2006, 'It was 2006 when I had the training. Since then, I haven't done much' (Oliver). Megan could not specify precisely when she participated in the RA training, but stated it must have been 5–8 years ago, 'It was, gosh, it must be about 7 or 8 years ago now. At least five, anyway. I've got the certificate. I've been to some of the RA meetings in London. I haven't had any more formal training besides that' (Megan).

More astonishingly, participants have disclosed that they did not have formal training but are practising RA processes. Rose communicates that she did not partake in any training and could not be specific when she participated in a few short courses, 'I haven't had any in-depth training; I haven't done several days-long courses; I've done a couple of short sessions. I'm unsure if it was within the last 18 months or more than 18 years ago' (Rose).

Rhys expresses that he was only introduced to RA and did not have specific training in RA, 'We were first introduced to it two years ago. We haven't had specific training' (Rhys). Damian discloses, 'I've had some training about [RA] basics; we've had conversations

about it' (Damian). There is no regular training or development for staff who employ RA within their job role.

Staff from the Restorative College criticised the quality of the training sessions provided by internal staff and how the policy is inappropriate for some challenges. Possibly, due to the quality of training, more questions were raised than answers given. Maggie reveals that the training session was a lecture on the new RA policy rather than meaningful training. The new RA policy was still unclear to Maggie after the training session; an hour was insufficient to fathom the new behaviour policy. Maggie expresses:

We had about an hour of a talk, rather than training, to introduce us to the policy. I'd say the policy was still unclear for most. Well, to be fairly truthful, I don't think an hour's talk about a new policy is enough. But the policy doesn't fit with everything; for example, if a student misses a deadline, I know that's a behaviour, but another policy says that we're to give them a caution if they miss three deadlines, and they don't match. If you do RA and you've got a policy such as that, it needs to be made clear that it's just about behaviour because that's all it works for. It doesn't work for missing deadlines and attendance. – Maggie

Maggie raises issues regarding the RA behaviour policy contradicting other policies and how the RA behaviour policy is restricted to disruptive and challenging behaviour, as opposed to missing deadlines, punctuality and attendance, which are highlighted to be prominent in the FE sector. What is concerning is that Maggie's understanding of RA values, practices, and use is limited to challenging, disruptive or problematic behaviours, which may have been due to the quality or lack of training. It is submitted that RA meetings or conferences can support students with missing deadlines, attendance and punctuality. RA can support teachers to determine or identify underlying issues as to why a student is missing deadlines, non-attendance and tardiness, thus providing support to these barriers to learning.

Bethany goes as far as to state that no one has been appropriately trained to deliver RA. She acknowledges the skills required to deliver RA processes:

We think we're doing good restorative meetings, but are we? Because none of us has been trained on it. I run counselling as well, and nobody can be a counsellor; it's skilful, and I think to do that is quite skilled as well, and it's assuming that we've all got the skills and we haven't. – Bethany

Lack of understanding due to the limited training and skills was also evident when Jennifer explained how difficult she found facilitating RA. Jennifer communicates how she found it challenging to manage and facilitate RA:

Although they were told when we sat down, the girls would talk to each other in turn, and it was a case of one speaks and then the other speaks. I don't think they were aware of that before. So, when they came together and started answering the questions, one answered the question, and the other was arguing, resulting in one of them leaving the room. – Jennifer

Jennifer expresses how a few staff members are confident in delivering RA processes; this may be due to the quality of training offered. Jennifer exerts, 'We've only got maybe three staff members who will be comfortable at the moment, doing a restorative intervention between a member of staff and a student' (Jennifer). Jack showed limited understanding of what practices came under the umbrella of RA. Direct approaches are not the only methods available. Jack failed to consider indirect methods. As with Maggie above, this

can be due to the lack of quality training received. Jack said, 'There has been an instance where one of the parties has agreed to it, and the other one hasn't. At that point, then, we just had to get assurance that there is going to be no further instance' (Jack).

