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'I think we've told you everything we can': exploring a restorative philosophy in action through the voices of young people with social, emotional and mental health needs

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a restorative philosophy in action through the voices of young people with social, emotional, and mental health needs in a special school in South East England. Drawing on walking-tour interviews, ethnographic field notes, and reflexive conversations, the study reveals how these young people conceptualise this philosophy as a rights-based approach to safety, mediated by adults attuned to justice- and rejection-sensitivity. Rather than viewing it as a scripted resolution process, they describe restorative work as embedded in everyday care, with flexibility as a key expectation. Their communities echo these views, reporting secondary harm from proximity to disability – suggesting that, when shaped by systemic harm, disability can be experienced collectively. This creates additional obligations for restorative philosophies that extend beyond the individual. Furthermore, the study highlights how experiences are shaped by bounded contexts, diagnostic mechanisms, and the tendency to frame social, emotional, and mental health needs as invisible disabilities.

KEYWORDS

Special school; disability; restorative justice; restorative practice; education

Restorative education

Originating from within the criminal justice system (Zehr 1990), restorative justice is now well established within education as a way of supporting conflict resolution and reducing exclusions (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020; Samimi et al. 2023). Globally, schools have adopted restorative approaches, with key practices including restorative conferences and peace building circles (Samimi et al. 2023). These practices represent a shift away from exclusionary discipline, placing new responsibilities on school communities to become self-sustaining, proficient in conflict resolution, and committed to inclusion. These are community properties, where relationships represent the 'main resource for building social bonds' (Lodi et al. 2021, 32). As such, the concept of community is essential, and is applied in this article to the way in which a restorative philosophy supports young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

While recent publications highlight a growing commitment in education to restorative cultures and increased alignment with other educational theories (Restorative Justice Council 2025); research also reveals a disconnect between the intended aims of restorative practices and the actual experiences of young people (Bentley 2019; Leach and Lewis 2013). This disconnect presents a key issue as restorative work is often framed as transformative, especially when aligned with participatory research and critical consciousness (Garnett et al. 2019). Therefore, exploring young people's

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experiences, involving them in research, generating rich contextual insights, and applying critical analysis is essential to a comprehensive understanding.

In this article, restorative work is not limited to processes and should be considered as a philosophy in action (Corrigan 2012); whereby practitioners adopt a restorative mindset that informs their every decision. This philosophy in action relies on practitioners prioritising values and principles, over processes and outcomes, resulting in a philosophy-to-practice mindset (Strang and Braithwaite 2001), one which enables flexible and adaptive restorative provision.

Adopting a mindset based on a philosophy in action allows the data in this article to be interpreted through diverse practices and helps us infer meaning from the way in which young people describe their experiences. These experiences extend beyond conflict, encompassing everyday scenarios that embody a restorative philosophy. In examining these experiences and the events that take place, this article also looks to highlight the mechanisms (i.e. underlying structures and processes) that offer explanations to the way in which this social phenomenon is experienced (Bhaskar 1975; Bhaskar and Danermark 2006).

Special school contexts

The exploration in this article is in collaboration with primary age young people with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs and is situated within a special school in the South East of England. Special schools provide education for young people whose needs cannot be met in mainstream; therefore, by design they exist in the margins – with only 1.7% of young people in England attending state-funded or non-maintained special schools (Department for Education 2024a). They are often small, provide a high staff-to-student ratio, and follow an alternative curriculum.

Exploring a restorative philosophy in these spaces, therefore, automatically situates young peoples' experiences within a segregated and bounded context. This context could be considered as fertile ground for diverse ideologies – potentially providing affordances not available within mainstream education. However, this also affords a detachment from broader mainstream societal norms, i.e. within domestic, local, and national contexts. Therefore, while restorative philosophies in special schools may meet young people's immediate needs, they may also unintentionally create a false sense of reality, leaving them underprepared for future interactions shaped by a predominantly punitive society.

In England, the number of young people attending special schools reduced significantly following the 1981 Education Act and the Warnock report (Warnock 1978), however since 2006 there has been a sharp increase (Black 2019) to the point where demand now out-strips provision (Department for Education 2025; Thomas, Dobson, and Loxley 2023).

Young people in these schools are required to have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), i.e. a statutory document that sets out their needs and names their educational provision. This document acts as a gatekeeper; however, the threshold for obtaining an EHCP is high, with parents reporting systemic issues that create financial and emotional strain such as the need to fight for assessment and appropriate provision (Support SEND Kids, 2024), rising tribunal appeals (Marsh 2021), and a lack of parental agency (Boddison and Soan 2021).

These issues could be considered as the macro conflict that a restorative philosophy also has the potential to address and is particularly relevant for young people with SEMH as research highlights a hierarchy within SEND, whereby despite presenting with significant SEMH challenges, it is almost 'impossible' for these young people to secure an EHCP when meeting age-related academic expectations (Boesley and Crane 2018, 41). As an EHCP is a generally accepted requirement for admission, young people with SEMH, therefore, often fail to gain a special school place, and consequently the sectors' focus has become more concentrated on cognition, learning, and communication and interaction needs.

