BEAUTY FROM ASHES

The Contribution of the Restorative Leader in a School Community

Sr Rosanne Azzopardi

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Student's Code __393885M___

Student's Name & Surname _Sr Rosanne Azzopardi___

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_Beauty from Ashes: The Contribution of The Restorative Leader in a School

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ABSTRACT

BEAUTY FROM ASHES
The Contribution of the Restorative Leader in a School Community

This study examines how Maltese Church Schools are dealing with conflicts and behaviour issues, exploring leaders' balance of empathy and discipline in managing challenging behaviour. Although punitive and retributive approaches are still being used in schools, this research investigates the presence and impact of restorative practices, whether recognized or unrecognized, within these schools. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with eight school leaders, the study reveals current disciplinary methods, the subtle incorporation of restorative practices, and what is required for a whole-school restorative approach.

The findings indicate that while leaders were unfamiliar with the term "Restorative Justice," their actions align closely with restorative principles and values which resonate with Catholic teachings already promoted in Church Schools. By highlighting the limitations of punitive methods and showcasing the transformative potential of restorative strategies, this research encourages educators to foster environments that prioritize healthy relationships and holistic growth. This approach allows students not only to discern right from wrong but also to engage with conflicts constructively, fostering resilience and empathy. Leaders and educators, particularly within Church Schools, are called to embody the restorative role of the "Biblical Potter," becoming essential catalysts in picking up the broken pieces of their students' stories and lead them to restoration. Schools that adopt restorative practices promise safer, more supportive environments, equipping students with essential social and emotional skills that support both academic and personal development.

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Keywords

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- ✓ RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
- ✓ RESTORATIVE LEADER
- ✓ RESTORATIVE APPROACHES & PRACTICES
- ✓ RESTORATIVE VALUES & PRINCIPLES

- ✓ WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH
- ✓ EMPATHY vs. DISCIPLINE
- ✓ CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
- ✓ MARIA TERESA SPINELLI

To my dear family,
my congregation,
and
all the restorative leaders
who dedicate themselves to
transforming school communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CoPE   Community of Professional Educators

HoS   Head of School

RA   Restorative Approaches

RJ   Restorative Justice

RP   Restorative Practices

SLT   Senior Leadership Team

LIST OF FIGURES/TABLES

xi

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Research Problem

In 2024, Malta maintains a reformative juridical system, which emphasises retribution and punishment for the perpetrator. Research indicates that individuals who are punished, especially through incarceration or humiliation, are likely to reoffend. (Braithwaite, 1989; Cullen et al., 2011; Gendreau et al., 1999) Victims often experience low satisfaction following criminal prosecutions, leaving them with unresolved questions and traumas. This parallels the experience in schools where inappropriate or untimely punishments lead to student recidivism. Despite their best intentions, educators often lack the necessary tools and resources, experimenting with various disciplinary methods to achieve desired outcomes. "Zero-tolerance policies not only turn school into an adjunct of the criminal justice system; they further rationalise misplaced legislative priorities. And that has profound social costs." (Giroux, 2006, p.184) Restorative Justice (RJ), founded by Howard Zehr is a transformative approach to criminal justice, shifting the focus from the idea of which laws were broken and what punishment is deserved to the identification of who has been hurt, their needs, and the obligations involved. It aims to restore the offender, the victim, and affected bystanders, necessitating a fundamental change in how wrongdoing is perceived and managed. RJ has been adopted by numerous schools globally with promising results, as it balances discipline and empathy effectively. (Fronius et al., 2016; González, 2012; Gregory et al., 2016)

Locally Restorative Justice is still in its embryonic stage. The Restorative Justice Act of 2012 is applied at the court's discretion, mainly in family courts and mediation centres, with limited impact "because it had to share the stage with parole and remission; which is a reformative justice system, not a restorative one." (Cassar, 2017, p.10, as cited in Refalo Cutajar, 2021). In 2015, SOS Malta initiated the ASAP (Against School Aggression Partnership) pilot project, addressing bullying and aggression in four local colleges (Pembroke School, Santa Lucia Secondary School, Cospicua Middle School, Naxxar Middle School), including RJ among its approaches. This yielded marginal positive effects, with ongoing implementation expected to reduce bullying and raise awareness. Schools abroad that adopted a restorative mindset reported significant results over

several years (5-6 years). Subsequently, SOS Malta embarked on the TREP project with partners from Bulgaria, Ireland, Germany, and Spain. This project highlighted the resistance among Maltese to shift from the current reformative juridical system to restorative methods (both in educational settings and otherwise). Cassar (2017) identified three reasons for this resistance: 1) victim-offender mediation is not offered as a whole community approach, 2) lack of trained professionals to implement restorative practices, and 3) cultural reluctance of victims to meet their offenders. The TREP project facilitated a gradual shift, leading to a part-time online accredited training course on Restorative Practices supported by MCAST, and delivered across the different countries taking part in the project. This course targeted law enforcement officials, psychologists, social workers and teachers, and was reviewed at the end of each unit through a short survey. In 2017, the anti-bullying services and the education sector benefited from this course, but it was then shelved and never offered again. In 2017, the anti-bullying team observed restorative practices in two Dublin schools in deprived areas, thus enhancing their ability to deliver CoPE sessions in Maltese schools. Currently, Maltese schools are in the initial stages of adopting RJ, with leaders and teachers familiarising themselves with its theory, philosophy, and principles. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted this momentum.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

Through this present study, the researcher aims to understand how schools are dealing with conflicts and behaviour issues, which methods are being adopted, and whether school leaders manage to strike a balance between empathy and discipline when dealing with challenging behaviour. The researcher is aware that punitive and retributive approaches are still being used in schools and is keen on studying whether restorative approaches are being used too - knowingly or unknowingly. Drawing from interviews with school leaders, this study investigates how disciplinary issues are currently managed, whether restorative practices are being incorporated in any form and what is needed for a school shift to a whole-school restorative approach.

Research Questions

In the light of these aims and objectives, three key research questions guide this study:

- How do local school leaders deal with students' conflicts and behaviour issues?

- Do they use restorative approaches?

- How can leaders move to a whole-school restorative approach?

The Theoretical Framework of the Study

The first chapter of this dissertation opens by defining restoration and presenting it from a religious and legal perspective. It then reviews the literature on Restorative Justice (RJ), providing its definitions and tracing its origins, values, principles, and core beliefs. The chapter continues by explaining how the Restorative Justice can be applied in educational settings, outlining specific restorative practices, restorative pedagogy and language. Section 1.3.3 discusses the benefits of a whole-school approach to RJ and the potential challenges that may arise during its implementation. Finally, section 1.4 details the essential qualities and the pivotal role of the restorative leader, and Maria Teresa Spinelli is proposed as an example of such leadership. This chapter lays the foundation for analysing current school practices in relation to the study's three research questions.

Chapter Two outlines the research methodology used to examine how school leaders address student conflicts and behaviour issues, whether restorative approaches are being utilized, and how schools can be transformed through restorative methods. Chapter Three synthesizes and analyses the data collected, while Chapter Four discusses the findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter One. The concluding chapter summarizes the key findings, acknowledges the strengths and limitations of the study, and offers recommendations for future research in the field.

Relevance and Benefits of the Study

Restorative practices have been widely recognized for their significant and diverse effects on the educational environment, including student behaviour, school climate, and disciplinary approaches. These practices encourage young people to positively change their behaviour, collaborate with others, assume leadership roles, and address inappropriate behaviour among peers. As Wachtel (2003) observes, "Thanks to restorative practices, troublesome young [people] change their behaviours, cooperate, take positive leadership roles, and confront each other about inappropriate behaviour" (p. 86).

Amid the many challenges faced by local schools, Restorative Justice (RJ) offers potential for meaningful improvements. Hopkins (2003) highlights how RJ can make schools safer and more positive, reduce exclusions, promote inclusion and belonging, improve morale and self-esteem, increase attendance, address bullying, and reduce staff turnover and burnout (p. 28). In Hopkins' (2016) view, restorative practices foster an atmosphere of respect, empathy, and accountability, strengthening relationships among students, teachers, and staff. These improved relationships not only reduce bullying and conflict but also enhance students' sense of belonging and community within the school. The collaborative nature of restorative practices encourages all members of the school to take responsibility for their actions, repair harm, and restore relationships. As Boulton and Mirsky (2006) note, "Besides reintroducing a sense of community, restorative practices have greatly reduced property damage" (p. 91).

DePaoli, Hernández, and Furger (2018) emphasize that restorative approaches help students develop essential life skills such as empathy, active listening, and conflict resolution. These skills are crucial for personal growth and contribute to a supportive, cooperative learning environment. Students who engage in restorative practices are more likely to demonstrate prosocial behaviours and higher emotional intelligence, which, in turn, support both their academic and personal success. When students feel respected and understood, they become more engaged in their learning. Morrison (2005) points out that restorative practices can improve attendance and classroom participation, as students are more motivated to attend school and engage in learning

when they feel valued and supported. This increased engagement is closely tied to better academic performance and a more positive attitude towards learning.

The next section, Chapter 1, reviews the literature on Restorative Justice, outlining specific restorative practices, restorative pedagogy and language.

Chapter 1

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LITERATURE REVIEW

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this project is to shed light on how conflicts and issues of misbehaviour, particularly in school settings can be dealt with restoratively to strike a balance between the use of empathy and discipline. The literature review discussed in this chapter sets the context for this study.   The first section discusses the concept of restoration from a religious perspective, giving the biblical context of it and presenting God as a restorative leader. This is followed by a description of punitive and retributive justice from a legal perspective, and how these practices are still noted in education settings and their effects. The next section presents different definitions of restorative justice, from where this originated, and its values, principles and core-beliefs. The concluding part of the literature review opens with knowledge about the Restorative Justice Framework and examples of restorative practices, how these can be useful in classrooms, and applied as a whole-school approach. A list of worldwide studies on restorative approaches in education, its barriers and critique are also outlined and discussed. Finally, the researcher highlights the pivotal role of the restorative school leader and draws an example of one presenting snippet from the life events of Maria Teresa Spinelli (founder of the Augustinian Sisters, Servants of Jesus and Mary, a congregation that the researcher forms part of).

1.1 Restoration

1.1.1 Defining Restoration

The Oxford English Dictionary defines restoration as "the act of restoring, renovating, or re-establishing something to close to its original condition." These processes of renewal, recovery, and returning to an original or improved state can occur within many broad contexts including biblical settings, historical preservation, environmental conservation, and personal wellbeing amongst others.

1.1.2 A Religious Perspective - Biblical Definition of Restoration

The concept of biblical restoration encompasses both the reestablishment of the existing order and the attainment of personal salvation. This restoration is rooted in the idea of a restored cosmic order, reflecting God's original creation, where righteousness, justice, and harmony prevail. God delights in restoring and improving on the original and is not content with just going back to the *status quo*. This theme, prevalent in the Old and New Testaments, reflects God's redemptive plan for humanity and creation. His intention is to repair and renew what sin and disobedience have damaged. Even when humanity fails its part of the covenant, God remains faithful, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and his commandments, to a thousand generations." (Deuteronomy 7:9)

1.1.2.1 God's Promises of Restoration

In the Old Testament, God established a covenant with Abraham, Moses, and David, which formed the foundation of His commitment to His chosen people. When Israel failed to abide by the covenant, God responded with judgement but always promised restoration upon repentance. Through several prophets, God promised both physical and spiritual restoration, foretelling renewal and blessing, especially during hardship, exile, and spiritual decline. He promised to rebuild David's fallen tent (Amos 9:11-15), restore the land (Isaiah 40:1-5, 61:7), give a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), restore health and all that was broken after years of captivity (Jeremiah 30:17, Isaiah 61:1-4), and renew the covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Psalm 85:10 expresses God's idea of shalom as a vision for holistic well-being, healing, and transformation. Job's story illustrates divine restoration: after losing everything and enduring suffering, Job's humility and faithfulness led to material restoration and deeper spiritual transformation, understanding God's sovereignty amid trials.

In the New Testament, restoration is fulfilled through Jesus Christ, who restores God's relationship with humanity through reconciliation and healing. The parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates forgiveness and reunification. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, the meek, and the merciful, teaching non-retaliation and

offering transformative alternatives to vengeance. Miraculous healings, such as the paralytic man's healing (Mark 2:1-12) and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), demonstrate God's power to restore health and promote self-examination over punishment. Jesus' ultimate act of restoration, His sacrificial death on the cross, offers forgiveness and redemption, restoring humanity's relationship with God. Jesus also promises future restoration in Matthew 19:28, and Paul's epistles highlight sanctification as an ongoing transformation into the image of Christ. In Revelation 21:5, God's restorative plan culminates in a new heaven and a new earth, where God dwells with His people, wiping away every tear and making all things new.

1.1.2.2 God the Restorative Leader

God, in His nature and actions, is committed to the restoration and redemption of His creation. Both in the Old and in the New Testament, God is often portrayed as a compassionate shepherd who leads, guides, and restores His people through an intimate and caring relationship. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." (Psalm 23:1-3) This compassionate nature is aligned with justice and righteousness and God's leadership involves judgement, correction and discipline when needed. "For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us." (Isaiah 33:22) God's restorative leadership is particularly evident in His interactions with individuals who experience brokenness due to sin, suffering or personal failures. As the Apostle Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) God persistently shares His gift of life with people, creating each in His image so that everyone can experience the very life of God Himself. He also restores one's vision (Proverbs 29:18), hope and confidence (Psalm 71:5), effectiveness and productivity (Genesis 28:3, John 15:5). Restorative justice (RJ) is at the heart of God's mission.

1.1.3 Punitive and Retributive Justice – A legal perspective

1.1.3.1 Defining Punitive and Retributive Justice

Criminal law, established by the state, prohibits actions harmful to society, such as those threatening life, wellbeing, liberty, or property. Crimes are voluntary infractions of these rules and acts of conscious defiance against state authority (Johnstone, 2008). Punitive and retributive justice are foundational concepts in criminal justice, shaping legal frameworks and societal responses to crime. Despite their interconnection, these concepts differ in their theoretical bases and applications.

Punitive justice focuses on delivering penalties proportionate to the offense, aiming to discourage future crimes by the offender and society (Kreitler, 2022). It operates on the principle that punishment restores moral order and public confidence in the legal system. Retributive justice, conversely, centres on the moral culpability of the offender, aiming to reclaim state power, discourage recidivism, and prevent offenders from benefiting from their crimes. In educational settings, retributive discipline assigns consequences for specific behaviours, often resulting in exclusionary measures that isolate students from their communities (Karp & Breslin, 2001; McNeill et al., 2016; Ryan & Ruddy, 2015 in Gross, 2021). McNeill et al. (2016) analysed over 9,000 articles on school suspensions, expulsions, and exclusionary discipline, finding no evidence that these measures prevent future misbehaviour (Gross, 2021).

1.1.3.2 Current Punitive and Retributive Practices in Education

Punitive and retributive practices within educational settings are employed to manage student misbehaviour and maintain order. This is often done through zero-tolerance policies mandating standardized penalties like suspensions (Buckmaster, 2016; Gross, 2021; Kreitler, 2022). These policies, originally for serious offenses, now address minor infractions, prompting alternatives like Positive Behaviour Intervention Support (PBIS) and restorative practices to foster engagement and reduce suspensions (Lustick, 2017).

Students are at times excluded via in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or expulsion (Gross, 2021). In-school suspension removes students from general education

with models ranging from punitive to therapeutic (Morris & Howard, 2003). Out-of-school suspension and expulsion, which permanently removes students, negatively impact future academic performance (Gage et al., 2018). The OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA) categorizes expulsion into three types: Expulsion Under Zero Tolerance Policies, Expulsion with Educational Services, and Expulsion Without Educational Services (Gross, 2021).

Morris & Perry (2016) highlight the failures of exclusionary punishment, noting a 20% achievement gap between Black and Latin students and their white peers. A single suspension increases dropout likelihood by 50%, leading to juvenile justice involvement and perpetuating exclusion (Christle et al., 2005; Peguero & Bracy, 2015). These practices harm students' well-being and sense of belonging, disrupting relationships and making them feel unworthy (Gregory et al., 2010; Starzecki, 2022; Tillery et al., 2013).

Exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects students of colour and those with disabilities, exacerbating achievement gaps and resulting in lost instructional time (Green et al., 2018; Perry & Morris, 2014). Schools are encouraged to minimize out-of-class time to mitigate these effects (Starzecki, 2022). Different states define suspension and expulsion variously, but both practices lead to missed instruction and a deteriorated school climate (Cholewa et al., 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). Excessive use of exclusionary discipline correlates with declining academic achievement, increased dropout rates, and long-term negative outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010; Marchbanks et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2015).

1.2 Restorative Justice

> "**Injustice causes harm – to the person who experiences the injustice, to the community and to the person who commits the injustice. Justice, as a state of healthy balance, requires healing of all those parties.** Healing needs are guided by the values of respect, maintaining individual human dignity, nondomination. When all parties feel equal, respected, valued in their individual uniqueness, able to exercise constructive control in their lives and able to take responsibility for their actions, then justice is achieved." (Pranis, p.66 in Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007).

Throughout the years, a new way of dealing with harm has been put to light. RJ offers a mechanism for healing and reconciliation while addressing open wounds and fostering

peace. The process itself acknowledges that when injustice is inflicted all three parties are harmed (the victim, the perpetrator and the community) and there is a need for restoration. The concept of RJ promotes a shift in thought as justice is not seen "as getting even", but "as getting well", suggesting that true justice is a process of healing that recognises and protects human dignity. This principle challenges the prevailing "throwaway" culture highlighted by Pope Francis, which is evident in the dehumanizing aspects of incarceration, characterized by isolation and exclusion. Catholic ethics, rooted in Christ, calls for a transformation in how society treats incarcerated individuals. One recognizes a shift of emphasis from isolation to drawing closer, recognizing their inherent dignity and capacity for growth and redemption (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997). Every human being, regardless of their sins, remains within the reach of God's mercy, advocating for a shift from punitive to restorative measures.

The Catholic perspective on criminal justice, therefore, balances justice and mercy, punishment and forgiveness, free will, and the consequences of poor choices (USCCB, 2000). RJ critiques the societal preference for retribution over rehabilitation, highlighting the need to see offenders as human beings deserving of restoration. According to Sullivan and Tifft (2008), RJ addresses various forms of harm through empathy, compassion, and voluntary engagement in the healing process. Community involvement in RJ not only facilitates conflict resolution but also empowers communities to define and respond to harmful acts. This comprehensive approach highlights the shared responsibility to support victims and address the structural inequalities that contribute to harm. Justice, in this view, is not about vengeance but about societal protection and offender rehabilitation. Root causes and personal choices contributing to crime must be addressed, promoting models of RJ that focus on harm done to victims and communities rather than mere legal violations. RJ promotes accountability, reparation, and the rebuilding of lives for offenders, aligning with Catholic values of responsibility, forgiveness, and healing (USCCB, 2000).

1.2.1 Defining Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) is broadly understood as a set of practices and beliefs designed to address wrongdoing by helping individuals take responsibility and repair harm while nurturing social relationships within their community (Fronius et al., 2016; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Winn, 2018). In the criminal justice system, RJ is a movement that emphasizes justice as a personal process, involving essential elements such as restitution, community service, victim-offender mediation, conferences, and circles (Van Ness, 2004). This approach contrasts with traditional punitive discipline systems by focusing on restoration rather than punishment, aiming to encourage behaviour modification, healing, and reconciliation for both offenders and victims (Gross, 2021; Karimullah, 2023).

The ethos of RJ honours individuals as complex beings with diverse needs and desires, viewing wrongdoing as an opportunity to build and repair relationships rather than as grounds for exclusion (Bruhn, 2020). Morrison and Vaandering (2012) assert that "human beings are relational and justice is understood broadly as honouring the inherent worth of all and is enacted through relationships" (in Gross, 2021). This relational focus is central to the process of RJ, which seeks to keep individuals connected to their community, emphasizing the importance of belonging regardless of their actions (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

RJ is also described as a philosophy guiding all interactions, rather than a strict model (Wachtel, 2003). Its ambitions extend beyond the realm of criminal behaviour, aiming to transform how contemporary societies address wrongdoing, deviant behaviour, conflict, and performance issues across various institutional settings (Johnstone, 2008). The Social Discipline Window, a framework that emerged from RJ principles, posits that strong relationships reduce inappropriate behaviour more effectively than punitive measures (Vaandering, 2015). RJ aims to transform perspectives by shifting the focus from purely legalistic views to recognizing the individuals involved in conflicts. Van Ness et al. (2022) highlight how "RJ recognizes the persons involved – not just the laws involved," comparing this shift to viewing the world through a new lens, thus allowing for new questions and insights, ultimately challenging the status quo (p. 175). They

argue that a key feature of RJ should be transformation, encompassing the transformation of perspective, structures, and individuals. Firstly, RJ transforms perspectives by teaching participants conflict resolution skills and providing opportunities for practical application, challenging traditional thought patterns and cultural norms. Secondly, it transforms structures by challenging and potentially changing political, economic, and social institutions, including the criminal justice system, suggesting a parallel restorative system. Lastly, RJ transforms individuals by focusing on healing, reconciliation, negotiation, vindication, and personal transformation, which Van Ness et al. describe as the "passionate side of justice" (2022). They further emphasize the fact that "a hallmark of RJ must be ongoing transformation: transformation of perspective, transformation of structures, transformation of people," beginning with self-transformation. This process involves seeking reconciliation, asking for forgiveness, and pursuing healing, reflecting on one's daily actions and attitudes towards others. RJ is thus viewed as an invitation for renewal at both the community and individual levels, with the transformation of the world starting with the transformation of oneself (Van Ness et al. 2022).

Contrasting with retributive justice, RJ focuses on healing and rehabilitation rather than punishment. This approach emphasizes the transformation of offenders through community support and engagement, promoting holistic well-being and successful reintegration into society (Derby, 2021). Organizations like Prison Fellowship International advocate for a restorative approach, focusing on the rehabilitation of prisoners through inner transformation and making amends with victims (Derby, 2021). This model encourages community involvement, particularly from religious organizations, to support reintegration and foster a holistic sense of well-being within communities.

The fundamental hypothesis of RJ is that people are happier, more cooperative, and more productive when authority figures work with them rather than imposing actions upon them (Vaandering, 2015). This approach, rooted in community-oriented conflict resolution practices from indigenous communities, emphasizes that wrongdoers remain valued members of the community, and that harm should be repaired through inclusive, non-exclusionary methods. Restorative circles, a common practice within this

framework, facilitate healing by allowing all parties involved in a conflict to share their experiences and work towards mutual understanding and resolution (Lustick, 2022). This process engages emotional and spiritual dimensions, helping participants transcend their initial perceptions and foster new, positive relationships (Pranis, 2007, as cited in Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007).

1.2.2   The Origins of Restorative Justice

"Restorative Justice does not ask what laws have been broken, but who has been hurt." (Dr Howard Zehr) Its roots are found in several historical, cultural, and philosophical traditions that have shaped it into a unique area of expertise. Its origins can be traced to indigenous practices in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, where communities, such as the Māori of New Zealand and Native American tribes, have long engaged in circle gatherings for communal decision-making. These practices, which involve dialogue and consensus-building, aim to address harm and determine appropriate reparations (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Payne & Welch, 2018).

RJ is also influenced by religious traditions, particularly Judeo-Christian beliefs that emphasise relationship rebuilding, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The Jewish concept of "shalom," signifying wholeness and peace, aligns closely with RJ principles, as do Christian teachings on repentance and reconciliation. Additionally, the ancient principle of lex talionis, or "an eye for an eye," has influenced RJ by emphasising restitution, requiring offenders to compensate their victims, thus focusing on repairing harm rather than punishment (Jennings et al., as cited in, Ventura Miller, 2008).

The modern RJ movement emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to dissatisfaction with the retributive justice system. Key figures like Howard Zehr, considered the "grandfather" of RJ, played a crucial role in defining its principles. Zehr's seminal work, "Changing Lenses" (1990), provided a comprehensive framework for RJ. A notable development occurred in 1989 with New Zealand's Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act, integrating Maori circle practices into the juvenile court system (Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Earlier, in 1974, Canada documented a case where youth offenders made restitution instead of facing punitive measures (Vaandering, 2009). RJ

began to be incorporated into the U.S. criminal justice system around forty years ago and has increasingly been adopted in schools since the mid-2000s (Gross, 2021).

1.2.3 Values of Restorative Justice

The values underpinning RJ foster environments of healing, respect, and accountability. Key values include openness, self-determination, collaboration, flexibility, equality, non-discrimination, non-violence, fairness, respect, empowerment, trust, honesty, voluntarism, healing, personal accountability, inclusiveness, empathy, and accountability (Barton, 2003; Wallis, 2014). These values contribute to a 'restorative mindset' (Hopkins, 2011), emphasizing diverse perspectives, needs, feelings, and the impacts of actions. Kay Pranis (2007) discusses the challenges of distinguishing values from principles and underscores their importance in RJ. Empathy, for instance, is central, acting as the "emotional glue" (Pepinsky, 2008). RJ asserts that all humans have dignity and value, prioritizing relationships over power. These values—respect, inclusion, empathy, personal accountability, fairness, and mutual care—are essential for supportive and equitable environments, guiding RJ practices and philosophy.

1.2.4 Principles of Restorative Justice

The principles of RJ reflect a deep appreciation for the worth and well-being of all individuals involved. Hopkins (2015) identifies several guiding principles, including recognizing unique perspectives, valuing expressions of thoughts and needs, focusing on event impacts, believing those affected are best placed to resolve issues, and trusting in reflective decision-making. The Restorative Justice Council (2016) outlines six core principles: restoration, voluntarism, neutrality, safety, accessibility, and respect. These principles ensure RJ practices are fair, inclusive, and effective. Barton (2003) highlights the importance of equity and non-discrimination, creating an environment where all voices are valued. Personal accountability and empowerment encourage individuals to take responsibility and actively engage in the process. Pranis (2007) emphasizes honesty

for meaningful resolutions, while the Restorative Justice Council (2016) stresses the need for safe spaces, both physically and emotionally.

1.2.5 Core beliefs of Restorative Justice

RJ is grounded in core beliefs that shape its approach to conflict resolution and harm repair. Evans and Vaandering (2016) note RJ in education centres on nurturing healthy relationships, supporting harm repair, and fostering justice and equity. Fundamental beliefs include honouring individuals as human beings and striving to right wrongs (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Zehr, 2015). RJ shifts the focus from punitive measures to building positive relationships and addressing underlying issues (Payne & Welch, 2018; Reimer, 2011). Hopkins (2011) emphasizes giving each person the opportunity to be heard, reflecting the belief in the value of each individual's experiences. RJ also prioritizes relationships over power, aligning with feminist perspectives on dignity and value. Prison Fellowship International outlines three core elements: Encounter, Repair, and Transform. Encounters facilitate dialogue, repair addresses harm, and transformation creates positive change (Derby, 2021). These beliefs highlight RJ's transformative potential in addressing harm and building stronger, more equitable communities.

1.3 Restorative Justice in Educational Settings

In "New Directions in Education," Miller (1991) argues for holistic education, supporting children's intellectual, emotional, physical, social, creative, aesthetic, and spiritual development (Hare, 2010). King (2009) describes the education of the human spirit as fostering peace, joy, hope, love, sensitivity, creativity, and a sense of community and belonging. Since the 1990s, many schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies, assuming that removing disruptive students would solve disciplinary issues (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). These policies have increased suspensions and expulsions without significantly improving safety. Research shows that schools with zero-tolerance policies are often less safe, and students feel safer in schools with positive disciplinary measures

(Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Hopkins notes the need for consistent methods to address behavioural issues, leading to the adoption of a restorative milieu, also known as the "whole-school restorative approach" (2015).

1.3.1   The Restorative Justice Framework in Schools

RJ is a framework designed to address wrongdoing by fostering accountability, repairing harm, and strengthening social relationships in educational settings. It keeps students connected to peers and adults, nurturing a sense of belonging regardless of misdeeds (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). This approach views wrongdoing as opportunities to build and repair relationships (Bruhn, 2020). RJ operates on the principle that effective social control can be achieved through a balanced approach of high control and high support (Wachtel, 2003). This philosophy asserts that stronger relationships reduce inappropriate behaviour (Vaandering, 2015). By promoting accountability and fostering positive relationships, RJ offers a humane alternative to punitive measures, aiming to create supportive school communities (Gross, 2021; Van Ness & Strong, 1997). RJ helps students feel heard and cared for, contributing to a positive school climate. These benefits highlight RJ's potential to mitigate the negative impacts of zero-tolerance policies, linked to low achievement and higher dropout rates, especially among marginalised groups (Rosenbaum, 2018).

1.3.2   Restorative Practices in a School Setting

1.3.2.1   Restorative Practice Programmes and Strategies

Many educators prefer the term "restorative practices" due to the controversial connotations of "justice" (Gross, 2021). Restorative Practices (RP) as outlined by Gross (2021) encompass various strategies such as affective statements, restorative questions, impromptu conferences, and proactive and responsive circles (restorative circles), all aimed at cultivating a restorative community within educational settings. These practices are designed to bring together the perpetrator and the victim, and foster awareness among offenders about the impact of their actions on others, avoid scolding

to prevent defensive reactions, and actively involve offenders in the restorative process to promote accountability (Wachtel, 2003). Furthermore, RP involve accepting ambiguity, separating the deed from the doer, and viewing wrongdoing as an opportunity for learning. Restorative practices (RP) encompass strategies aimed at conflict resolution and community building in a strive to promote resilience, equal participation, and cultural flexibility (Lustick, 2022). RJ's philosophy underscores the importance of treating individuals with dignity and respect, acknowledging emotional and spiritual dimensions (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Pranis, 2002).

A school adopting RPs enrols on an RP programme which operates during regular school hours and is overseen by a full-time RJ Coordinator. When conflicts arise – between students, educators or the two, a three-phase process unfolds: pre-conference, joint meeting, and follow-up (Jennings et al., 2008 as cited in Ventura Miller, 2008, p. 178). This structured sequence involves preliminary individual meetings to introduce the RP process and gauge participants' willingness to engage in it. This is followed by a facilitated discussion to address and resolve the conflict. RP is rooted in relational and non-punitive values, supporting both conflict resolution and community building through regular activities such as community circles and restorative conferences (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; O'Connell, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 1999). These practices not only resolve conflicts but also equip students with skills in empathy, accountability, and self-regulation. The approach is informed by Vygotsky's social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of modelled behaviours and social interactions in learning (Kurt, 2020). Consequently, RP fosters an environment where students internalize socially responsible behaviours, reinforcing a collaborative and respectful school culture (Macready, 2009). Research suggests that RP strengthens school communities by reducing reliance on exclusionary discipline, promoting social responsibility, and addressing disparities in disciplinary outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory & Evans, 2020, as cited in Gregory et al., 2021, p. 147). Moreover, RP draws from diverse fields such as education, counseling, and criminal justice, blending research and practice to promote peace, restitution, and proactive problem-solving within the school environment (Costello et al., 2009). Originating from RJ models, RP has evolved to emphasize preventative skill-building in schools, helping students develop constructive,

lifelong social skills (Smith et al., 2015). RPs are woven into the fabric of school interactions, offering daily opportunities to practice and reinforce social responsibility, empathy, and accountability, thus contributing to a respectful, cohesive school community (Augustine et al., 2018; Zehr, 2015).