Maggie shares an experience of an RA process that involved her and another student. She questioned the formality of the process, and her anecdote highlights a facilitator's lack of understanding, training and skills. Maggie felt that she and the student organically resolved their differences; however, the facilitator thought she had to go through the whole process following the script. Maggie tells us:

The trouble with these meetings, they're scripted. And for me, why is there a script? It should be a natural thing rather than scripted. I think that the script is limiting. They've got the script in front of them, and they're reading off the script. The facilitator had this script. However, I didn't know she had this script until after I had opened the meeting with the student. The meeting was because the student felt that I had offended her in class. After all, I had said something about maybe she had dyslexia. We were working on personal statements; her statement was a bit kind of, it didn't flow, and it repeated itself, and I said that to her in class and talked to her about long sentences and garbled sentences. And I asked her if she had dyslexia, and that offended her. So, she had written an email to complain. So, I opened the meeting and, like I said, as I normally would, and discussed how I didn't want to offend her by asking about dyslexia. I was just wondering if she had dyslexia, I could get her support, etc. So, we had this meeting, and at the end, the facilitator said, so she talked about her script and how she had to have certain questions answered. So, she still had to ask further questions even though the student and I felt as though we had resolved it. – Maggie

Discussion

A critical argument of this paper is the lack of research and literature on RA in the FE sector. Relying on evidence, experiences and case studies from primary and secondary sectors can be problematic and seen as an oxymoron. The FE sector is diverse and complex compared to the sectors mentioned above, and it encompasses students whom these sectors have excluded from their institutions.

A common theme among the participants of this study was that implementing RA must be a top-down and whole-school approach steered by the Executives, SLT and front-line staff. Training and staff development days are crucial and are seen as an opportunity to introduce RA and implement an RA policy successfully. An in-house dedicated RA team meant that support and opportunities to share good practices and develop confidence in delivering RA were readily available. Further, the acceptance of an RA policy is dependent on how it is sold to the institution and its members. The quality of pitching and delivery, supported by consultation and evidence, is crucial. These findings are supported by other research. Hopkins (2006) study reported that a lack of support from senior management was a barrier to successful implementation. Kane et al. (2007, 2008) and McCluskey et al. (2008) found that RA implementation positively impacted when implemented with commitment and leadership, and was more effective as a whole-school approach. The studies mentioned above were later supported by McCluskey et al. (2011), who carried out a systematic review of the findings from Kane et al. (2007, 2008) and McCluskey et al. (2008). Gonzalez et al. (2019) also argue that implementation would not have been possible without the entire school's commitment, and the involvement of students in implementation was vital, which meant the school had more practitioners to support RA

practices and processes. The Restorative Practices Development Team (2003) found that the quality of pitching, selling supported by evidence, and delivery to the institution and its members, and having a consultation to implement RA, was crucial. For the Restorative College, a borough-wide initiative helped with implementation. There are examples of other restorative cities in the UK which had an impact on the Education sector. For instance, the first restorative city in England was the City of Hull (Green et al., 2013, 2014). Hull aimed to create a more socially and emotionally confident youth population, encouraging a more entrepreneurial and aspirational outlook (Green et al., 2013, p. 445). RA were implemented in the public services working with youths, schools, and the police. Results show that by implementing RA, the police had saved at least £3.5 million and cut custodial sentencing by 23% in the Youth Justice System. Schools reported that classroom disruptions were reduced by 90%, and evidenced improved and healed relationships (Green et al., 2013). Gonzalez et al. (2019) and Hopkins (2004) argue that assigning a dedicated staff and a team to support RA processes positively affected implementation and practice. Hopkins (2004) further expressed that every restorative school should have an RA coordinator. Kane et al. (2007, 2008) and McCluskey et al. (2008) found evidence that sharing good practice and modelling built confidence in staff.

This research found many obstacles and barriers to implementing RA in the FE sector, primarily caused by funding cuts. Due to mergers, institutions are influenced to adopt the dominant institution's policies, thus inadvertently renouncing their own policies. FE institutions consist of employees on precarious employment contracts, thus making it difficult for institutions to monitor training and consistency in the application of RA, leaving institutions adopting RA vulnerable to non-RA tools being applied or being masqueraded as RA tools. Gavrielides (2008) explicates that often, practices that are not restorative are brought under the RA umbrella if due diligence is lacking.

Monitoring RA training and application is further complicated due to the institution's size. That said, this research found that most institutions and staff attended a 1–3-day training. Some disclosed that they did not participate in formal training, had no recent activity, or engaged in a refresher course. Staff criticised the quality of their training session. Some felt that the training session was more of a lecture than meaningful training. An hour was seen as insufficient to fathom RA. A participant goes as far as to state that no one has been appropriately trained to deliver RA. Lack of training and skills was evident when staff explained how they found it difficult to facilitate RA. It was expressed that only a handful of staff members were confident in delivering RA processes. Due to a lack of training and skills, although participants of RA organically resolved their differences, the facilitator still felt the need to go through the whole process following the RA script/questions.