Diagnosis, therefore, could be considered as a mechanism that positions young people with SEMH in special schools as a minority, whereas, within this study they are the main protagonists and are considered to offer a highly unique and valued perspective on restorative philosophies. These young people have often encountered negative punitive experiences such as school exclusion (Department for Education 2024c; Thompson, Tawell, and Daniels 2021), with enhanced patterns of negative disciplinary outcomes when considering gender, race (Anyon et al. 2021; Bowman-Perrott et al. 2011) and poverty (Gorard et al. 2024). However, what is most striking is that they are often hidden within society due to their seemingly invisible disability (Goodwin 2020) – a reality that contributes to additional challenges and distorted societal perceptions.

These exclusionary characteristics are mirrored in this case study (see Table 1 – School level characteristics) where many young people were boys with high levels of free school meals (a proxy measure for child poverty). Moreover, the notable majority of young people described as White-British encourages further questions, e.g. what diagnostic assumptions do we make about young people dependent on their individual characteristics, what are the special school experiences of gendered and racially distinct minority groups, and how do systemic mechanisms mediate the way in which restorative philosophies are enacted?

Axiologically special schools offer a synergy with restorative philosophies due to the often-cited warmth and care, non-punitive approaches and their reliance on relationships as a critical tool for supporting challenging behaviour. However, there is a significant lack of extant data highlighting the prevalence of restorative special schools. This issue is not limited to special schools, with very few studies looking to evidence the way in which access to restorative educational practices are mediated by school level characteristics (Payne and Welch 2015).

Table 1. School level characteristics.

Descriptor	Case study school context ^a	English non-maintained special school comparison 2024 ^b	English state-funded special school comparison 2024 ^b	English state-funded mainstream primary school comparison 2024 ^b
Number on roll	87	\bar{x} = 79 (based on 52 non-maintained special schools and a total of 4,120 students)	\bar{x} =149 (based on 1,050 state-funded special schools and a total of 156,952 students)	\bar{x} =275 (based on 16,764 state-funded primary schools and a total of 4,614,990 students)
Gender	86% boys/14% girls ^c	71.2% male/28.8% female ^d	72.3% male/27.7% female ^d	50.9% male/49.1% female ^d
Percentage of students in receipt of free school meals	56%	30.1%	47.4%	24.3% (19.7% in state-funded primary schools in South East England)
Proportion of students described as White-British	82%	72.4%	66.6%	62.6%
Proportion of students described as having English as an alternative language	1.5%	10.7%	14.5%	22.8%
Social, Emotional, and Mental Health listed as primary need ^e	'We are a special school for pupils who have been identified as having Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties' ^f	11.4%	12.2%	13.2%

^aData collected from SchoolDash (SchoolDash 2025).

^bData collected from Schools, pupils and their characteristics (Department for Education 2024a).

^cSchoolDash is limited to reporting the descriptors 'boy' or 'girl'.

^dThe Department for Education is limited to reporting the descriptors 'male' or 'female'.

^eOf those with an Education Health and Care Plan (Department for Education 2024b).

^fSchool website, citation redacted due to confidentiality.

Moreover, while restorative studies have been carried out in special schools (Hibbin 2023; Holland 2012; Procter-Legg 2022; Zaman 2024), much of the research describes practitioner perspectives, and there is limited literature amplifying the voices and experiences of young people with SEND which provides thick description within the context of restorative philosophies (Procter-Legg 2025).

This article looks to extend this evidence and engage with the first-person voices of young people with SEMH while ensuring they are afforded ethical priority. In practice, this means valuing their experiences, constructing knowledge with them and foregrounding what they have to say to those in positions of power and influence. In this article, thick description is desirable, as it provides a detailed contextual account which goes beyond the superficial. This enables us to infer meaning and subsequently challenge normative assumptions such as the deficit framing of SEND and the procedural view of restorative work in education. Moreover, thick description helps surface young peoples' experiences and affords them ethical prioritisation. Providing the potential to interrupt mainstream narratives and aid the readers' understanding of mechanisms that affect the way in which these young people experience restorative work in education.

Methods

The research design adopted an individual case study approach to a special school in South East England. I visited the school across two weeks in October 2024, returning in January, and May 2025, looking to answer the following questions:

RQ1 - In what way do young people with SEMH in this special school experience a restorative philosophy in action?

RQ2 - To what extent is there convergence or divergence between these young peoples' experiences and the conceptual understanding of communities of care?¹

The main data included conversations with young people, audio recorded during walking tours, a method selected to provide as much autonomy as possible and to suit individual needs (Butler and Derrett 2014; Day and Cornell 2023). These tours were conducted with seven young people (five boys and two girls)² between the ages of 7 and 9 years, across two class groups. They were told that they were in charge – they could choose the route and were able to tell me about whatever was important to them within their school.

During the tours, I asked clarifying questions regarding their experiences, specifically picking up on elements that linked to restorative concepts and conflict resolution. These tours took place before any recorded conversations with adults, guided by the principle that the narrative of a restorative philosophy in action should be controlled by the young people. Tours were conducted individually or in pairs based on the young person's preference.