1.3.2.2 Relational and Restorative Pedagogy

In the context of schools, restorative relationships are essential for creating a positive school climate and fostering a sense of belonging among students and staff. Gregory et al. (2016) state that "teachers who effectively implement restorative practices have more positive relationships with their students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds" (p. 147). This improved relationship is attributed to the consistent use of restorative language, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving techniques that prioritize understanding and respect. Initially, RP aimed to reduce individual discipline and behaviour issues within educational settings (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). However, it has become clear that achieving this goal requires an overall positive school culture as the foundation for these practices. Smith et al. (2015) emphasize that "creating a positive school climate necessitates a focus on both the physical and psychological safety of all students" (p. 14). The relationships fostered through RPs help support this psychological safety by building trust and reducing fear and anxiety among students. The relationships among staff, students, and families, created through RPs, can significantly support the psychological safety of students (Gregory et al., 2016). According to Starzecki (2022), while RPs were initially implemented to reduce individual discipline and behaviour issues, it has become evident that a positive school culture is crucial for the success of these practices, emphasizing the importance of relationships and community building within the school environment (p. 14).

RPs promote strong interpersonal relationships and hold students accountable for their actions (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). Teachers who effectively implement RPs have more positive relationships with their students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. Students perceive teachers as more respectful when they issue fewer discipline referrals compared to teachers who do not implement RPs (Gregory et al., 2016). These practices create a supportive school climate and become a

"way of life" among all staff in a school setting (Starzecki, 2022, p. 14). Creating a positive school climate necessitates focusing on both the physical and psychological safety of all students (Smith et al., 2015). Core components and processes for RP in schools include concepts of dignity and mutual respect, often viewed as a continuum ranging from informal to formal responses while working with students (Costello et al., 2009; Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

1.3.2.3 The Restorative Classroom and use of Restorative Language

Educators can make use of numerous ways to implement RPs in the classroom. They can incorporate daily morning meetings to build relationships with students, understand their social and emotional mindsets, and set the tone for the instructional day. Another method involves goal setting, where students take ownership of areas they wish to improve, whether academically or socially. They set realistic, actionable steps toward their goals, and teachers provide individual goal conferences to monitor progress, helping students learn to self-check and refocus. When unacceptable behaviour occurs, allowing the offended student to share their feelings helps the offender understand the impact of their actions, fostering empathy and perspective-taking. In *The Restorative Classroom – Using Restorative Approaches to Foster Effective Learning* (2023), Hopkins outlines five key themes for creating restorative classroom environments. Everyone in the class must feel unique and equally valued, both as individuals and when sharing ideas and perspectives. Educators can pose various thinking questions throughout the day to help students realise that their thoughts influence their emotions, which in turn influence their actions. A restorative classroom fosters empathy for individuals harmed by conflicts and disagreements. It is crucial to identify, understand, and address students' needs, as unmet needs might result in harmful behaviour. Lastly, students need to feel empowered during restorative activities, fostering a sense of trust in their abilities to understand and repair harm.

RPs emphasise a collaborative classroom approach, engaging individuals by doing things *with* them rather than *to* them or *for* them, balancing high support with high control to hold individuals accountable while providing understanding and assistance (Mirsky, 2007, p. 5).

Restorative language emphasises building and maintaining positive relationships, fostering mutual respect, and addressing conflicts constructively (Vaandering, 2010). In educational settings especially classrooms, it creates an environment conducive to open dialogue, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. Restorative language focuses on expressing feelings and needs without assigning blame, encouraging individuals to articulate their emotions and the impact of behaviours on them. As Wachtel (2016) explains, it "invites individuals to express their feelings and needs, promoting a deeper understanding and connection" (p. 45). This communication style helps de-escalate conflicts and fosters shared responsibility and cooperation.

Restorative language employs techniques like affective statements and restorative questions to guide interactions. Affective statements convey the speaker's feelings in response to another's behaviour, promoting self-awareness and empathy. For instance, an educator might express concern about disrupted learning rather than accusing a student of being disruptive (Hopkins, 2016). This reduces defensiveness and encourages reflection on actions and their impact. Restorative questions prompt reflection and dialogue, asking, "What happened?", "Who has been affected?", and "What can we do to make things right?" (Morrison, 2005). These questions facilitate structured conversations, allowing all involved to share perspectives, understand consequences, and collaboratively develop solutions to repair harm and restore relationships.

Adopting restorative language in schools can enhance the school climate by promoting a culture of respect and accountability. Research indicates that schools implementing restorative practices, including restorative language, see reductions in disciplinary issues and improvements in student-teacher relationships (McCluskey et al., 2008). This approach aligns with RJ's broader goals to "repair harm, restore relationships, and reintegrate individuals into the community" (Zehr, 2002, p. 38).

1.3.3 A Whole-School Approach

In exploring the core beliefs underpinning RJ, it becomes clear that certain principles must be included into the organisational culture to implement a restorative paradigm. RJ can be implemented in various ways within schools, ranging from training a few

individuals in restorative facilitation to integrating RJ principles into policies and teaching methods. Schools that embed RJ deeply within their culture see it reflected in everyday interactions and teaching methods, fostering an empathetic understanding of students' unmet needs rather than focusing solely on disciplinary actions. The proactive and reactive frameworks of RJ are critical for building strong, supportive school communities. As Bruhn (2020) demonstrates, a robust proactive framework, characterized by routines and rituals that develop relationships among teachers and students, is essential for the effective application of restorative practices in response to conflict. School leaders play a pivotal role in embedding these practices and creating an environment where punitive discipline policies are replaced by strategies that foster a sense of belonging and care among students.

The integration of RJ within a Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) framework illustrates its adaptability and comprehensive nature. MTSS integrates various levels of support to address students' academic and behavioural needs systematically. At the primary level, universal community-building practices are essential to establish a strong sense of community. Secondary and tertiary levels involve more targeted restorative interventions, such as problem-solving circles and formal restorative conferences, to address more serious issues and reintegrate students after significant incidents (Gregory et al., 2021).

Figure 1

12 indicators of restorative practice (RP) implementation.

RP Tier 3: Intensive Support
Indicator 12. Repairing "More Serious"
Harm and Restorative Conferences

RP Tier 2: Targeted Support
Indicator 11. Repairing "Less Serious" Harm and Restoring
Community in Classrooms

RP Tier 1: Universal Support/Prevention
Indicator 9. Explicit and Differentiated SEL Skill-Building
Indicator 10. Community-Building and Skill-Building Circles

RP Infrastructure
Indicator 1. Administrative Support for RP
Indicator 2. Schoolwide Buy-in and Distributed Leadership
Indicator 3. Discipline Policy Reform
Indicator 4. Data-Based Decision-Making to Guide Change

RP Capacity-Building in Staff, Students, and Families
Indicator 5. Addressing Equity and Social Justice
Indicator 6. RP Professional Development
Indicator 7. RP Student Leadership and Student Voice
Indicator 8. RP Family/Community Involvement

Note. From *Twelve indicators of restorative practices implementation: A framework for educational leaders* (p.152), by Gregory, A., Ward-Seidel, A. R., & Carter, K. V., 2021, in *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 31*(2), doi:10.1080/10474412.2020.1824788

The research by Gregory et al. (2021) highlights the importance of a comprehensive framework for implementing RJ. Their study identifies 12 implementation indicators grouped into three categories: RP infrastructure, RP capacity building, and RP tiers of support (see Figure 1). These indicators provide a structured approach for school leaders to develop systematic, multi-year rollout plans for school-wide RJ initiatives. The

framework emphasizes the importance of philosophical alignment, collective investment, and equity-focused initiatives in successfully embedding RJ within school systems.

Implementing RJ effectively requires a nuanced understanding of the roles and training needs of school staff. Meyer and Evans (2012) propose a tiered model of behavioural intervention, similar to the MTSS framework, that addresses students' learning and behavioural needs at different levels of intensity. This model emphasizes the importance of universal programmes to foster a positive school climate and more personalized interventions for students who need additional support. It advocates involvement and consultation with every member of the school community from the outset and allows for ongoing representation throughout the life of the project. In its conception it allows for flexibility and ownership by the school itself. Because each school has its own needs and personnel, "no two schools are likely to interpret the model in the same way" (Hopkins, 2003, p. 171), but the model provides a structure on which to base the shift to a restorative school. Schools have found these models useful in developing a restorative approach that is both flexible and structured.

Figure 2

A five-stage model for school change along restorative lines.

Stage 1	Owning and developing the vision: Awareness-raising sessions and a chance for everyone in the school to ask questions and make suggestions. Some baseline evaluation of school climate might be worthwhile at this stage so change can be measured.
Stage 2	Establishing and developing a steering group, involving representatives from across the school community. This group is responsible for the development, the monitoring and the oversight of the project. They will need basic training in restorative approaches at the outset so the project is managed restoratively.
Stage 3	Identifying and establishing the training team from within the school, also using representation from across the school community. This team will need basic training in the skills and then training for trainers.
Stage 4	Developing and supporting the training team as the training begins across the school, with lunchtime teams, class groups, curriculum and year teams, governors, parents (or whoever the steering group has identified as a target group).
Stage 5	Policy and organisational review to ensure restorative practice and ethos is integrated into every aspect of the school day.

Note. From *Just Schools: A whole school approach to restorative justice* (p.171) by B. Hopkins, 2003, Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Overall, the core beliefs of RJ guide the implementation of restorative practices in various contexts, from organizational leadership to school settings. The commitment to these principles fosters environments where individuals feel valued, heard, and supported, ultimately leading to more effective conflict resolution and community building. The transformative potential of RJ lies in its ability to shift focus from punitive measures to practices that repair harm, restore relationships, and promote a sense of belonging and responsibility among all participants (Derby, 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2015).

1.3.4 Worldwide Studies on Restorative Approaches in Education

Over the last twenty years, RJ has evolved beyond its original roots, now promoting healthy relationships and effective communication. It can take both a proactive and active stance, requiring a consistent approach. Global studies from the early to mid-2000s in the UK, New Zealand, Australia, the USA, and Canada highlight RJ's effectiveness (Blood, 2005; Hopkins, 2003; Morrison, 2005). Yasmin Devi-McGleish's research on restorative approaches (RA) in schools reveals significant benefits in healing post-conflict relationships but also identifies challenges, especially the tension between RA and teacher authority. Schools with strong relational foundations integrate RA more effectively, indicating that positive school climates are crucial (2016).

K. Butterfield highlights the role of RPs in fostering healthy relationships and positive school climates through conferences, circles, and mediation, stressing the need to address systemic issues and engage the whole school community (Butterfield, 2020). Kathy Bickmore advocates integrating proactive conflict dialogue into classroom pedagogy to address injustices and foster democratic engagement (Bickmore, 2011). DePaoli, Hernández, and Furger (2018) emphasise restorative approaches in supporting students' social and emotional development, calling for systemic change to reduce exclusionary disciplinary measures and enhance educational equity.

James MacAllister critiques the philosophical foundations of RA, recognising its potential to transform school culture but urging a deeper examination of underlying assumptions to align with broader educational goals and ethical standards (Macallister, 2015). Drewery (2013) and McCluskey (2014) discuss the positive outcomes of RA on school climate and student behaviour, highlighting the importance of whole-school approaches, ongoing professional development, and community engagement for long-term success. E. Archibold (201) stresses embedding restorative practices into school policies and interactions to build positive climates, promoting respect, inclusivity, and collaboration.

Collectively, these studies highlight RA's transformative potential in education, emphasising the need for systemic, culturally sensitive, and well-supported

implementation strategies to achieve positive, inclusive, and equitable school environments. The United Nations' endorsement of RJ in 2006 underscores its significance in not only addressing crime and anti-social behaviour but also in promoting healthy relationships and effective communication within communities, catalysing the global adoption of RJ practices in educational settings.

1.3.5   Barriers and Critique to Restorative Practices in Schools

The effectiveness and sustainability of restorative practices (RP) in schools face significant barriers, including staff resistance, insufficient training, and inconsistent implementation. Resistance often arises from a lack of understanding or belief in restorative approaches among educators and administrators accustomed to traditional disciplinary methods (Roney & Daftary, 2020). This challenge is exacerbated by limited professional development opportunities necessary for equipping staff with the skills to implement RP effectively (McCluskey et al., 2008). Moreover, the inconsistent application of restorative methods within schools hinders significant change. Wachtel (2003) emphasizes that systematic, rather than situational, restorative procedures are essential for meaningful impact, requiring all school community members to adhere to restorative principles. Inconsistent training and application can lead to frustration and a lack of cohesive practice (Wachtel, 2003). Schools with a punitive disciplinary culture particularly struggle to shift mindsets, as a strong emphasis on control and compliance complicates viewing discipline as an opportunity for learning and growth without strong leadership and a clear vision for change (Drewery, 2013; McCluskey, 2018).

Resource constraints further hinder effective RP implementation. Adequate staffing, funding, and time are crucial for success, but often scarce in many schools. Teachers and staff need time for training, organising and conducting restorative conferences or circles, and following up with students and families. Schools with limited resources struggle to allocate the necessary time and personnel, resulting in incomplete or inconsistent implementation (Roney & Daftary, 2020). Gregory and Evans (2020) suggest that RP's inconsistent student outcome improvements stem from mis-implementation, characterised by top-down mandates misaligned with restorative values, limited

individual-focused approaches, and under-resourced, short-term initiatives (in Acosta et al., 2019). Therefore, comprehensive training and support are essential to foster a school culture that values restorative principles (Roney & Daftary, 2020).

Further critiques challenge not only the barriers but also the foundational assumptions of RP. Macallister (2015) argues that without a philosophical commitment to transformative change, restorative approaches risk being reduced to behavioural management rather than fostering authentic growth. Likewise, Lustick (2017) provides a critical perspective from Black educators who question RP's ability to address systemic inequities, suggesting that restorative methods may fall short unless power dynamics and racial issues are explicitly considered. McCluskey et al. (2008) similarly caution that inconsistent institutional support can dilute the effectiveness of RP, transforming it into a mere tool rather than a holistic framework for change. Finally, Roney and Daftary (2020) underscore that implementation often falters due to lack of resources, insufficient training, and the challenge of shifting entrenched disciplinary cultures. These critiques point to the necessity of embedding RP within a supportive, well-resourced educational structure that aligns with restorative values, addresses structural challenges, and promotes reflective, culturally aware practices.

Daly (2008) further argues that RJ's success depends on ideals of generous, empathetic, and supportive interactions, which are not always present. The RJ process can falter if victims or offenders are unwilling to participate empathetically. Achieving restorativeness requires a high degree of empathetic concern and perspective-taking, often more challenging than achieving fairness. Varying levels of distress among victims and their capacity to engage meaningfully also influence RJ's success, with more distressed victims finding it harder to participate. These factors underscore the need for realistic expectations and recognition that RJ success depends on multiple variables, including the capacities and orientations of both victims and offenders, facilitator professionalism, and resource availability.

1.4 The Restorative School Leader – A Pivotal Role

When it comes to school-related characteristics that lead to student performance and success, school leadership comes in second only to teaching. (Leithwood et al., 2004 as cited in Starzecki, 2022, p.5) "School administrators are the most pivotal school staff members involved in decision-making about student discipline (Buckmaster, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016) and therefore have the greatest ability to influence disciplinary practices." (Gross, 2021, p. 3) Mukuria (2002) and Smith & Hains (2012) corroborate this statement and conclude that "principals' overall orientations to student wrongdoing affect suspension rates because schools with more authoritarian leaders (who believe in rigidly administering discipline) have higher rates of suspension." (Bruhn, 2020, p.5)

According to Derby (2021), leaders should lead by allowing restorative values to permeate the organization's culture and programmes, ultimately influencing staff, volunteers, partners, and those served by the organization. By learning to strike the right balance between giving support and achieving results (see Figure 3), leaders operate collaboratively and empower their stakeholders rather than impose decisions upon them.