The cultural change from punitive to restorative proved difficult, mainly when staff felt they were surrendering their power and authority. Departing from normative practices can be a culture shock, as it is a departure from tradition. This research found that institutions implementing RA still maintain an authoritarian and hierarchical structure; thus, there was a power imbalance. Staff raised concerns about how SLT constantly questioned their power and authority. As a result, the power dynamic between students and staff, and between staff and staff, is questioned. These findings resonate with other research where staff are reluctant to sacrifice their authority (Russell & Crocker, 2016) and surrender the power to punish, symbolising teachers' power (McCluskey et al., 2011). Also,

institutions implementing RA maintain an authoritarian and hierarchical structure (Varnham, 2005).

Participants of this study cited time as the principal barrier to implementing RA. Implementing an RA behaviour policy in an institution is lengthy; many factors, such as size and staff training, influence implementation. The implementation relies on staff to read and understand the policy, which is problematic as staff are time-constrained. Furthermore, delivering RA is time-consuming, which has a ripple effect on the logistics of booking a room and delivering RA. When implementing RA, most institutions require paperwork to be completed for evaluation purposes, thus increasing teachers' workload. The issue of time in implementing and practising RA is also identified in research and literature (Bitel, 2005; Hopkins, 2006; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Russell & Crocker, 2016; Vaandering, 2011). Teachers are under a lot of pressure to deliver the curriculum; thus, RA can obstruct lessons and learning outcomes. Without a clear plan, strategy, and direction, implementation of RA can be a prolonged process (Edgar et al., 2002; Kane et al., 2007, 2008; McCluskey et al., 2008). Bitel (2005) recommended that the process be either facilitated by external staff or by internal staff who have time off from front-line teaching. In this study, Restorative College assigned a team to deliver RA and train teaching staff to provide RA where possible; time was still cited as an issue for this institution due to the size and the number of students attending the College.

Staff in this study mentioned that they felt they were already operating restoratively and were willing to accept the RA policy. While this can be seen as a positive, which supports implementation, Karp and Breslin (2001) identified a problem with this positionality. They found that staff who felt that they were already delivering RA found it difficult to fully understand RA ideals.

Finally, it is fundamental to note that the FE sector has a very complex environment of diverse students. RA may not always be ideal for dealing with conflict or other behavioural challenges. Due to the diverse needs of students in the FE sector, institutions part of this study feel that RA should be tailor-made to the student(s) or adapted to suit their needs. A caveat is that additional time would be needed to research the case and the student's needs, and then deliver the process.

Limitation

This research employed an interpretivist, exploratory case study design using mixed qualitative methods. While future studies could adopt quantitative approaches to increase sample size and reach a national audience through technology and online platforms, the feasibility of such research may be limited by the access and engagement challenges identified in this study. Nonetheless, broader quantitative research could complement these findings and offer further insights into RA experiences among staff and students in the FE sector.

Conclusion

This paper identified that research and literature are scant on research focusing on RA in FE in the UK, which merits much research focus. Findings highlight that a successful RA behaviour policy implementation requires both top-down and bottom-up approaches

driven by SLT and accepted by all staff. Staff turnover and consistency in applying RA in FE institutions are a cause for concern. The dynamicity and fluidity of FE institutions' staff community disrupt the stability of a whole-school approach, as new staff are not trained in RA, allowing traditional methods to return to the institution. In addition, the size of FE institutions means that monitoring practices and applications of RA are challenging, which means staff are left to their 'virtues and vices' for practising RA. The struggle for authority and power was conspicuous. As with available research in the field, cultural change was a challenge. It was argued that staff are opinionated regarding behaviour management and discipline, which will require substantial time to change their mindset. Staff shared barriers that impeded practising RA. For example, time was an issue, time to implement RA as a policy and time to practise RA. Implementing RA as a behaviour policy is a long and strenuous journey. Staff feel they do not have enough time to accommodate RA due to teaching needs, exacerbated by the bureaucracy attached to the process. In addition, institutions do not allocate extra time on the teaching timetable to practise RA. Therefore, finding a suitable time for all parties is problematic. Even if the institution has a dedicated team for RA practice, the staff per RA process ratio computation fails. Further, space to conduct RA is limited in institutions, as rooms are time-bound, and there is no guarantee that the process to be completed within the time allocated. Finally, it is argued that the FE sector's environment is complex and consists of diverse students and needs. Thus, institutions require regular and bespoke RA training.

Disclosure statement

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