Significant time was spent building rapport in advance, to ensure the young people felt safe and were able to engage positively with the walking tours. This included mutual attention, mutual positivity, and co-ordination (Abbe and Brandon 2012); concepts borrowed from the literature on rapport within the criminal justice system. In practice, this meant considering the relational aspects of rapport (Foster, Talwar, and Crossman 2022), i.e. spending time with young people, talking to them about their interests, playing games, sharing information, and returning to the school to build trust and demonstrate reliability. As a result, young people became actively engaged in the research and eager to participate, contributing rich, in-depth qualitative data.

To enable comparative analysis, I also recorded conversations with parents ($n = 4$) and members of staff ($n = 8$). These began simply by asking about the school, but in the case of staff, quickly progressed into a dialogue which created reflexive conversations on the research, what the young people were (and were not) saying, and the way in which restorative philosophies had the potential

to offer just environments for young people. Additionally, I took field notes throughout my time at the school, writing notes and reflections both before and after each day.

All conversations were transcribed and analysed through the process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) looking to foreground the experiences of young people by coding their data inductively in advance of the adults, whose conversations were then coded deductively using the codes created from the young people. This, in turn, empowered young peoples' voices in shaping the narrative while helping to challenge and reduce preconceived assumptions around what a restorative philosophy in action might look like.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted from the University of Oxford, Education Department Research Ethics Committee (DREC) – Reference EDUC_C1A_24_159. All the participation was voluntary. Adults provided written consent, and young people gave assent following permission from parents or carers. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of young people, and generic role descriptions were assigned to adults, both ensuring anonymity and highlighting the ethical prioritisation of young people. All interview excerpts are quoted verbatim, with minor linguistic irregularities retained to preserve authenticity.

This special school – these young people

Gaining a clear understanding of the young people in research can be challenging, particularly when the term SEND is often used as a catch-all for a wide range of diverse needs. This complexity is further heightened when contextualising needs within individual schools, therefore this article looks to provide details which aid the readers' understanding of a specific context.

The school in this case study is nestled on a long, narrow link road, the school stands with cars parked closely together on one side and a high wall on the other. The building itself is a blend of old and new; the main reception is set behind a large wooden door reminiscent of an old townhouse. It is co-educational; however, most students are boys, mainly White-British, with a large percentage in receipt of pupil premium funding (additional grant funding designed to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students); serving as a reminder of the links between disability and individual financial security.

These young people could be self-described as:

I'm 'James' – good looking - ginger and a bit annoying sometimes ... Like so I annoy people really easily sometimes ... but not all the time. [I've] got a really funny, cool class, I have a good personality and make people laugh. (James, Student)

Described by adults as:

James is a child who didn't fit into a mould and ... has, you know, not experienced a good time when he was at school. He's then been out of school because there wasn't a place for him within mainstream education. And so actually although sometimes he doesn't present that way, his self-esteem and the value of himself is very low ... His 'go to' is maybe antagonising others because he doesn't know how that interaction happens between people, because he hasn't been exposed to it, so he hasn't got those foundations in learning ... (Senior Leader)

Comparative data

The above narrative descriptions are complemented by local and national data (see [Table 1](#) – School level characteristics) showing non-maintained special schools, state-funded special schools, and state-funded mainstream primary schools. Key trends include the tendency for English special schools to be smaller than mainstream primary schools, to include higher proportions of male students and those receiving pupil premium, and to serve less ethnically and linguistically diverse

cohorts. The special school in this case study aligns with those trends but displays even more pronounced differences – particularly in terms of gender, pupil premium eligibility, and English as an alternative language. Finally, while the prevalence of SEMH as a primary need across the sector ranges from 11.4% to 13.2%, all students at this special school have SEMH identified as their primary need.

My hope is that through this laminated approach to description readers will gain a greater insight into the actual young people we are talking about and therefore will read the results with a high degree of specificity.

Data and discussion

Main findings

The data and discussion are grounded in the idea of restorative work as a philosophy in action, i.e. a mindset rooted in values that, in turn, inform principles and processes. This allowed for the exploration of diverse practices and meaning to be inferred during thematic analysis, consequently resulting in the construction of five themes: Values and Safety, Meeting and Diagnosing Needs, Normalising Conflict, Maintenance Over Grand Restoration, and Inclusivity and Complex Identities.

In this special school young people were clearly signposted towards school values, which were congruent with a restorative philosophy. They understood the values and recognised that they aided the school's ability to meet their needs. Moreover, they were aware that conflict was a daily occurrence; therefore, developing tools to support conflict resolution and de-escalation were essential learning requirements. They conceptualised this within a rights-based approach to safety whereby harm violates these rights, and whereby normalising conflict helps develop tolerance both at an individual and community level.

Young people sought regulation through their interactions with adults, contingent touch and environmental stimulants. These experiences of a restorative philosophy in action were mostly congruent with their communities of care albeit with slightly differing emphasis. Moreover, for everyone in this study, restorative work had the potential to become routine, something that could be rehearsed and was seen as a learning opportunity.

These reflections, however, are mediated through systemic mechanisms such as the special school system and patriarchal diagnostic tools. This in effect creates a sub-culture that operates in parallel to punitive societal expectations while operating a systemic gatekeeper to restorative philosophies through diagnosis routed in the medical model of disability. Examples include the way in which girls (especially those with SEMH) are a significant minority within special schools, and the way in which cultural norms needed careful consideration to ensure restorative practices were not at odds with the lived experiences of young people. That said, staff in this school were clearly reflective on these issues of inclusivity, i.e. who was and was not represented, leading to a nuanced application of restorative philosophy in action while actively exploring future strategies for further inclusion. These findings are explored in full across the following five themes.