Figure 3

Being Results-focused vs. Support-focused
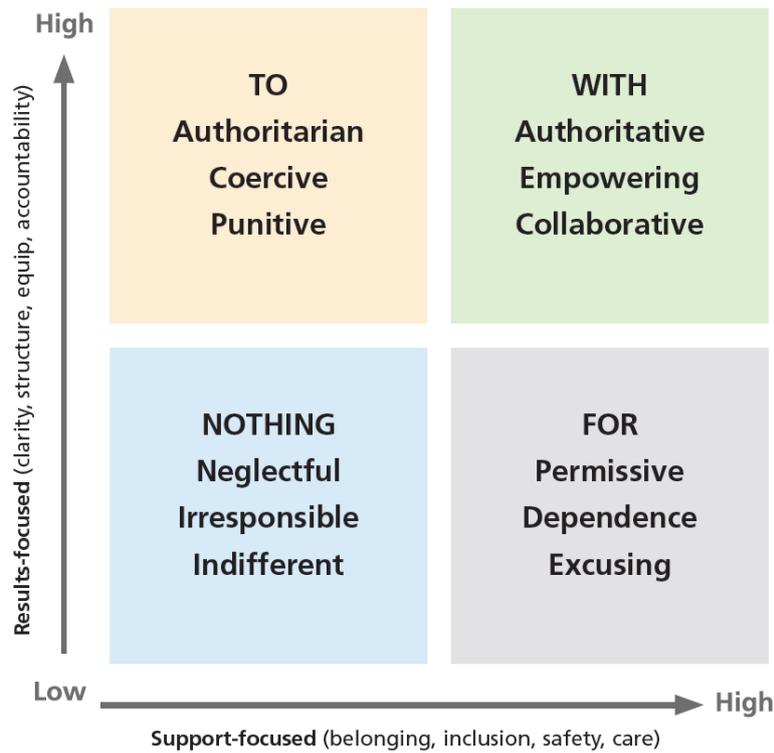
Note. From *Restorative justice: Principles and practice* (p.7), by J. Derby, 2021, Prison Fellowship International (PFI).

In the educational context, the successful implementation of RJ significantly hinges on the engagement and support of school leadership. Hopkins (2015) notes that initiatives often fail if the head teacher does not support the new approach. Steinfield (2022), a school administrator preparing for a new school year just after the Covid-19 pandemic, listed six steps restorative leaders can use to help their communities move forward: restore hope through vision; find time to listen and serve (using an open-door policy); use the crisis to generate courage for change; build a strong culture; plan well and cultivate joy. When a leader instils a restorative environment by modelling restorative skills, this proves good for staff health and well-being because they feel valued and cared for. Having more skills to address challenges, staff feel more confident and able to teach (Hopkins, 2015). Bruhn's study carried out in 2020 concluded that a restorative culture cannot be established within a school using positional authority alone. "Restraint,

persistence, and respect" were distinguished as critical qualities needed to bring RJ to life. These prioritize relationships and generate opportunities for restoration (p. 22-23).

1.4.1 Qualities of the Restorative Leader

"Leadership does not begin with title or position; it begins the moment you are more concerned about others' flourishing than your own." (Andy Crouch, 2016 as cited in Steinfield, 2022). The qualities of a good leader include a deep sense of empathy, compassion, resilience, honesty, integrity, and a commitment to grow. As Hopkins (2015) states, leaders need to have the 'lightbulb moment' that makes them realise that "if they want to truly embrace a restorative culture in their workplaces, then the change needs to start with themselves." (p.29) Restorative leadership is distinguished by key qualities that enable leaders to successfully manage difficulties, promote development and facilitate healing within their communities. One needs to be adaptable to the needs that arise and possess strong conflict resolution skills by promoting dialogue and cooperation. According to Hopkins, it is not enough for restorative leaders to be 'on board' but 'they need to know how to drive the bus themselves' (2015, p.29), including potential others in the process. They provide a model of a "democratic, empathic listener, willing to listen to the team, able to support colleagues in conflict, ready to mediate between colleagues and parents/carers if need be, and modelling the use of Circle processes." (Hopkins, 2015, p. 9)

> "Embracing an ethic of community, restorative leadership is guided by core values to do no harm, to serve collective wellbeing, and to bring the highest benefit to all. It is leadership that utilizes a community-centred approach, engaging social networks to forward and sustain hopeful possibilities." (Steffen, 2012, p.9)

Acting from a deep sense of empathy, the restorative leader understands and connects with experiences, emotions, and the needs of others. By actively listening to the concerns of the individuals, and demonstrating genuine care and understanding, restorative leaders gain a "deeper understanding of a particular culture, its areas of strength and weakness, its goals, failures and direction for future vision." (Steinfield, 2022) The next section presents Maria Teresa Spinelli as a sound example of such a school leader. Being a religious person living within the congregation which Spinelli

herself founded, the researcher has known her story and studied her qualities for several years, reflecting on her restorative qualities.

1.4.2 Maria Teresa Spinelli – an example of a Restorative School Leader

Maria Teresa Spinelli (1789-1850), the foundress of the Augustinian Sisters, Servants of Jesus and Mary, felt a deep desire for the apostolate, particularly to offer education to others. Initially, in 1820, in Rome, she helped young women rise from poverty and taught them the Christian doctrine, and the skills to read and write so that they could find a job. She then moved to Frosinone in 1821, following a call she received while praying, and opened the first public school for girls. (Archivio Generale delle Agostiane, Serve di Gesù e Maria, Roma, B1-5.)

Although initially she was pressured and expected to open a private school for girls coming from aristocratic families, her desire was to "instruct all those who were willing to learn." (Frattali, p. 64-65) In November 1821, joined by two teachers, Teresa opened the first public school to more than a hundred girls who yearned enthusiastically to receive their first formal education (Positio, 155). From the very beginning, as a woman and an educator, Teresa was ahead of her time: giving each student a tailor-made formation matching their age, abilities, timings and needs (Deguara, 2022); treating students from all social classes equally and teaching them to embrace diversity (Gadaleta, 2000, p.30); as well as introducing the notion of timetabling to include not only academic work, but also time for prayer, music, recreational moments and walks with educators (Costituzioni, 1827, p.90). This holistic, child-centred approach addressed the girls' physical, intellectual, and spiritual development, and it eventually empowered them with a voice to fight for their fundamental rights and make appropriate choices for a better future.

Like the volunteers who worked for around sixty thousand hours to restore and assemble more than two hundred thousand fragments of Giotto's frescoes inside the Basilica of St Francis, following the 1997 Assisi earthquake, Spinelli was never concerned

about the hours invested in the numerous attempts to "restore the heart." With unwavering patience, she accompanied each person, delicately striving to recover the fragments that had fallen due to life's earthquakes. She attempted to piece together the elements shattered by the burdens of a challenging life – whether it was social discrimination, poverty, sin, ignorance, and/or illness. Motivated by a maternal love in a close link with the virtues she possessed, Teresa persistently worked to build anew, believing that, despite fractures and setbacks, a vibrant fresco could emerge. Just as the restorer leads volunteers to search for broken pieces in seemingly impossible endeavours, Spinelli tirelessly sought to reconstruct the broken hearts that shaped each person's masterpiece and made this her mission and vision for the Congregation and the school.

It was "a mission to restore man to his authentic integrity" (Costituzioni, 1827, p. 84) and to prepare students to live in society maturely and responsibly (Gatt, p. 86). Rules and discipline, embraced by both students and teachers, helped in this restoration process. They weren't applied in an authoritarian way but lovingly, "offering an opportunity for learning, growth and maturity." (Deguara, 2022, p. 38) Teachers were encouraged to be "mothers in Christ, loving them [students] tenderly, educating them with patience." (Costituzioni, p. 274) It was done through love and the establishment of safe environments where children were encouraged to engage in dialogue "not one made of superfluous words but one which would lead them to understand." (Bea, 1982, p. 155) Teachers helped to regulate their students' behaviour "by letting them assess the seriousness of their habits" (Costituzioni, p. 277) and turn each incident into a life lesson. Spinelli encouraged her fellow sisters and teachers "to correct the students according to the nature of each one – one with severity; another with sweetness; one with silence and another with a glance; and yet another with a threat, and when needed with a punishment also." (Costituzioni, p. 277) Spinellian education today continues to value the students for their uniqueness and inner beauty. "Each student is loved and cared for because of her intrinsic worth as everyone is created in the image of God and is precious in God's eyes." (Deguara, 2022, p. 39) Spinelli frequently repeated that each child belongs to God and is to be treated as His princess. (Costituzioni, p.301)

1.5 Conclusion

As Meyer and Evans (2012) point out, restorative school discipline is neither just an add-on programme, nor another tool in the toolbox labelled 'behaviour management'. The restorative discipline system represents "a school culture that permeates all aspects of school organisation and relationships within the school as well as relationships between the school and its community." This chapter has shown the importance of moving away from retributive justice to embrace a more restorative approach, as individuals and as whole school communities.

The next chapter discusses the methodology used to investigate how local school leaders perceive discipline, whether they manage to integrate empathy using restorative approaches, and how they deal with discipline issues in their day-to-day running of the school.

Chapter 2

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the research paradigm that contains the ontological, epistemological and methodological stances influencing the study. Subsequently, the rationale for qualitative methodology and the three research questions will be outlined. The choice of the methodology employed will be discussed and an overview of the research design will be provided. This will include the data collection method chosen, the sample and population of participants in this study, inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as the ethical considerations that are taken into account. The process used for data analysis will also be outlined.

2.1 The Research Design

Research is framed by a series of related assumptions addressing ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Coe et al., 2017). Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) state that "the ontological assumptions give rise to epistemological assumptions; these, in turn, give rise to methodological considerations; and these, in turn, give rise to issues of instrumentation and data collection" (p. 3). Ontology questions the nature of the social world, while epistemology investigates how we know what exists. Methodology concerns the procedures and logic to be followed, and methods refer to the techniques for data collection. These elements exist on a continuum from realist to constructivist ontology, and from positivist to interpretivist epistemology, and encompass a range of methodological approaches from nomothetic to ideographic (Coe, 2017). Creswell and Creswell (2023) stress the importance of aligning research design with these philosophical assumptions to ensure a robust approach to data collection and analysis. This alignment underpins the chosen methods, guiding the researcher through the entire study.

2.1.1 Ontological Position: Constructivism

Social constructivism asserts that realities are defined interpersonally through interactions within networks of relationships. Constructivist ontology posits that things

do not have an inherent essence but are perceived through social interactions. This philosophy is based on ontological relativity, suggesting that all statements about existence are dependent on a worldview, and no worldview is solely determined by empirical data (Patton, 2015). Constructivist research seeks to capture diverse understandings and multiple realities, emphasizing the subjective and intersubjective nature of knowledge. By focusing on these varied perspectives, the researcher aims to understand the complex social constructs that influence school leaders' experiences when dealing with student conflicts and misbehaviour.

2.1.2   Epistemological Position: Interpretivism

Interpretivism, as an epistemological stance, contrasts with positivism, which upholds the objectivity and measurability of truth. Instead, interpretivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed through social interactions and is mediated by historical and cultural contexts (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). This approach helped the researcher to generate data through direct engagement with the school leaders, understanding their perspectives and experiences. Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative inquiry within a constructivist paradigm emphasizes mutual discovery and understanding between the researcher and participants. This epistemological foundation supports a nuanced exploration of the social phenomena being studied, facilitating an empathetic and context-sensitive approach.

Qualitative research aims to uncover the depth, nuance, and sensitivity to context that is essential for understanding complex social phenomena (Bryman, 2016). This study employed a constructivist epistemological framework, positing that reality is subjective, and culturally shaped. Pasternak (2020) highlights that qualitative research provides a voice to participants, enhancing understanding of their situations. Grix (2019) states that qualitative researchers seek to "discern patterns, trends and relationships between key variables" within social contexts, rather than focusing solely on variables and hypotheses (p. 113). This contextual approach, as described by Gelo et al. (2008) in Castro et al. (2010), examines individuals within their natural environments, offering a richer, more detailed understanding of the phenomena under study. This chosen methodology

ensured that the research captures the lived experiences of school leaders, providing insights into the psychosocial complexities they encounter on daily basis at school.

2.1.3   Methodology: A Qualitative Approach

Methodology, as described by Mason (2018), refers to the underlying logic guiding the design and implementation of a research project. It encompasses the rationale behind every aspect of the research process, from the formulation of research questions to day-to-day decision-making. Mason elucidates how methodology "is the logic that informs – although does not dictate – your decisions about what to do and why, as well as how much and in what way it matters when things 'go wrong' as the research progresses" (p. 32). This foundational understanding of methodology was crucial for the present study, which aimed to investigate the strategies adopted by schools in handling misbehaviour and discipline issues, with a particular focus on the use of restorative approaches.

Given the importance of school leaders' views and opinions for this study, a qualitative research approach was deemed most suitable. Qualitative research is particularly suited for studies requiring in-depth, contextually rich data. Kelly (2016) asserts that qualitative methods are appropriate for collecting information on what participants "think or know or do" (p. 936). This approach is designed to handle the complexity of human experiences and social interactions, which are often difficult to quantify statistically. Griffiths (1998) highlights the fact that qualitative research involves the interpretation of data within its original context, emphasizing the value-laden nature of the information gathered. Grix (2019) adds that qualitative research involves analysing cases within their social and cultural contexts over time, developing theories that trace processes and sequences of events. Furthermore, Kelly (2016) notes that qualitative research allows for the collection of rich, detailed information from knowledgeable individuals, with "a wealth of information and data … collected from knowledgeable people" (p. 936). Creswell (2007) supports this by explaining that qualitative data collection is "precise, specific, and accurate," allowing participants to express their opinions and share their experiences, thereby constructing knowledge through dialogue and discussion. This methodology aligns with the aim to closely examine how schools

manage disciplinary issues, making evidence-based research and semi-structured interviews with school leaders a natural choice.

One of the key strengths of qualitative research highlighted by Creswell is its ability to gather contextually rich, detailed data through methods like interviews and observations, which are particularly useful for exploring complex human behaviours and social processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). They underscore the importance of integrating ethical practices and precise data analysis techniques, which are crucial for developing valid and reliable research outcomes.

2.2 Collection of Data

2.2.1 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview Procedures

In qualitative research, interviews are vital for understanding participants' viewpoints and experiences. According to Ayala and Elder (2011), "Interviews are considered to be the most effective way to examine the acceptability of interventions" (p. S69). This method provides invaluable insights, enhancing study validity and robustness. Edwards and Holland (2013) highlight interviews as a standalone research method, enabling deep exploration of personal narratives and contextual backgrounds, thus providing rich data.

Keith Morrison (2000) identifies five interview conceptualisations, favouring standardised semi-structured interviews for balance between preset material and open conversation. This method asks each participant the same questions in the same order but allows for flexibility in providing comments and explanations, ensuring comparable responses (Cohen et al., 2000). Hameed (2020) asserts that interviews are ideal for collecting in-depth information on opinions, experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Patton (2015) highlights skilled interviewing, emphasizing rapport, nonjudgmental interaction, and authenticity. Effective interviewing involves genuinely open-ended questions, clarity, depth probing, and smooth topic transitions. Skilled interviewing also requires distinguishing between descriptive and interpretative questions and involves the art of listening.

The research design involved several critical decisions to determine the most effective method for data collection and analysis. In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as they provided the researcher with the opportunity to become well-acquainted with the interviewees, facilitating a more relaxed and natural atmosphere. Semi-structured interviews were particularly valued for their flexibility and for allowing participants to address relevant issues not initially included in the questions. The format also enables comprehensive exploration of research topics, yielding nuanced and contextually rich data.

2.2.2 Piloting the Interview Questions

Research interviews, defined by Cannell and Kahn (1968), are conversations initiated in order to obtain research-relevant information, allowing for the observation of verbal and non-verbal cues, thus providing in-depth data (as cited in Cohen et al., 2000, p. 411). Cohen et al. (2000) note that interviews vary in purpose, structure, and focus, either exploratory or hypothesis-testing, descriptive or interpretative, cognitive or emotional. Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2013) stress the importance of coherence between research questions, the conceptual framework, and the interview guide. Categorizing the interview with subheadings of topics or concepts ensures this coherence. Similarly, Aspers and Corte (2019) emphasize clarity in question design, enhancing the precision needed to identify the core phenomenon under study. Interview questions were meticulously designed to reflect the present study's research questions. The literature informed the development of semi-structured, open-ended questions to obtain a broad perspective on the topic. This ensured that research strategies align with the realities faced by school leaders in dealing with disciplinary issues.

A pilot study with two school leaders was conducted to validate the interview questions. Based on feedback, the questions were refined to better encompass information relevant to the research questions.

2.2.3 Sampling and Profile of Study Participants

According to Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2013), participant recruitment is a critical component of research methodology and encompasses defining an appropriate study population and identifying effective strategies to recruit participants. In qualitative research, recruitment differs from quantitative approaches by focusing on detailed understanding rather than generalization. Qualitative research aims to gain a detailed understanding of specific phenomena and their socially constructed meanings. This necessitates recruiting a small number of participants with particular characteristics relevant to the research topic, as they can provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Qualitative research employs non-random methods, specifically purposive recruitment. This approach is deliberate in selecting "information-rich" individuals who can offer detailed insights into the study topic and is flexible enough to refine participant selection during data collection in order to ensure diverse experiences and perspectives (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). This method is crucial for exploring issues in depth and understanding the socially constructed meanings within the research context.

To carry out this research study, the researcher conducted ten semi-structured interviews with different Heads of Church schools, two of which were used to pilot study the interview study. Using purposeful sampling, the participating interviewees chosen include a representation of lay, clergy and religious Maltese school leaders. All participants have been heading schools for several years and have gained ample experience within their field of practice. The participants were diverse in terms of gender (6 males and 4 females), age range, and the category of schools they led (4 secondary, 4 primary and 2 mixed). Among the interviewees there were leaders from both single-sex (7) and co-educational schools (3), and schools were situated in various regions of Malta (north, central, south) and Gozo.

2.2.4   Design of the Interview Schedule

After obtaining ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC), the researcher analysed the list of Church schools on the Malta Archdiocese website and chose ten Heads of Schools falling within the parameters of the research. Then, the researcher contacted the Secretariat for Catholic Education seeking permission to conduct research in the chosen Church schools. Once permission was granted, the school leaders were contacted by email with an information letter and a consent form (Appendix A) and were kindly asked to participate in a semi-structured one-to-one interview of approximately 45 minutes. Once the Heads of Schools showed interest and accepted to be interviewed, the researcher emailed them the interview questions (Appendix B) and liaised with them to fix an appointment. All interviews took place in person since the researcher thought it important to visit the different Church schools being studied to get the feel of the school ambiance while there. The interviews took place between December 2023 and February 2024. The interviewees gave personal anecdotes of several situations they encountered at school, showing that they were giving the best possible view of their reality which was of paramount importance to the present study. Before the interviews, the interviewees were assured that any personal information disclosed during the interview would be omitted from the data presentation. Ranging from 45 to 70 minutes, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed yielding 107 pages of text for analysis. Extensive consideration was dedicated to safeguarding the participants' confidentiality. All audio recordings, transcripts and raw data were stored on a biometric password protected laptop which could only be accessed by the researcher.

2.3   Data Analysis

Creswell (2009) describes data analysis as making sense of text and image data through preparation, various analyses, and progressively deepening understanding, akin to peeling back the layers of an onion. Coding is essential for organizing qualitative data, involving the segmentation of text or images into categories labelled with *in vivo* terms

from participants' language. Cross-sectional coding or indexing creates a consistent system for applying codes across the dataset (Mason, 2018). Codes in qualitative research may be thematic, descriptive, conceptual, axial, interpretive, analytic, hierarchical, loose, rough, or open. Patton (2015) defines content analysis as the process of qualitative data reduction and sense-making to identify core consistencies and meanings, forming the basis for themes to reveal significant insights.

Braun and Clarke's model of Thematic Analysis (TA) comprises six phases: familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This model ensures a comprehensive analysis by linking qualitative findings with quantitative data. Thematic analysis, used as a constructionist method, identifies, analyses, and reveals patterns within the data set.

Researchers must effectively store, organise, and retrieve data to make interpretations consistent with their epistemological approach. Data can be read in three main ways: literal, interpretive, and reflexive. Literal reading focuses on form and content, interpretive reading constructs meanings, and reflexive reading situates the researcher within the data generation process (Mason, 2018). During data analysis, the researcher aimed to extract specific data from the dataset (interview transcripts), resulting in a detailed and nuanced account of a group of themes rather than a rich description of the dataset. An inductive approach, linking themes strongly to the data itself, was chosen (Patton, 2015). This form of thematic analysis is data-driven, processing data "without trying to fit it into pre-existing coding frames, or in the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). Some themes emerged from the data not directly related to interview questions, indicating the need for emergent coding.

Interpreting qualitative data is challenging yet engaging as researchers infer meanings from it (Mason, 2018). The researcher chose to perform thematic analysis at a latent/interpretive level to "identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies that are shaping the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Organising data is both practical and epistemological, requiring recognition of what constitutes data and understanding the researcher's goals.

2.4 Validity, Reliability and Triangulation

Validity is crucial in research, as invalid work holds no meaning (Cohen et al., 2018). In qualitative research, it is rooted in philosophical contexts, requiring a strong connection between the interviewee and researcher and a well-defined research design (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003). Validity should be viewed as a matter of degree, aiming to minimise invalidity and maximise validity (Cohen et al., 2018). It encompasses the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims, and the significance and interpretation of the data collected (Ary et al., 2002 as cited in Cohen et al., 2018). Validity varies across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research.

Reliability refers to the consistency, dependability, and replicability of findings over time, instruments, and respondent groups. Reliable research yields similar results when replicated with comparable respondents in similar contexts, minimising errors and biases. Internal and external validity, generalizability, and objectivity from bias are essential for reliability (Cohen et al., 2018). Qualitative validity involves accuracy checks, while reliability ensures consistency across researchers and projects (Gibbs, 2007). This includes procedures like checking transcripts for errors and maintaining consistency in code definitions (Creswell, 2009). Validity in qualitative research is determined by the accuracy of findings from researchers', participants', or readers' perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Triangulation involves using multiple research methods to study a phenomenon, enhancing validity by providing a comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2009). It aims to map out and explain the complexity of human behaviour by examining it from multiple perspectives (Cohen & Manion, 2018). This study utilised triangulation by collecting data from various school leaders, conducting semi-structured interviews, and reviewing related literature to enhance validity.

2.4.1 Researcher Bias

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a crucial role and their motives, interests, values, and ideologies can influence data collection and interpretation (Sutton & Austin,

2015). Researchers actively engage with data through observation and interpretation, necessitating reflexivity to recognise the interplay between epistemological and methodological processes (Patnaik, 2013). Researchers must reflect on their positions to eliminate bias, maintain objectivity, and enhance validity (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

My involvement as both a teacher and a consecrated individual posed challenges in maintaining objectivity and avoiding personal biases. Interviewees' responses were likely influenced by my religious status, as interviewer characteristics can significantly shape responses (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). Factors like the interviewer's appearance, gender, and attitude can impact the interviewee's willingness to disclose information, and the interviewer's positionality can affect power dynamics (Hopkins, 2009 as cited in Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2013). To mitigate this, I engaged in casual conversation with participants before the interviews to build rapport and ease. Maintaining a reflective journal helped contextualize data, ensuring honest interpretation and accurate reflection of participant information (Patnaik, 2013).

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research involves examining the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of data (Mertler, 2017). Participants were asked to review interview transcripts for accuracy, and reflexivity was practised throughout the study to maintain awareness of biases that might affect the research.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

2.5.1 Informed Consent

Central to ethical concerns in research is obtaining informed consent. In interviews, obtaining consent is both an ethical obligation and a practical necessity, as participants need information to decide whether to participate. Participants can generally refuse participation or withdraw at any point. Researchers must emphasize the voluntary nature of participation to respect autonomy and reassure participants that withdrawal is always permissible (Cole et al., 2017). This was reiterated by the researcher when initially contacting participants and again before the interview, when they signed a printed consent form.

Green et al. (1997) suggest that giving consent can make participants vulnerable as they disclose personal views. Autonomy is the principle underlying consent, protecting participants' autonomous decisions. Informed consent involves four main elements: adequate information provision (disclosure), participant understanding, competence to give or withhold consent, and absence of coercion. At the start of each interview, the researcher ensured that these elements were explained to uphold ethical standards. As Cole et al. (2017) state, "participants ought to know they are being researched, be fully informed about what this involves, and be able to withdraw at any time" (p. 62). However, uncertainty about research benefits or risks persists, requiring participants to tolerate some uncertainty and assess probabilities, which may vary.

2.5.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are crucial in semi-structured interviews but are distinct concepts. Confidentiality pertains to how the information collected is handled, ensuring it is not disclosed to unauthorized individuals and is used solely for research purposes. Anonymity ensures that participants' identities remain unknown to individuals who might access the research data. Boruch et al. (1996) also note the complexities of maintaining anonymity, as narrative descriptions given during interviews can at times reveal identities. In this study, a coding system was implemented, assigning the eight school leaders the letters "HoS" followed by a number (e.g., HoS1). The leader's gender was not particularly important for the purpose of the study and so it was not identified in the codes given. This approach protected participant identities and upheld confidentiality and anonymity principles.

2.5.3 Interpretation of Data

In qualitative research, the interpretation of data involves understanding and making sense of collected information. The researcher must engage actively with the data, which includes observing, understanding, and interpreting the information shared by participants. To ensure that the interpretations are valid and credible, ethical

considerations are paramount. To maintain ethical standards and ensure accurate data interpretation, detailed procedures were followed. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, and their consent was obtained. This process included providing information letters and consent forms. Audio recordings of interviews were securely stored on password-protected devices and were set to be destroyed after the dissertation's publication. The use of codes further safeguarded participants' anonymity. Additionally, all data collected was interpreted diligently to reflect the true thoughts and experiences of the participants, ensuring that the findings were credible and accurately represented the participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2000 as cited in Busher & James, 2009).

2.5.4   Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas in research often involve confidentiality, anonymity, and respectful treatment of participants. Ethical guidelines, such as those from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), emphasize informed consent and participants' awareness of their right to withdraw at any time. This respect for autonomy maintains the ethical integrity of the research process (Beauchamp, 2009). Permission letters were sent to relevant authorities, including the Secretariat for Catholic Education, and ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee. Detailed information was provided to all participants, ensuring they were aware of the study's intent and their rights (Busher & James, 2012). This rigorous approach ensured that the research adhered to the highest standards of integrity and respect for participants' rights and dignity (Mertler, 2017).

2.6   Limitations of this Methodology

In-depth qualitative interviews, while valuable for obtaining rich data, present notable challenges. One major issue is the significant demand on time and energy. Coordinating schedules with participants, who often have busy calendars, alongside the researcher's teaching timetable, extended the data collection process to three months. Another

limitation is the vast amount of data generated. Transcribing ten interviews was time-consuming, and processing and interpreting the extensive qualitative data required meticulous attention and substantial effort. Lichtman (2012) highlights the lack of predefined rules and the challenging tasks of writing and data management. This necessitates a careful balance between comprehensive data collection and effective data analysis to ensure information richness is maintained.

Qualitative interviews also involve unpredictability due to their interactive nature. Plummer (2011) notes, "Research – like life – is a contradictory, messy affair" (p. 195). This unpredictability can manifest as participants not providing expected information, or unforeseen circumstances such as cancellations or dropouts. These disruptions can hinder data collection and potentially impact research outcomes. However, this messiness can lead to the discovery of unexpected insights, deepening understanding (Cole et al., 2017).

Reliance on participants' willingness and ability to articulate their experiences is another limitation. Despite allowing participants to choose their language of preference, some struggled to convey their thoughts accurately or did not offer the desired depth of information, potentially leading to gaps in the data and challenges in drawing comprehensive conclusions. The subjective nature of qualitative data complicates analysis further, as the interpretation of responses can be influenced by the researcher's biases and perspectives.

2.7 Conclusion

Lakhotia and Chaddah (2019) emphasize that research is a cornerstone activity in society, driving numerous academic and social advancements. It is essential that research is conducted ethically to uphold human dignity. During the research process, the researcher engaged in discussions about various issues and experiences faced by school heads in their daily work, particularly regarding student conflicts or misbehaviour. The methods employed were detailed and proved highly effective for examining the current state of several Maltese Church schools in terms of their adoption of restorative approaches. This chapter offers a thorough account of the research

methodology that underlies this study, including the characteristics of the sample and participants, the instruments used, the data collection processes along with their reliability and validity, the data analysis procedures, and the ethical considerations adhered to by the researcher. The detailed results of the data collection will be presented in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 3

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THEMATIC ANALYSIS

3.0 Introduction

This chapter aims at presenting a comprehensive analysis of the data gathered in the study. The steps for thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to analyse the eight semi-structured interviews. Guided by the research questions and using an inductive thematic approach, the researcher conducted an in-depth analysis of the transcripts and elicited four overarching and prevailing themes: Understanding and addressing behaviour issues and conflicts (Theme 1 & 2), Leaders as facilitators and enablers of Restorative Practices (Theme 3), and the challenges and restraints encountered by school leaders (Theme 4). This thematic map was generated to help make connections and identify relationships between themes and sub-themes.

TABLE 1

Thematic Map Outlining Emergent Themes
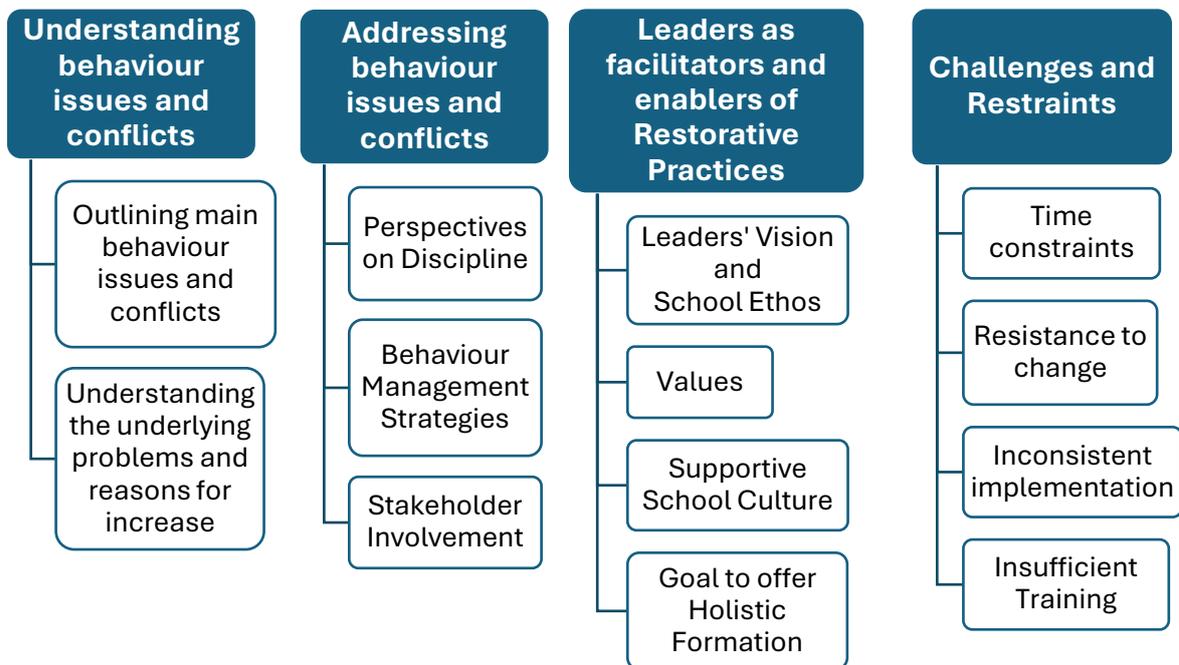
In the following sections (3.1 – 3.4), each theme will be analysed and supported by the verbatim statements of the participants.