Values and safety

It's Wednesday and James and his friend 'Mark' are leading a school tour. I'd told them they could take me anywhere and talk about anything, while letting them know I was particularly interested in their school values.

Well, the values make this school feel quite a bit safer and happier than my old school . . . our school values are Happiness, high Expectations, Nurture, Consistency, Understanding, and Positivity. And that's what all the values stand for – they go together and make a word. (Mark, Student)

The acronym HENCUP was supported by playful imagery of hens in teacups across the school, making the values memorable and engaging. I'm asking about values because they are used in this setting to operationalise a restorative mindset, one which was co-developed with the staff team, and is actively known and understood by the young people. During the school tours, young people specifically connected these values to their own safety, development, and needs. These values were visible in assemblies, classrooms, and in communications with parents. A parent said,

I did know the acronym, but I can't remember it . . . what they do is such a contrast to what we're used to. They're very much into having conversations with the kids - not just rule-rule-rule, but actually trying to understand them. And then where things go a little bit wrong, which they do on a daily basis, they try to understand what went wrong and fix it, rather than blaming the children or blaming the families. (Parent 1)

This emphasis on understanding over blame was a recurring theme. Another parent described the values as including acts of kindness and accountability, such as 'doing something nice for somebody if you've hurt them,' and that they were 'all about looking after each other and being kind and accountable' (Parent 2).

When asked if the values extended beyond the classroom, 'Oliver' told me, 'Yeah, they definitely do . . . values keep us safe not only in the classroom but in all of the school, including the library' (Oliver, Student). This suggests that a restorative philosophy can manifest as a whole-school ethos (Hopkins 2002) and is intrinsically linked to safety; however, it draws questions on the reach of the philosophy, suggesting it may be confined to the special school, rather than extending beyond institutional boundaries into the wider societal ecosystem. Young people reinforced this idea by describing differing responses to conflict both within and beyond the school gates and by contrasting their current and previous educational experiences.

The idea of values creating a safe environment seemed to manifest as a developmental journey with students' conceptualisation of safety growing over time, becoming more nuanced and embedded in their daily experiences. Newer students described values in terms of basic physical safety rules, while those who had been at the school longer linked them to emotional safety, feelings charts and reward systems.

All young people consistently used the language of safety, e.g. 'She can't go on my bus anymore because she was acting too dangerous' (Oliver, Student). This focus on safety seemed to represent an anchoring principle, one which acts as the operationalised guideposts for restorative values, a concept which is recognised as pivotal to restorative justice (Anderson, Islam, and Li 2025). Moreover, Oliver's comment suggests that this special school as an institution was potentially acting as a bounded context that mediated belonging and inclusion, while incidents that happened on the bus or further afield represented an alternative, more punitive environment.

What I inferred from my conversations was that these young people feel that they have an unquestionable right to safety – that harm violates this right – and consequently when this happens, obligations are created for others. This was a shift from *positive and negative* behaviours – to *safe and unsafe* behaviours, a process which creates an obligation on others based on the individual's and community's rights.

These obligations were present in parental comments such as the need to 'fix it' (Parent 1). However, the parents' focus was generated from the need to repair harm – rather than the need to protect young people's rights. This move towards a rights-based approach offers additional nuance, especially in complex cases and when working with young people with SEND. Moreover, the concept of *safe and unsafe* allows for the cognitive scaffolding of a binary dichotomy, without causing additional stigma, and aids the externalisation of behaviours while offering essential feedback for positive interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, adopting a values-led and rights-based approach is congruent to the additional needs of these specific young people, where justice-sensitivity and rejection-sensitivity is highly prevalent in the data and within the literature on specific diagnostic elements of SEMH, e.g. within Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Bondu and Esser 2015; Ginapp et al. 2023). Therefore,

appropriately framing restorative philosophies, within a values-led and rights-based approach rather than through a focus on reparation, seems to have acted as an underpinning principle for successful implementation in this specialist setting.

Meeting and diagnosing needs

During the walking tours young people talked about their own needs and how values were ‘good for needs, and [that they] would be good if you have ADHD and Autism’ (James, Student). This was reinforced by the way in which young people were encouraged to be curious when engaging with each other and to explore their own SEND more deeply.

[This school] It’s good because you can meet people - It brings people together - yeah and you can learn about your needs if you’re not already learnt about them ... They’ve helped me even more and I’m less angry at my house and stuff like that. (James, Student)

This link between the school values and the young peoples’ SEND was shared by staff. Staff understood values as a byproduct of ‘understanding students’ needs more thoroughly’, whereby they ‘interpret[ed] students’ outward behaviours ... as communication’ (Head Teacher), a shift which avoided a defensive response; instead providing a values-led response designed to meet underlying needs.