3.1 Theme 1: Understanding Behaviour Issues and Conflicts

In educational settings, **behavioural issues** manifest themselves in various forms, and often reflect underlying personal or environmental factors. The first theme relates to how school leaders seek to understand behaviour issues and conflicts. According to HoS4, behavioural issues are "attitudes which are not acceptable at a school setup or in society," emphasizing the need for educators to reason with students to help them understand why such behaviour is unacceptable. HoS3 adds another dimension by suggesting that behavioural issues might stem from personal circumstances, such as difficulties at home, indicating that external factors can significantly influence student behaviour. Similarly, HoS1 contends that a student's behaviour is closely tied to their "aptitudes and attitudes towards their own life and others around them," thus suggesting a holistic view where both individual character and environmental context play a role in behavioural development. HoS6 and HoS2 also emphasize that misbehaviour often has a "root cause," with HoS2 noting that "behind that misbehaviour there is definitely a story." HoS5 expands on this by suggesting that behavioural issues may also be the "consequence of conflict," where students' misbehaviour could be a response to challenges that they face both inside and outside the school environment.

Conflict, a common occurrence in schools, is generally defined as a "disagreement" between two or more parties (HoS5). This disagreement can occur between adults, students, or between an adult and a student. HoS5 further suggests that conflicts can be resolved through discussion and compromise. HoS4 and HoS1 provide additional perspectives, describing conflict as a "lack of agreement" or "problems over character differences," indicating that conflicts often arise from differing perceptions or personalities. Interestingly, HoS7 offers a more nuanced interpretation of conflict, viewing it as a "moment where you need to redefine, re-understand and deconstruct a new belief or a way of thinking." Additionally, HoS6 and HoS8 suggest that conflicts, while challenging, can also yield "healthy results if dealt with in the right way," reinforcing the idea that conflict, when managed constructively, can lead to growth.

From the interview responses, one could observe a clear gendered dimension to how conflicts are experienced and managed. HoS1 noted that while boys tend to resolve conflicts quickly, girls "keep on dwelling on the problem and they enlarge it by the second," leading to prolonged and sometimes escalated conflicts. This perspective suggests a stereotype where boys are perceived as more straightforward in handling disputes, while girls engage in prolonged conflicts. Contrastingly, HoS2 challenges this generalization by asserting that boys also experience and internalize emotions deeply:

> "I feel upset and worried when I hear that boys can throw a punch and the next day they're friends, but girls aren't like that. This isn't true because boys also keep things inside. We have a heart too, we remember, and we hold on to who hurt us—so this type of talk about girls being one way and boys another worries me a lot. All children should have the space to speak as they wish, or if they need to shout, yes, to say what they want. Everyone should have the chance to express themselves as much as they want and then, slowly, once they've emptied out, then calmly and patiently we can reach an understanding." (HoS2)

This indicates that both boys and girls may require similar emotional support and opportunities for expression to effectively process and resolve conflicts.

3.1.1 Outlining main behaviour issues and conflicts

3.1.1.1 Bullying and aggressive behaviour

One of the most recurrent behavioural issues identified by the heads of schools is bullying, which manifests in both physical and verbal forms. HoS8 emphasized that bullying is the "most problematic" behaviour observed in schools, often accompanied by a lack of respect for authority, as seen in students "answering back" and not respecting adults. This concern is echoed by HoS3, who noted that bullying frequently involves students with weaker characters being "picked on continuously for a long time." This pattern of behaviour is particularly alarming as it highlights the vulnerability of certain students and the persistent nature of bullying within school environments (Smith, 2019).

Aggressive behaviour, often linked to bullying, was also highlighted by HoS4, who described instances of boys "showing off using rude words and violent behaviour," especially in unsupervised environments such as school transport. This observation is supported by HoS7, who noted that behavioural issues tend to escalate "when they are

tired and out of control, on their way back home," indicating that the lack of supervision and physical exhaustion may exacerbate aggressive tendencies particularly on school transport. Such behaviour can be understood through the lens of social learning theory, which suggests that students may be modelling aggressive behaviour observed in others (Bandura, 1977).

3.1.1.2 Social and virtual conflicts

The interviews also revealed a significant shift in the nature of conflicts among students, with a growing trend of conflicts extending into virtual spaces. HoS7 pointed out that while traditional forms of bullying were "more rough" and occurred in person, there has been a notable increase in "virtual" misbehaviour, such as online bullying. This shift is further corroborated by HoS5, who observed that conflicts now frequently arise from "comments written on Facebook, in Messenger groups, on Instagram," indicating that the digital environment has become a new battleground for student conflicts. This evolution of conflict dynamics suggests that schools must now address not only physical but also digital spaces when managing student behaviour.

3.1.2 Understanding the underlying problems and reasons for increase

A significant underlying problem is **the impact of family dynamics** on student behaviour. HoS6 highlights the negative effects of parental comparisons between siblings, which lead children to feel inadequate and unable to meet their parents' expectations. This pressure can result in rebellion and a breakdown in communication, as children or adolescents "cannot take it anymore." Also referring to the home environment, HoS4 attributes a "sudden increase in behavioural issues" to the lack of a stable family background, "because families have more and more problems to face" (HoS1), a fact which causes stress and confusion in students' minds. Such family-related stressors contribute to the emotional and psychological burdens that students carry into the school environment, often manifesting as behavioural issues.

Another crucial issue is **alienation and a lack of self-worth** among students. Adolescents face significant conflicts related to their need for acceptance and attention, as noted by HoS6, which can result in them losing their "sense of self" and succumbing to peer pressure. This struggle with identity and the need to be valued can lead to behavioural problems, as students may act out to gain attention or fit in with their peers.

The **influence of social media** has emerged as a prominent factor contributing to the rise in behavioural issues. HoS8 notes that interactions on social media often spill over into students' behaviour at school. The anonymity and detachment provided by screens lead students to act impulsively, without consideration for others, negatively affecting their real-life interactions. The expansion of bullying into digital spaces, as observed by HoS8, has made the problem more pervasive and difficult to manage. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these issues. HoS6 and HoS3 point out that the isolation during the pandemic has led to increased self-consciousness, sensitivity to criticism, and social pressures among students. Those who spent formative years during the pandemic now exhibit heightened sensitivity to name-calling and criticism, very likely because of limited social interaction during that time.

Learning difficulties have been identified as another contributing factor. HoS5 also notes an increase in traditional issues, such as students not completing their homework, which can be traced back to various factors, including the home environment, lack of resources, and challenges in coping with academic material. These difficulties can lead to frustration and disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

Finally, **bullying** remains a persistent and evolving issue. HoS7 mentions that parents often escalate bullying incidents when they choose to involve the police, consequently complicating conflict resolution processes. HoS8 observes that bullying has "grown a lot through social media," making it a more complex and widespread problem in the school environment.

3.2 Theme 2: Addressing behaviour issues and conflicts

3.2.1 Perspectives on Discipline

The heads of schools interviewed see discipline as a complex and multi-dimensional aspect of school management - a balance between control and empowerment, authority and empathy, individual responsibility and community support. They all stressed that the ultimate goal of discipline must always be to foster the holistic development of students, helping them to grow into responsible and self-regulated individuals. Through discipline, educators aim to create an environment where students can learn from their mistakes, understand the consequences of their actions, and develop the emotional and behavioural skills necessary for their future success.

One school leader emphasized that "everyone is responsible for discipline. We start from self-discipline" and explained that the school's policy encourages individuals to shoulder responsibility rather than rely on others to fix their mistakes (HoS7). This approach shifts the focus from punishment to accountability and personal growth, where students are guided to resolve conflicts and reflect on their behaviour in a constructive manner. Likewise, HoS8 defined discipline as a means of personal growth and development, saying that:

> One of the most important things in discipline is helping the child grow into a person who can regulate her own emotions and her own behaviour. And that must be kept in mind. When discipline is more about control than education, then you are not giving the control to the child. You're robbing the child of the control s/he needs to grow and to develop.

This outlook underscores the notion that discipline should empower students to develop self-regulation rather than merely imposing external control. HoS8 also stated that the aim of disciplining students is "formation and education," which means helping students "grow and develop" rather than simply "vent out" frustration (HoS8).

The integration of positive discipline, where discipline is applied with love and support, was repeatedly highlighted as a critical factor. One head of school shared that "positive discipline doesn't come naturally to all," and that character, support from senior leadership teams (SLTs), and a positive approach are crucial in its implementation (HoS6). Another head of school described their experience with initially ineffective

discipline strategies, which were perceived as too lenient, but noted that over time, by involving educators in the process, a more accepted and effective discipline strategy was developed (HoS2).

Discipline was also described as a challenge that requires careful balance between authority and empathy. One school leader noted that "discipline is a challenge - it's a role that no one really wants to take on because they will always appear in a negative light. However, the way something is done makes all the difference" (HoS6). This statement reflects the complex role that educators and school leaders play, where they must set rules while also nurturing a supportive and understanding environment. This idea is further reinforced by another head of school, who emphasized the importance of discipline being done "with reasoning, with empathy, with love," warning that without these elements, there is a high chance that the discipline will backfire (HoS4). This balance between discipline and empathy was a recurring theme in the interviews. HoS5 highlighted the belief that effective discipline involves "maintaining a balance between listening to the children, showing compassion, giving them a chance to speak, and taking action when necessary". This perspective aligns with the view that discipline should be a dialogue, where students are given the opportunity to express their perspectives and understand the consequences of their actions.

3.2.2 Behaviour Management Strategies

3.2.2.1 Behaviour Policies

A common practice among schools is the formulation and continual revision of behaviour policies. These policies are typically developed through a collaborative process, involving the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), teachers, and staff members. One head of school stated "We have a school behaviour policy that was written not only by the Senior Management Team but also in consultation with teachers and staff members, and it was also discussed at the School Council level" (HoS5). However, this collaborative process did not extend to parents, indicating a potential area for further inclusivity. The same school leader noted that the policy is comprehensive, covering various aspects such as "Good Order, uniform, Healthy Eating Policy, and behaviour expectations even

outside school hours" (HoS5). Despite its detailed nature, the policy does not explicitly list consequences for infractions, emphasizing flexibility in response to misbehaviour.

3.2.2.2   Preventive Strategies

Preventive strategies focus on creating a positive school environment and encouraging good behaviour through modelling and affirming positive actions. One head of school emphasized the importance of prevention policies, noting that they "promote a more equal environment" and help students become "more aware, tolerable, acceptable, and loving" (HoS3). The focus on prevention over reaction was a recurring theme, noted in different interviews. HoS3 clearly explained saying "I believe in preventing misbehaviour rather than intervening or reacting when you have an issue". This approach prioritizes preventing issues before they arise, as opposed to reacting to problems after they occur.

The concept of modelling good behaviour is a key element in these preventive strategies. As one school leader explained, "We, as school leaders, are meant to be their role models imparting a sense of calmness and peace, showing and using empathy, being honest, humble, and fair with each student" (HoS2). This sentiment was echoed by another head who pointed out that "when children start noticing that a positive behaviour led to a positive outcome, then they are more likely to give it a try. This is the social theory of learning – you observe, and you imitate" (HoS7). Affirmation of positive behaviour promoted through reward systems was also noticed. In different schools, good behaviour is being affirmed through reward systems. One particular school uses a point-based system to reward positive behaviour, with students who accumulate the highest number of points being recognized during an awards ceremony at the end of the year. Classes that perform well are rewarded with special outings (HoS2). This approach reflects the belief that affirming and modelling good behaviour leads to a more positive school culture.

3.2.2.3   Corrective Strategies

Corrective strategies in the schools under study are largely based on the principles of positive discipline, where the emphasis is on consequences that are directly related to

the misbehaviour, rather than punitive measures. One head of school articulated this philosophy by stating, "I believe in positive discipline, not in a punitive disciplinary style. Through positive discipline people reflect on what they could have done better and act upon it accordingly" (HoS1). The idea is to guide students through a reflective process that helps them understand the impact of their actions and learn from them. HoS6 described how "consequences" are used to "lead the girl to reflect on everything that has happened" and to ensure that "hopefully from this situation, the girl will learn something for her life". The use of consequences rather than punishment helps to maintain a focus on personal growth and accountability. This approach is supported by another school leader who asserted that every consequence must be tied to the action: "Yes, definitely the consequence has to be related to the harm done— it has to be or else it's not a learning experience" (HoS7).

However, there are instances where more severe measures are necessary. HoS4 acknowledged that "there are instances where the situation becomes so serious that drastic measures need to be taken and regretfully suspension is given". Suspension and exclusion are considered last resorts, employed only when a student's behaviour significantly disrupts the school environment or when the student fails to take responsibility for their actions (HoS4; HoS8). These measures are implemented through structured systems, such as infraction points that accumulate to trigger various disciplinary actions. One head of school described this system, explaining that

> "students get infractions and when they add up, they start getting disciplinary acts...
> if you get 15 points, the guidance will call you, and when it goes up to 30, you'll have
> three breaks in, and when you get up to 45 the parents are called to school" (HoS3).

Despite the necessity of corrective measures, one head expressed concern about the fairness of these approaches. "How can we measure two children who do the same thing with the same standard? Is this child's background the same as the other's?" (HoS2). This comment highlights the complexity of applying discipline fairly, acknowledging that each student's circumstances and backgrounds must be considered when determining appropriate consequences. Interestingly, some schools have also explored creative forms of consequences that align with the school's educational mission. For example, one head of school shared how community service served as a learning experience to a boy who damaged the school property. He was told to "go round the school, switching

off lights and fans and whiteboards that had been left switched on" (HoS3). This approach served as a respectful yet effective way to teach him responsibility towards the school property while reinforcing the school's values of showing respect to one another.

3.2.2.4 Restorative Strategies

Different Restorative Strategies focusing on a personalized, empathic and support approach to behaviour management could be observed in responses given by the eight heads of schools. These responses were grouped into themes.

One prominent theme across the interviews was the emphasis on treating each student as an individual with unique circumstances. Several heads of schools highlighted the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline. For instance, one head stated, "We cannot create a system that is standard for everyone because everyone is different, everyone has their own story" (HoS2). This **individualized approach** involves understanding the underlying reasons for a student's behaviour, as another head said, "We try to understand what's going on. What's the real reason for your action, for your behaviour?" (HoS3). Similarly, HoS8 emphasized the need for consequences that allow all parties to grow, noting that "sometimes to do this, we have recourse to therapy as well" to address underlying issues that might not be apparent in the school environment.

Another key theme is the critical role of **open communication and dialogue** in resolving conflicts. The heads of schools consistently stressed the importance of giving students the opportunity to express themselves and engage in meaningful conversations. For example, HoS2 emphasized, "All children should have the space to talk as they wish, or if necessary, to shout, and yes, to say what they need to", underscoring the importance of providing students with a platform to express their emotions fully. This approach is further supported by HoS6, who stated, "Give them a chance to speak and share your perspective—why are you doing this, why are you saying this?", highlighting the belief that communication is essential in helping students understand the implications of their actions and facilitating behavioural change. Additionally, HoS3 described a structured

process involving dialogue, noting that "It's important to listen to them separately to hear their story, then call both of them together and then try to listen to other students who may be involved or who may know the issue". This sequential method of communication ensures that all perspectives are considered before reaching a resolution. This forms the basis for restorative dialogues and approaches.

Closely related is the theme of **empathy and perspective-taking**. Several heads of schools highlighted the importance of helping students understand the impact of their actions on others, fostering a deeper sense of empathy. For instance, HoS6 affirmed, "I try to help the person put themselves in the other person's position to facilitate understanding". Another head expressed a similar approach, stating, "I would make it clear that [...] their actions have legal repercussions" (HoS5), which not only helps students recognize the seriousness of their behaviour but also encourages them to think critically about the consequences of their actions. By promoting empathy, these restorative strategies help students develop a more nuanced understanding of the social and emotional dynamics at play in conflicts.

Several heads of schools pointed out that behavioural issues often stem from deeper underlying problems that require **professional intervention**. HoS8 explained that, "The bully most of the time has other issues, other problems. Sometimes some issues are not being dealt with properly either at home or at school as well", highlighting the importance of addressing the root causes of behavioural problems. HoS8 further noted the role of therapy and counselling, suggesting that, "sometimes they would need help, counselling or therapy or something" (HoS8), implying that restorative strategies are not limited to immediate conflict resolution but extend to long-term support and healing. HoS1 stated, "We keep on following the child after each incident. We do not let them be", emphasizing the ongoing commitment to ensure that students receive the help they need to address underlying issues and move forward developing positive behaviours.