Underlying needs were also linked to differentiation of the restorative process, which took place on a case-by-case basis – sometimes involving a lengthy and in-depth conversation, but on other occasions, staff may just be asking ‘Can I get you anything?’ or ‘Would you like to talk about it?’ (Support Staff). While staff were trained and advised how to approach situations, they always had autonomy within reason. This level of autonomy aligns with broader expectations for special schools, which are often situated outside mainstream normative frameworks that typically constrain autonomy (e.g. curriculum and accreditation expectations). This suggests that restorative interactions were shaped not only by individual practitioners but also by the broader context, which acted as a reinforcing mechanism for their individualised approaches.

The benefits of restorative work were not limited to young people, and the needs of parents in this setting were also being met as a byproduct of positive interactions with a restorative philosophy. Parents talked about feeling less responsible for the sole navigation of the journey that is SEND, and that there was a ‘knock on’ effect, whereby they were no longer waiting for a call to collect their child in the middle of the day and consequently were feeling more relaxed and for some were even able to return to work ‘because we’re not going to get that call’ (Parent 3). This suggests that the challenges of engaging with education for young people with disabilities were not only felt by the young people but that proximity to disability matters. Moreover, the harm created by a non-inclusive, punitive educational system can have an indirect effect, i.e. through having close interpersonal proximity to disability, others can experience secondary harm.

This extends our understanding of the way in which disability is experienced, suggesting disability can be experienced on a community level when interacting with systemic harm. This creates an added responsibility for restorative practices – not only to address individual issues but also to meet the needs of communities through engagement with inclusive educational systems. In this case study, restorative philosophies were clearly shaped by the specific context of a specialist setting, which offered an alternative to normative educational expectations. It was this interaction, rather than the restorative philosophy alone, that created a unique ecosystem. Therefore, we should not expect similar outcomes in other educational settings without considering the specific contexts and interactions involved.

The unique ecosystem in this case study was supported by staff who clearly felt that there was an ethical imperative to ensure young people with SEMH had access to a restorative philosophy in action, and that to meet their needs staff needed these strategies at their disposal; in the same way as other young people need wheelchairs, medication, assistive technology and accessible spaces.

However, this went even further, suggesting that restorative philosophies could become a diagnostic tool. Students told me that restorative interactions helped them learn about their needs and parents reinforced this by talking about how by reducing their child's anxiety and supporting their autistic needs, it became more obvious that there were other elements such as ADHD that were present but only became visible once elements of the young person's needs were being met.

Similarly, staff reflected on the way in which a restorative process allowed them to see undiagnosed trauma because previously 'it's been masked by the behaviours that they were showing, which was put down to their ASD and social, emotional, mental health needs, but actually there's huge early childhood trauma that's now coming out' (Senior Leader). These reflections suggest that the restorative goal of understanding can mean understanding conflict but can also be in understanding the complexities and differences of individuals – potentially leading to deeper insights into young peoples' SEND and intersectional identities. Moreover, greater understanding of individuals has the potential for their further involvement in creating a way forward.

This process of understanding driving provision is operationalised in this setting through individual support plans which are co-constructed with the young people. These plans give young people agency in the way in which they are supported, specifically around dysregulation, restrictive physical interventions, and what they feel are helpful de-escalation strategies. 'If you go to that PSP [Positive Support Plan] ... the pupil voices will tell you – I like to be hugged or touched and a lot of them will say I don't – And it's really important that we capture their opinion ... [so] people can uphold that' (Support Staff).

These plans were being constructed as part of, and follow-up from restorative conversations, where young people and staff were adding comments to their personalised documents, which acted as reflections on their time in conflict. These plans had a significant impact with supporting data showing that since their introduction there was a significant reduction in restrictive physical interventions that staff were increasing their understanding of young people and that a more personalised approach was being adopted. This is congruent with current research centring the voices of girls with ADHD, whereby they felt teachers' understanding of their needs had a cascading effect on positive strategies (and consequently on outcomes) whereas being misunderstood led to masking (Keys, Kieran, and Burns 2025). This reinforces the notion that the restorative concept of understanding has the potential to act as both a positive strategy and a diagnostic tool, provided it avoids unnecessary gender coding and recognises that gender exists beyond a binary dichotomy.

Normalising conflict

It's Tuesday morning and 'Liam' is showing me around the school. We pause near his classroom and pass the pastoral base, where he checks in with familiar staff. From upstairs, I hear shouting and banging, but Liam remains unfazed, so we continue. At the top of the stairs, a staff member gently redirects us: 'Maybe not here right now ... someone's having a tricky time' (Pastoral and Operations Lead). We turn back, and I ask Liam what that means. 'Um, they're frustrated, and we have to deal with it,' he replies. We head outside to continue our tour.

Later, back in the office, the Head Teacher asks if I was touring during 'all of that', referring to what they saw as a serious incident, where a reinforced glass window was broken, and a class had to be relocated to allow for a young person to receive additional support. Despite these challenges, Liam's calm demeanour and the staff member's composed response meant neither of us absorbed the surrounding tension. This holding of the calm during conflict seemed to be a critical ingredient within this school's restorative model, one which prioritises co-regulation as a community response to harm and a collective obligation to 'deal with it'.

Situations [like this], you'll always get them, but you also get points of learning from them ... You know ... it had an impact on the rest of the class because they had to leave the classroom ... But when they came back in the

classes' response was to tidy up - apart from one child who went 'I'm not tidying up her F-ing mess' and was trying to encourage the rest of the children - that was a learning point for that young person because we were able to speak to him and say, well, that's fine if you don't want to, but these guys are working as a team. But ... why do you feel like [that]? And actually, it wasn't the fact that he didn't want to tidy up. It was the fact that he was upset by her reaction, as it [disrupted] something that they're in the middle of doing. (Senior Leader)

These reflections reinforce the idea of harm creating an obligation, in this case, an obligation for a community response to somebody's 'tricky time'.

The reoccurring word for me while experiencing this school was tolerance. This was summed up by how conflict was characterised as normal and instead of demonising young people for what were inevitable behaviours, staff offered emotional containment while maintaining learning opportunities for everyone else. This idea of conflict existing within schools as a normal and healthy element of development is not only congruent with restorative principles but also with peace and just educational systems more broadly. This speaks to the work of Johan Galtung (1969) who posits that not only is conflict normal but that it is necessary when enabling justice. It is, however, direct and indirect violence that we should seek to remove from our schools – i.e. physical, structural and cultural oppression which negatively affects young people (Galtung 1990). In doing this, we have the potential to enact positive peace, whereby not only is there a lack of violence but there is a presence of social justice, where our actions address inequality and systems of injustice are rendered visible.

In practice in the above situation, these themes were seen through a proportionate response that held in mind the complexity of this young person's needs. In doing so, staff provided an alternative educational response that met these needs (offering containment and allowing for autonomy) avoiding secondary structural oppression through continued inclusion. Moreover, by providing the young person with what they needed following the incident, staff reinforced a community response, and the learning point that individuals with SEMH are valued within society.

These ideas were shared by parents who saw conflict as a gateway to tolerance, including where young people were more able to put themselves in other people's shoes and consider why they might be feeling a certain way. Staff were enabling this by not rushing through processes or trying to solve the problem too quickly, instead the restorative affordance to navigate conflict was utilised as a tool to develop emotional intelligence and reduce emotional reactivity.

While the normalisation of conflict within this context has led to positive outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that, in broader society, conflict is not typically normalised. Instead, it is often weaponised to incite fear and moral panic. As such, although the experiences of young people and their communities of care may align closely within this setting, they diverge from wider societal expectations. This highlights a limitation of restorative philosophies that operate within bounded contexts, i.e. they may effectively address the needs of young people in specific environments, yet fail to prepare them for future experiences in a society where conflict is undesirable and where their needs remain invisible to dominant social groups.

Maintenance rather than grand restoration

The overriding message from young people was that a restorative philosophy, enacted through school values was about safety – this meant developing strategies to help regulate their emotions and consequently their outward behaviours. Where young people did talk about conflict resolution it was short, simple and focussed on the goal of returning to the status of positive relationships. When asked about how they resolve conflict they said:

Um probably say sorry, what means like apologise, and then like have a hug or a high five ... Yeah and make them feel better and then you can be friends again. (Liam, Student)

Young people did, however, follow the restorative process, albeit with more of a focus on regulation and strategies that they could utilise to de-escalate their own behaviour. This relates to the above

theme of conflict being an expectation and therefore that learning to manage future conflict was more imperative than focusing on a specific incident. That said, during my time at the school I saw many young people talking about how they felt, what they were thinking, who had been affected and what they could do in the future.

... the teacher was using the restorative question framework - taking his time to go back and forth through the incident whilst praising the boy for being able to take part in the conversation. Often the boy lay on his tummy and looked away whilst answering the questions or raised his voice shouting about the other child. Throughout the process the teacher held the calm. He prioritised maintaining the relationship but was clear that working through the restorative conversation was important work. (Excerpt from field notes)

These interactions were often one-to-one, with staff carefully supporting the emotions of young people with contingent touch and creatively using the environment around them. This was the ongoing day-to-day maintenance of relationships, rather than grand resolution, whereby constantly engaging in these practices, violence was being avoided, and conflict was being navigated. Over time, these interactions had become a social infrastructure – vital to the community's ability to function. Though individually they might seem minor or inconsequential, their absence would lead to a breakdown in the community's operations.

This perspective aligns with Graham and Thrift (2007) who advocate for surfacing 'invisible work' within the social sciences, i.e. those continuous, often unnoticed processes of maintenance and repair that are essential to sustaining systems. While their examples include networked infrastructures of cities and the lifecycles of products; I suggest that in this context, the intentional creation of specific opportunities for relationship-maintenance and repair serves as the infrastructure that sustains this complex community itself.

Strategies included using a soft seating area in the classroom and an adjacent corridor, which was regularly used independently by young people. Initially seeing young people in corridors seemed to be opposed to the inclusive nature of the school, however it quickly became apparent that it was the young people who were using the space, they were making the decisions around how and when to use it, and they recognised that taking a break from the classroom was consequential for meeting their own needs as well as supporting the learning of others. What was most interesting was that in using this space they would realise that others also needed to use it and were seemingly able to prioritise, dynamically risk assess the way in which other young people were feeling and give up the space to others who were in greater need.