3.2.3 Stakeholder Involvement

3.2.3.1 SLT in collaboration with staff

Effective behaviour management often requires close collaboration between the SLT and the broader school staff, particularly when dealing with complex or recurring issues. One head of school emphasized the need for a collective approach, stating, "we involve the class teachers and LSEs where necessary, but it's mainly the DSO (Designated Safeguarding Officer), the HoS and the guidance teacher." (HoS1). Another head of school reinforced this collaborative approach, noting that they never address serious behavioural issues alone:

> "I choose to have with me the Assistant Head of that particular age group, the school's DSO, who is also the Assistant Head in charge of wellbeing, and there have been situations where we have even called in the anti-bullying team within the secretariat" (HoS6).

This multi-disciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand and ensures that the responses are tailored to the specific needs of the students involved.

The role of the SLT is not only to enforce discipline but also to provide guidance and support to students. As one head observed, relying too heavily on the head of school as the sole disciplinarian can create a counterproductive dynamic:

> "When children are sent to the head of school's office, they start seeing him as the big bad Wolf. I don't believe in that system. On the contrary, I feel that I need to be a father to these children, and every time a boy or girl misbehaves, we dialogue, and I help him to process what has just happened" (HoS2).

This perspective highlights the importance of adopting a supportive and empathetic approach to discipline, which can be more effective when supported by the entire SLT and staff.

3.2.3.2 Role of parents in behaviour management

Several heads of schools highlighted the importance of collaboration between the school and parents, to effectively manage behaviour and conflict resolution. HoS8 explained,

> When there are issues, we try to create collaboration between parents, teachers, and SLT. It is very important so that students may find the right guidance because if we say one thing and then parents say another thing that won't help the student.

This collaboration ensures that students receive consistent messages and support both at school and at home. This alignment between the school and parents is particularly important when addressing the root causes of behavioural issues. HoS8 added that, "If you work hand in hand with the parent and help the child through counselling, to develop her self-esteem, her confidence, her assertiveness, then yes, I think the root causes would be addressed" (HoS8). However, she also cautioned that when parents are not fully engaged or aligned with the school's approach, "we end up treating the symptoms because it would be very difficult to treat" the underlying issues.

To foster a better understanding of the school's behaviour management strategies, some schools provide educational opportunities for parents.

> We offer courses to parents as well about behaviour management, about bringing up children—the difficulties and the issues, and how to deal with them. We offer seminars during the day as well, and there is quite a lot of participation (HoS7).

HoS5 explained that they meet all the parents before the academic year starts, and also during several meetings throughout the year to "emphasize that not only academic matters are important but other things as well". These meetings provide a platform for setting expectations and ensuring that parents are on board with the school's approach to behaviour management. Some schools actively work to change parents' perceptions of discipline. For example, HoS1 explained how upon entry of their children to school, some parents do not understand what positive discipline is and so during meetings with them she constantly repeats and explains how misbehaviour is dealt with. "This has helped parents to perceive positive discipline as a good form of discipline, unlike what they might have understood upon entry into the school" (HoS1). This ongoing effort to educate and involve parents is critical in ensuring that behaviour management strategies are effective and supported by all stakeholders.

3.3 Theme 3: Leaders as facilitators and enablers of Restorative Practices

The third theme elucidates how school leaders understand their role with respect to RP.

3.3.1 Leader's Vision and School Ethos

The role of school leaders in Catholic schools is deeply intertwined with the school's ethos and the vision they uphold. When answering question 5 during the interviews (Part A), school leaders emphasized the importance of aligning their actions with the core values of their religious community.

> We constantly remind each other... to instil within all educators, LSEs included, the positive discipline approach... this is what the school vision is, this is what we truly believe in, this is what Christ did after all, and as a Catholic school, we should follow what Christ did. (HoS1)

The heads of schools also highlighted their personal commitment to living out these values in their daily interactions. HoS8 noted, "As Catholics, we need to remember that the way we treat a person reflects our Christian values and the gospel values as well." Similarly, HoS4 reflected on the added pressure of being a priest and leader in a Catholic school: "I am aware that I am a priest and the person I look up to is Jesus. In all I do, I try to keep Jesus in mind, asking—What would he do in this situation?" This mindfulness guides their approach to discipline, balancing compassion with necessary firmness, and opening their mission to evangelize through actions. HoS8 pointed out that,

> As a Church school, one of our priorities is to evangelize the person. If the way you treat the child is not out of respect and love, then the image the child would have of the church and of God would be tainted as well.

This perspective underscores the importance of integrating the Catholic ethos into every aspect of school life, ensuring that students not only learn academically but also grow spiritually and morally. HoS4 articulated the school ethos clearly and explained how the ethos shapes his way of dealing with behaviour issues and conflicts:

> It is based on reason, religion, and loving kindness. This is constantly at the back of my mind, and when I have students here in my office, I reason with them, talk to them, help them to understand why they are here, what wrong they have done, and how they can learn from the experience.

3.3.2 Values

When asked which were the core values used when dealing with behaviour and conflicts, many school leaders mentioned empathy, understanding, and respect for every individual. HoS1 highlighted the importance of "empathy, good listening skills, understanding a person's actions, and reaching out," stressing the need to help students realize that mistakes are part of human nature and that they can always "do something good and get back to where one should be."

HoS4 highlighted honesty and integrity saying, "I strive with the students to see the importance of being honest, to admit if they've done a mistake and learn from it." This commitment to truthfulness is complemented by the value of clarity, as HoS3 noted, emphasizing the need to be "very clear about the rules and regulations so as to be fair." The Gospel values are a guiding principle for many of the school leaders. HoS2 shared that at school they often ask students, "WWJD – What would Jesus do?" to guide the behaviour management process, concluding with a prayer. "As a leader, I try to live and apply the values of the Gospel," HoS2 explained, aiming to model "empathy, honesty, humility," and to maintain an open heart when correcting misbehaviour. HoS7 reflected a belief in the inherent dignity of every person saying that "every individual is worth and has the same value". This respect extends to all interactions within the school community. HoS8 stressed that the first value is "respect to the individual," followed closely by the need to "protect the victims." In this context of valuing and respecting everyone, HoS1 pointed out that the role of the school leader is not to "point fingers" but to understand and address the needs of both teachers and students. However, there are concerns about the observed loss of respect among students towards adults. HoS8 expressed worry about a "lack of respect towards the adults," noting that while students appreciate what adults do for them, they often fail to show it.

3.3.3 Supportive School Culture

A **positive school culture** not only sets the tone for expected behaviour but also helps students and staff internalize appropriate conduct within the school environment. As HoS7 explained, "School culture is very important because it explains how we do things.

It keeps the people inside the community understanding how we should behave." Promoting a positive school climate involves intentional efforts and activities that reinforce the desired culture. HoS3 noted the use of "activities and competitions or, for example, posters created during the anti-bullying week" as tools to foster a supportive and respectful environment where students feel valued and understood. The impact of a positive school culture extends beyond students to include staff and the wider school community. HoS1 emphasized the importance of a supportive environment for everyone involved: "Be it the staff, be it the teachers, the LSEs, the ancillary staff, the parents, as well as us SLT, we have to keep on working to keep the group gelled so that we feel comfortable with each other." A culture of empathy and care is seen as essential, as HoS1 further explained, "I believe more in empathy... when you show the staff and the children that you're there for them... automatically people feel comfortable, and people change their attitude." This aligns with the belief that discipline should be administered with care and compassion. HoS4 stated, "Discipline has to be done with reasoning, empathy, and love." By embedding these values into the school culture, leaders can create an environment where positive behaviour is the norm, and conflicts are minimized.

A consistent theme across the interviews was the focus on **recognizing and rewarding positive actions**, which not only encourages students to maintain good behaviour but also sets a standard for others to follow. HoS1 highlighted the role of assemblies and school activities in reinforcing positive attitudes and behaviours. This approach is complemented by efforts to highlight and reward exemplary behaviour, as HoS4 explained, "During the award ceremony of the school, every year there are specific special prizes which highlight, for example, Christian witness, good behaviour, exemplary behaviour. So, students know that we observe good behaviour and we affirm it and reward it." The use of positive reinforcement extends beyond formal ceremonies. HoS5 explained: "We give out commendation notes to applaud good behaviour, and when a student has 5 of these, s/he is awarded in front of others." HoS2 described a different initiative: "Right now, we are working a lot on positive reinforcement. We sent them merit cards home, and now the children are working for them." In addition to recognizing individual achievements, several heads of schools underscored the

importance of creating an engaging and supportive environment where positive behaviour can thrive. HoS8 emphasized the value of giving students responsibilities and opportunities for leadership, stating, "One of the things that help students behave well is giving them initiative, engaging them a lot, giving them responsibilities. You try to see who the leaders are, engage them and they model good behaviour for others." Furthermore, HoS8 noted that incorporating fun activities into the school year helps prevent misbehaviour by keeping students engaged and feeling valued: "You have to make school fun... if they get bored then obviously, they misbehave." This philosophy of focusing on the positive rather than the negative is shared across the schools. HoS4 articulated this approach, saying, "I would be more for affirming the good and supporting the good behaviour rather than focusing on the bad and giving consequences for that behaviour." This perspective is echoed by HoS6, who noted, "This year we tried to focus more on the positive attitudes/actions and reward them, with the hope that more good is taken on board than the bad." Despite these efforts, there is an acknowledgment that more can be done to consistently point out positive behaviours, especially in secondary schools where academic pressures often take precedence. HoS8 remarked, "Unfortunately, most of the time positive behaviours are not pointed out... But we try to do it as SLT during assemblies—we do praise them a lot on their behaviour when it's positive."

HoS4 highlighted, "Not everybody has somebody to talk to at home. The fact that they find somebody here who is willing to listen to them and guide them through issues is very important in more ways than one." The need to offer **counselling, support and mentoring** was echoed throughout the interviews. The school leaders themselves find time for this daily, but they all stressed the importance of taking a holistic approach to address the underlying causes of behavioural issues, and thus the importance of additional support from guidance teachers, school DSOs and psychosocial teams. The importance of accompaniment and ongoing support is also highlighted by HoS2, who stated,

> This accompaniment is crucial. We need to accompany the child and understand what happened because there's definitely a story, something happening. If we only focus on the action and which consequence to give, then we would have done just one part of our job.

This sentiment reflects the broader understanding that behavioural issues often require more than just disciplinary action; they necessitate a supportive environment where students feel heard and understood. This approach is complemented by the belief that understanding the student's perspective and providing a space for dialogue is important. HoS6 noted, "When students open up and you share your perspective with them, they are capable of thinking and understanding. Often they don't find this kind of understanding elsewhere, so they need to find it in us." Effective leadership, as described by HoS1, involves:

> Being present and being one of them, I think is the thing that helps most... all my past effective leaders were people who dirtied their hands, came to class, taught with us, listened to us, cried with us, and who understood our needs.

This hands-on approach to leadership fosters trust and encourages positive behaviour, as does restorative mentoring, a practice explained beautifully by HoS3, who used it at school as an initiative to address bullying: "We called in the anti-bullying team from the Secretariat… they assigned one of the SLT members to each of these 2-3 students as mentors." Towards the end of the school day, these students had daily interactions with their mentor where they reported on their relations with peers and educators, expressed their frustrations and worked through their issues. This led to significant improvements in their behaviour.

Self-reflection was mentioned in the interviews as one of the key components that help school stakeholders in effective decision making and continuous improvement. HoS1 stated, "I observe, I meet the teachers and LSEs and even the ancillary staff of the school on a regular basis, because I believe that unless I know what's going on, I cannot then intervene when the need arises." This practice of constant observation and logging ensures that decisions are based on a thorough understanding of the school environment; the school leaders can assess their actions and strategies and respond accordingly in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Reflecting on the effectiveness of strategies over time, HoS7 noted that their school engages in longitudinal reflection, particularly when dealing with behavioural issues. "At primary level we didn't have many problems because we organized ourselves well... but at secondary level, we noticed that when an issue cropped up everyone became involved... So, we reflected on the best strategy to adopt." This ongoing reflection helps the school refine its approach and avoid overemphasizing negative behaviours. HoS6 highlighted the importance of post-action

reflection: "You need to reflect a lot because at times you need to make abrupt decisions... However, it is essential that afterwards you reflect on what could have been better or what can still be done better."

3.3.4 Goal to offer Holistic Formation

When addressing new educators in Church schools, at the beginning of scholastic year 2020-2021, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Galea-Curmi stressed that "Catholic schools should provide a holistic formation […] as an answer to the fragmentation that is being felt so strongly in the life of young people." (Galea-Curmi, 2020) This underlines the need to refrain from compartmentalising education and helping the students entrusted to the school communities to develop in a more holistic manner. The eight heads of schools made reference to different ways how they help their students be better equipped with essential skills necessary to navigate life's challenges.

A key component of this holistic formation involves engaging students in activities that **develop their leadership and initiative**. HoS8 noted, "One of the things I feel that helps students behave well is giving them initiative, engaging them a lot, responsibilizing them by giving them initiative." By identifying and nurturing student leaders, schools can create role models who exemplify positive behaviour. Empowering students to **make informed decisions** when they err, and to **take responsibility of their actions** is another critical aspect. HoS7 explained that "in the future they will know what to do when they make a mistake. They know that they are responsible for fixing that mistake." Similarly, HoS1 emphasized the need to instil courage in students to stand up against negative behaviours, either by confronting the issue or seeking help from an adult. Another essential skill needed to navigate challenges constructively, is that of **learning how to regulate emotions**. As HoS8 stated, "One of the most important things in discipline is helping the student grow into a person who can regulate her own emotions and her own behaviour." HoS2 expressed the importance of teaching students to **address conflicts directly**, stating, "Confrontation is crucial, and children need to learn the art of confronting those who have hurt them... It is our responsibility as educators to pass on this skill to them." This ability to face issues head-on is essential for personal growth and

conflict resolution. Likewise, HoS8 highlighted the importance of involving students in **conflict resolution processes** stating, "When there are issues of misbehaviour or where I would like better behaviour, then I do discuss with the students themselves and we try to come to better solutions." This collaborative approach not only resolves conflicts but also empowers students to take ownership of their actions. Finally, a concept mentioned by three of the school leaders was that **choices lead to consequences**. HoS2 explained, "For every good action, there is a good consequence, but for every action that isn't so good, there is a consequence that isn't so good." By guiding students through the process of understanding the impact of their actions, leaders noted that they could help them to internalize better the responsibility of making the right decisions.

3.4   Theme 4: Challenges and Restraints

The interviews with heads of schools revealed four primary challenges in behaviour management and conflict resolution: time constraints, resistance to change, inconsistent implementation, and insufficient training.

3.4.1   Time Constraints

Half the participants taking part in this study noted that the process of understanding student behaviour and finding solutions is often lengthy and requires considerable time investment. HoS6 remarked, "The time we have is very limited. You spend time talking to them, listening to them, and trying to understand, and then obviously that leads you to find possible solutions and talk to the parents". HoS1 echoed this concern, emphasizing that "to get to the root of the problem, we have to have several sessions to help the children understand and move forward". The time required for these processes can be overwhelming, especially when combined with the other responsibilities of running a school. HoS6 stressed her worry that some "children are not being reached" along their school journey due to lengthy processes required to settle down other immediate and complex behavioural issues.

3.4.2 Resistance to change

Introducing restorative approaches as a whole-school approach often encounters resistance from educators and parents due to deeply ingrained beliefs about discipline and authority. This resistance is frequently rooted in the personal backgrounds, character traits, and previous experiences of those involved. As HoS4 noted, "Some find our approach difficult because it's not very much in line with their character... they prefer the repressive mode where I am the educator, you do as I say, and I don't want to listen to what you have to say." For these individuals, traditional, authoritarian models of discipline feel more natural and aligned with their values. Moreover, resistance can also arise from the perception that restorative approaches undermine an educator's authority. HoS7 highlighted this issue, stating, "Some people still want the pound of flesh, so it's a process of education with all the community." For some, maintaining control and authority through punitive measures feels more secure and effective. This mindset creates friction when schools attempt to shift towards more empathetic and dialogic approaches to discipline, where understanding the underlying causes of behaviour takes precedence over immediate punishment. Overcoming this resistance requires ongoing education and dialogue with all stakeholders, including educators and parents, in order to foster a shared understanding and commitment to restorative practices.