These ideas of the environment being used to support regulation were extended into the way in which the bodies of others could also offer regulation through contingent touch and where needed through restrictive physical intervention. All young people involved in the study showed me the spaces used for restrictive physical intervention – a separate room with padded walls and flooring. The young peoples' comments about these spaces were complex albeit with the common theme, that this space was helpful, it was a space they could use (or may be directed to use) and that it was safe.

It's a padded room so if you're angry you can like punch – kick ... it's a safe space because you can't hurt yourself in here. (Mark, Student)

Look take our shoes off if we are going in here because look [gesturing to his shoes leaving a slightly muddy mark] ... so then if you're angry you can just sit here or you can do some stuff. (Mark, Student)

You won't hurt yourself and ... (James, Student)

And I think we've told you everything we can now. (Mark, Student)³

The young people's relationship with the space felt more positive because it was rooted in a sense of safety and was supported by the autonomy they had in how it was used. They had respect for the space, but they also recognised that this was a space for heightened emotions.

[The] room . . . is mostly padded apart from the ceiling which looks like a tiger attacked it in the middle of a tornado. (Oliver, Student)

A tiger attacked it in the middle of a tornado? (Researcher)

No, I'm not saying that's what happened, it just looks like that, and it also looks like a bear came in and bumped into the ceiling and then ran away. (Oliver, Student)

Oh wow, I'll have to have a look. And does that room help people? (Researcher)

It helps, it helps a lot. (Oliver, Student)

Can you tell me about how it helps and what it does? (Researcher)

Well, you can hitting yourself into the walls as, like, many times as you like without hurting yourself as it's all padding. (Oliver, Student)

These comments reinforce the idea that this space allowed young people to physically express their emotions in ways that might not be possible, safe, or acceptable elsewhere. While restrictive physical interventions were occasionally used to maintain safety, what truly mattered was how they were carried out – the dignity afforded to the young people, the autonomy they retained throughout the process, and, most importantly, the pre-existing relationships they had with the staff involved.

These more positive reflections on restrictive physical interventions somewhat challenge the existing literature (Hodgkiss and Harding 2023) albeit with common ground on the need for safety and positive relationships. Critics may suggest that using a space like this is exclusion under another name, but that's not what these young people were saying. These were not spaces to complete worksheets, where young people were ignored, or where disconnection happens. On the contrary, the interactions I observed in these spaces were kind, filled with care, based around meeting the young person where they were at – seemingly supporting young peoples' needs and ensuring they have agency in the process.

Moreover, these interactions were grounded in the expectation that young people may use the full range of their senses not just their spoken word. This includes the choice of coloured lighting in the space (controlled by the young person) and the idea that emotional containment and physical containment are linked in a very basic way. This was modelled throughout the day and was not limited to restrictive physical interventions or times of conflict.

I'm watching children getting out of the taxi, including one child who was upset. This was the beginning of seeing what seemed to be a lot of positive, contingent touch where adults used their bodies to offer containment and regulate children. In this case a woman was standing in what was quite a cold day pulling the child into the side of her long Puffa type coat which was almost acting as a duvet for them both. This seemed to be a bit of a motif with adults using their body position to direct, comfort and regulate the emotions of young people. (Excerpt from field notes)

While it may seem that these interactions are unrelated to a restorative philosophy in action, we can reflect on the way in which Liam (student) had told me he might fix something with 'a hug or a high-five' and that these physical actions communicate meaning and enable peaceful relationships to be rebuilt. Therefore, it seems logical that physical actions can also promote peaceful relationships being made and maintained.

Inclusivity and complex identities

It's Thursday morning and I'm spending some time touring the school with two girls – 'Rebecca' and 'Mary'. I've been interested to know if their experiences are similar to the boys I have spoken to, or if the fact that they are in such a minority matters. Much of what they tell me is the same – reflecting on the way in which physical boundaries can keep them safe – they are able to articulate the school

values, use the language of safety and seemingly enjoy interacting with the tour – while telling jokes and singing songs.

I ask if this school is different or the same as their previous school to which they echo the voices of the boys telling me clearly that it's very different. The two main themes are that when they got angry in their old school's staff 'didn't do anything' (Mary, Student) suggesting that here in a restorative and specialist space staff were more able to engage with conflict and where needed provide physical boundaries. The second difference was about being included. 'It's different, very different . . . [pause] because we're allowed to go on trips here and we're not last time – not allowed' (Rebecca, Student).

The interactions I had with these girls in this school suggest they experienced a restorative philosophy in action in a similar way, but also that the girls in this setting represented increased complexity. These were thoughts that were shared by staff where they felt that to gain a place at the school if you were a girl with SEMH, you had to present with significant difficulties – suggesting therefore that the bar to entry to engaging with this restorative ecosystem was higher for girls than it was for boys.

I find girls really difficult for me personally. To be able to understand at times and to be able to work out ways to support them sometimes. And maybe because I've worked with less of them, I don't know. (Pastoral and Operations Lead)

In this school, girls did not make peace easily. The restorative approach to conflict resolution was broadly the same, but it had to be adapted to accommodate these differences, with a greater emphasis on risk management and emotional regulation. With more time spent supporting one-to-one in the risk assessment stage.

These girls also presented with an inconsistent response to contingent touch during restorative processes – seemingly craving it at times, whilst at others presenting as almost allergic. This is reinforced in the literature, where girls with ADHD are strongly linked to physical hypersensitivity (Kelly, Kelly, and Taylor 2024) an issue which can lead to overwhelming feelings that block the brains' ability to process emotions. While we could infer direct gender differences, this push-pull for physical connection can also be related to avoidant attachment styles (Bowlby 1982) potentially pointing to underlying trauma. However, rather than an either or – this creates a multilayered complexity as research suggests that early exposures to adverse social events may be linked to rejection-sensitivity in ADHD (Maiolatesi, Clark, and Pachankis 2022) therefore, taking an intersectional approach in this school when working with girls seems increasingly important.

These additional complexities were underlined by the lived realities of many of the girls who I met during my time at the school, many of whom presented with underlying trauma, complex SEMH needs, and disjointed family and social dynamics. Moreover, the intersectional characteristics discussed above omit key dimensions such as race, ethnicity, culture, sexuality, and religion – factors which carry significant implications. For instance, research on rejection sensitivity and sexual orientation found that individuals identifying as 'gay or lesbian, bisexual, or something else' reported higher levels of rejection sensitivity (Maiolatesi, Clark, and Pachankis 2022, 10). This reinforces group differences in personality dispositions – shaped by social mechanisms that disproportionately affect certain populations. These dynamics contribute to persistent mental health challenges, particularly among 'women, sexual minorities, and younger people' (16).

Identity, therefore, is clearly important and understanding intersectional difference in this school was essential to being able to meet the children and their families where they were at. Staff talked about where they had seen a restorative philosophy in action at school clash with young people's realities at home and how this had the potential to cause shame and confusion. They described a risk management process whereby they engaged with differing levels of accountability, and the way in which young people were not always ready to engage with a fully restorative process due to their intersectional cultural identities. In some cases, this related to normative cultural expectations of physical chastisement and the way in which some parents needed to compromise on expectations due to external pressures and demands. Staff understood, therefore, how restorative processes may,

in some cases, contrast with more punitive systems or differing expectations within young peoples' wider lived experience.

Despite the complexities intersectional identities brought to this setting, young people and staff told me that they were able to be themselves. Young people talked in a way which related to their SEND, whereas staff spoke about their own neurodivergence alongside gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, and the way in which the underlying concept of understanding within restorative philosophies were foundational to the way in which they felt about coming to work.

Authenticity and difference were the norm within this setting, and the application of a restorative philosophy in action was seemingly linked to this inclusion. However, successful application depended on staff understanding these differences and amending their practice to meet the young people's intersectional identities. Moreover, these amendments require an understanding of the way in which the school plays a part within young people's wider societal existence – including the need to work with individuals and their families rather than act in conflict with their realities.

Conclusion

This article provides new evidence on the way in which young people with SEMH experience restorative philosophies in action, instrumentalised through school values and practices within a special school context. It provides practitioners with an insight into successful implementation – demonstrating that restorative work needs to be flexible and responsive to individual needs. These amendments rely on refocusing on safety, considered through a rights-based approach while prioritising regulation through maintenance activities which involve multi-sensory interactions. These ideas reinforce the wider concept that restorative practice is not a thing that you do, but that it can be understood as a mindset and applied through a restorative approach, which is congruent with the setting and the needs of the young people involved in conflict.

The young people in this study revealed emergent properties of a restorative philosophy in action, i.e. increased self-awareness, emotional regulation, and community-level tolerance. However, these are not reducible to individual interventions, therefore understanding that restorative work is underpinned by an institutional culture of care, mediated by the bounded context helps us understand how this philosophy can shape these young peoples' experiences of inclusion, safety, and justice.

Moreover, proximity to disability matters, with parents and communities of care clearly articulating how punitive systems negatively affect their own lives, and the way in which restorative work can support the capabilities of those closely connected to young people with disabilities. That said, young people with SEMH do not exist solely within special schools. These young people go on to be young adults, therefore the application of the associated concepts discussed in this article should be considered across mainstream education, social care, adult services, the criminal justice system and within the workplace.

Although this article demonstrates good practice, it also presents questions relating to disability itself when considering intersectionality. Gender clearly matters; however, patriarchal diagnostic tools govern interactions with restorative philosophies. This is an issue within a system that relies on the medical model to access provision, i.e. a patriarchal medical system which foregrounds male characteristics and therefore prioritises their access and engagement to specialist provision and restorative philosophies. However, while restorative interactions have potential limitations, this philosophy also provides us with the key to mitigating some of these issues through a simple expectation, i.e. by listening to young peoples' stories. This seemingly simple process can profoundly shape our actions. Moreover, when combined with a critical awareness of underlying mechanisms

and the way in which difference is represented within school contexts, we have the potential to create the conditions for successful and sustained implementation.

Notes

1. Communities of care refers to social networks which provide mutual support, in this case staff, parents and carers.
2. While gender is understood as beyond a binary dichotomy, this is the way in which these young people identified themselves in this setting.
3. This quote is used in the title of the article to signpost the inclusion of young people and the autonomy afforded by the walking tour method, i.e. he is telling us that he has been able to contribute but is now signalling that he is ending the tour.

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