3.4.3 Inconsistent Implementation

Even when a school commits to restorative approaches, variability in how these are practised can undermine their effectiveness. This inconsistency often stems from the different levels of commitment and understanding among staff members. As HoS1 noted, "You could have just one member of staff who does not believe in this attitude and then change the whole mindset." The presence of staff members who are either indifferent or openly resistant to restorative practices can create significant disparities in how discipline is managed, leading to confusion and a lack of coherence in the school's approach.

The demands placed on teachers further complicate consistent implementation. Balancing their primary teaching responsibilities with the need to enforce restorative discipline can be challenging, leading to a tendency to transfer these responsibilities to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). HoS8 pointed out, "At times teachers don't take full responsibility... they leave it to the assistant heads to correct students." This delegation not only places additional strain on the SLT but also reduces the opportunity for teachers to develop and practise their own skills in restorative approaches.

Parental involvement is another factor that impacts consistency. HoS4 emphasized that: "If the parents are not on our side and they don't see the validity of what we're doing and saying, it makes everything extremely difficult." When parents do not align with the school's restorative ethos, students may perceive these mixed messages and exploit them, leading to further inconsistencies in behaviour management. Ensuring consistent implementation, therefore, requires not only staff commitment and ongoing professional development but also active engagement and alignment with parents and the wider community.

3.4.4 Insufficient training

The eight interviewed heads of schools unanimously recognized the importance of providing comprehensive training and support to all stakeholders in behaviour management and conflict resolution. Continuous professional development is viewed as essential to helping educators adopt positive discipline strategies. HoS4 noted the variability in educators' comfort levels, stating that "some, because of their character, find it easy to adopt a positive mode of teaching and educating, while others find it very challenging and prefer the repressive mode." To address these differences and broaden perspectives, HoS8 highlighted the value of international training opportunities, such as Erasmus courses abroad, which have significantly expanded educators' approaches.

Parental involvement is also critical, and schools often offer training sessions to align home and school discipline strategies. As HoS8 explained, "We offer courses to parents about behaviour management, about bringing up children—the difficulties and the issues, and how to deal with them." This initiative reflects the broader educational

responsibility schools have, a sentiment echoed by HoS7: "The school is a learning place for everyone, for the whole community."

Collaboration with external experts further enhances the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies. HoS1 emphasized the value of COPE sessions that bring in university professionals or field experts to reinforce positive discipline approaches. Similarly, HoS5 highlighted partnerships with organizations like Appoġġ and Sedqa, which provide sessions on anti-bullying, mental health, and the importance of empathy and care for others.

Despite these initiatives, there is a consensus among the school leaders that more frequent and targeted training sessions are needed. HoS4 suggested, "Besides the CoPE sessions, we have staff meetings and other formation meetings... maybe it needs to be done more regularly." The well-being of staff is also a priority, with HoS5 stressing the importance of caring for teachers' mental health, which includes bringing in external experts and offering training outside of school hours. Specialized training in conflict management has shown positive results, as HoS1 noted, particularly a programme involving the use of cards to help children understand and improve their behaviour, which "has left a positive effect both on the teachers and on the students themselves." The consistent reinforcement of these positive discipline approaches is crucial for fostering a cohesive school culture. HoS1 underscored this need for continuous reinforcement, especially as staff changes occur, stating, "It is something that you should keep inculcating as time goes by." The success of these training programmes is further enhanced when all staff members take ownership of the approach, as demonstrated by the anti-bullying initiatives in HoS8's school, where active involvement from the preventive team made the strategies more effective.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of this study. Results elicited from the semi-structured interviews showed that school leaders find it challenging to balance empathy and discipline but try to do so by using preventive and positive corrective strategies, rather than retributive and punitive ones. Their personal values and their

school ethos, aligned with those of the gospel reflect restorative principles. These help them promote positive school climates where children are individually valued, heard, restored and offered holistic formation. The next chapter presents a discussion of the core findings that emerged from the interviews in the light of the available literature.

Chapter 4

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DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

This chapter critically examines the findings of the study in relation to the three research questions and existing literature on restorative approaches in schools, as extensively presented in Chapter 1. The chapter begins by presenting the key findings of the study. Then it discusses how the interviewed heads of schools are dealing with students' conflicts and behaviour issues (RQ1), the extent to which restorative practices are currently implemented in the schools they are leading (RQ2), and finally explores the main constraints that might be keeping them from moving to a whole-school restorative approach (RQ3).

4.1 Key Findings of the Study

The key findings of the study include that:

1) school leaders find it challenging to strike the right balance between using discipline and empathy when dealing with behaviour issues and conflicts;

2) school leaders align their disciplinary strategies with their core values and school ethos;

3) the restorative philosophy is very much in line with the Catholic Ethos embraced in local Catholic Schools;

4) school leaders unknowingly use restorative approaches when choosing to spend time talking and listening to victims, perpetrators and bystanders, as they focus on understanding the real issues and try to treat the root causes of misbehaviour;

5) all stakeholders (school leaders, school DSO, psychosocial teams, guidance teachers, teachers, LSEs and parents) need to be included for the restorative process to be a success;

6) restorative processes take time, and that school leaders need additional professional support from psychosocial teams on daily basis to manage to reach out to more students. More investment is needed to train personnel.

4.2   Answering Research Questions 1 and 2

How do local school leaders deal with students' conflicts and behaviour issues? Do they use restorative approaches?

Theme 1 in the Thematic Analysis chapter identifies how school leaders outline behavioural issues and conflicts as manifestations of both personal and environmental factors. Issues such as aggressive behaviour, bullying, and social conflicts often stem from deeper underlying problems such as family dynamics, social pressures, and academic struggles. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), which emphasizes the impact of multiple environmental systems on a child's development. HoS2 noted that "behind that misbehaviour there is definitely a story," which aligns with Vygotsky's social development theory emphasizing the role of social interactions in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Theme 2 shows that the interviewed school leaders frequently employ a holistic approach to understand these behaviours and the reasons for their increase, using a combination of understanding, empathy, authority and empowerment. Discipline, as defined by the leaders themselves, goes way beyond obedience to pre-set rules, but focuses more on creating an environment conducive to mistake-making where students understand the consequences of their actions and restore the harm done, developing emotional and behavioural skills in the process. HoS8 pointed out the importance of turning each disciplinary act into an educative and formative process which helps the students grow and develop holistically and acquire life skills. This is in keeping with the view of holistic education which supports children's full development (Miller 1991) and fosters in them hope, love, sensitivity, and a sense of commitment and belonging. (de Souza, 2016)

The findings (in theme 2 and 3) reveal that all the eight heads of schools demonstrate a clear inclination towards restorative practices and lead with restorative principles and values in mind. Yet, none of them showed awareness of the term RJ, its principles, values and philosophy. When reading about it in the interview schedule (section C and D), heads of schools showed particular interest in the approach and 6 of them mentioned that they would appreciate more knowledge and training about it, asking for access to

literature and studies about the implementation of restorative approaches in schools. This augurs well since existing research suggests that leadership plays a critical role in the successful implementation of restorative practices (Anfara et al., 2013; Bruhn 2020).

Having been a Church school educator for eleven years and a Church School student for thirteen years, while reading about restorative principles and values, the researcher noted that these aligned perfectly with the Catholic Church's education philosophy. As set out in three main Church Documents about education (Gravissimum Educationis, 1965; Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion, 2014; The identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue, 2022), Church Schools are to place an emphasis on holistic education, community involvement, dialogue, inclusivity, social justice, and peacebuilding. These are all reflected in restorative practices and approaches. When focusing on the development of the whole person, fostering healthy relationships within a community, and encouraging active participation in building a just and compassionate society, Church schools unknowingly align their values to restorative ones. The Heads of Schools need to be made aware of restorative principles and how these fit the present Catholic school ethos like a glove. Restorative Justice in Education can only nurture what school leaders are already promoting, and a sound suggestion would be to have Catholic School behaviour policies revised and inspired by restorative approaches rooted in Gospel values.

The results from this study show that the interviewed school leaders employ both preventive and corrective strategies to manage behaviour issues. Preventive strategies, as HoS3 suggested, focus on creating a positive school environment by promoting good behaviour through modelling and affirming positive actions. These methods align with the social learning theory, which argues that individuals learn behaviour by observing and imitating others (Bandura, 1977). Corrective strategies involve positive discipline rather than punitive measures. Through positive discipline, school leaders and other stakeholders guide students to reflect on their behaviour and understand the consequences following upon the misbehaviour. As noted in the interview responses, the participating schools implement restorative approaches to different degrees. The most used methods are restorative circles and mediation, even if used unknowingly. This aligns with the literature, which identifies restorative circles as a foundational

component of RJ in educational settings (Gregory et al., 2016). The school leaders' methods of dealing with Alisa and Fatima's conflict (interview guide [Part B] – see Appendix 2) reflect Lustick (2022)'s belief that restorative circles promote resilience and equal participation while fostering a sense of community. The thematic analysis reveals that some school leaders utilize creative corrective strategies, such as community service (HoS3) or restorative dialogues (all 8 leaders), to help students understand the impact of their actions and learn from their mistakes. These support restorative practices that emphasize empathy, dialogue, and understanding to resolve conflicts and promote a positive school climate. Restorative principles and values were mentioned repeatedly in the leaders' responses, affirming the alignment of their vision, and that of the school ethos, with Catholic teachings. As HoS1 affirmed, the positive discipline approach is constantly emphasized to support the Catholic school's vision, reflecting the values of empathy, understanding, and respect. HoS8 latched on the priority that stakeholders in Church Schools need to "evangelize the persons" by treating them with "respect and love" as this would affect students' image of God and the Church. Yet, being part of a bigger education system, along the years, Church Schools made use of retributive and punitive discipline too. From the thematic analysis, one can conclude that the current school leaders are still striving to strike the right balance between using positive discipline showing empathy and using rigid disciplinary measures. Three of the interviewed heads of schools (HoS3, HoS5, HoS8) still consider traditional corrective strategies as a good option, but these are used wisely and in controlled contexts. All three leaders insist that school behaviour and discipline rules should be clear and readily available for all stakeholders, uniformity is a must to promise fairer punishments, and the punishments are only given in relation to the actual misbehaviour, and after the student is talked to and has processed the harm and its root causes, and given the help needed. This approach contrasts with traditional punitive and retributive methods which promote zero-tolerance policies. These often harm students' well-being and sense of belonging, disrupt relationships (Gregory et al., 2010; Starzecki, 2022; Tillery et al., 2013), and fail to address the root causes of conflicts and behaviour issues (Morrison, 2007). Instead, when these three leaders use traditional methods, they focus on healing and dialogue, rather than punishment. This way of dealing with conflicts fosters a more

supportive and collaborative environment, leading to improved relationships among students and between students and staff. (Watchel, 2016).

4.3   Answering Research Question 3

How can leaders move to a whole-school restorative approach?

As described by Wachtel (2003), RJ is a philosophy guiding all interactions, rather than a strict model to follow or embrace. In fact, Meyer and Evans (2012) disagree with restorative school discipline as an add-on programme or another tool for behaviour management because restoration in this sense represents "a school culture that permeates all aspects of school organisation and relationships…". While the literature emphasizes the transformative potential of restorative practices in fostering positive school climates (Wachtel, 2016), the findings of this study suggest that the implementation across the whole school community is a challenge. Although school leaders may be willing to introduce restorative practices in a formal manner once they receive more formation themselves, they would require support from all the school community, including parents since the shift requires consistent implementation across the board. School leaders voiced their present concerns when new members of staff or actual staff members refrain from abiding by the school ethos and the school culture, thus causing havoc. At times teaching staff and parents view restorative approaches as incompatible with their existing disciplinary practices and so they create resistance to it (McCluskey et al., 2008). HoS4 noted that some educators prefer more traditional, repressive modes of discipline, which further complicates the adoption of a uniform restorative approach, while others perceive this approach as additional workload when they are already pressured to meet the demands of academic targets imposed by the performative culture of contemporary education (Buckmaster, 2016; Lustick, 2017; McCluskey et al., 2008).   This contradiction between the theoretical benefits of restorative approaches and their practical application raises important questions about the challenges schools face in fully integrating these practices.

Moving towards a whole-school restorative approach is possible but not easy. It must be a change that happens over time as it requires a shift in mentality, in school culture

and in the way things are individually and collectively done at school (and preferably at home too). According to Hopkins (2015) there needs to be a "restorative culture" that permeates all aspects of school life. It involves aligning policies, practices, and values consistently, and emphasizes the creation of an environment where relationships, mutual respect, and community building are central to daily interactions, beyond just responses to conflicts. Hopkins argues that a "restorative culture" fosters ongoing responsibility and respect among all members of a community, thereby reducing the need for reactive disciplinary measures. This change calls for better formation of all stakeholders, from heads of schools to teaching staff, students, parents and all the ones in between (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Gregory et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2011). To consistently implement restorative approaches, all stakeholders need to learn to strike the right balance between being results-focused and support-focused professionals, with school leaders working in authoritative, empowering and collaborative ways to empower the other stakeholders (Derby, 2021) Their role as leaders is pivotal as they have the greatest ability to influence disciplinary practices (Buckmaster, 2016; Gross, 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016), and as emphasized by Hopkins (2015), they must be fully committed and actively involved in the process of change. Apart from modelling restorative behaviours, restorative leaders require the ability to successfully manage difficulties, to promote development and to facilitate healing within the community.

From what was noted during the interviews, the eight school leaders are already fostering an empathetic understanding of students' needs, and this, supported by "a robust proactive framework, characterized by routines and rituals" (Bruhn, 2020), is what sets the basis for the effective application of RP in response to conflict. The interviews indicate that school leaders are already half-way there. Without knowing, they are already creating a culture where restorative values are deeply embedded in the school's everyday practices and helping stakeholders to align with restorative principles. Yet, they still lack the formal framework, necessary skills and resources to turn their schools into places of restoration for all. A lot is being done, but the formal structure would help to lessen the challenges and restraints mentioned by the leaders themselves. If integration of RJ had to happen within a Multi-Tier System of Support (as explained by Gregory et al., 2021 - see *section 2.4.3.4*), some schools might need to start from the

second and tertiary levels which involve more targeted restorative interventions, while others might even start from the tertiary level since they are already making use of problem-solving circles and restorative conferences. As explained by Van Ness et al. (2022), change in schools should encompass the transformation of perspective, structures and individuals so that schools focus more on healing and rehabilitation rather than punishment. While all heads of schools expressed their concern in trying to understand the reasons behind children's misbehaviours, more needs to be done to restore the harm caused to those involved – the victim, the perpetrator and the bystanders. Hence true justice becomes a process of healing that recognises and protects human dignity challenging the prevailing "throwaway" culture characterized by isolation and exclusion. As explained in Chapter 1, RJ becomes a culture that promotes accountability, reparation, and the rebuilding of lives for offenders, aligning with Catholic values of responsibility, forgiveness and healing (USCCB, 2000).

The four main constraints, identified by the school leaders and outlined in section 4.4, highlight the complex environment in which school leaders need to operate. While the literature advocates the adoption of restorative practices to improve school climate and student outcomes (Vaandering, 2015), the reality on the ground is that these practices are often sidelined by more immediate concerns. This suggests a need for a more nuanced understanding of how restorative practices can be integrated into schools and the support needed from the Secretariat of Catholic Education and the Education Department to encourage their implementation. The research by Gregory et al. (2021) identifies 12 implementation indicators that are crucial for a systematic, multi-year rollout of school-wide restorative justice initiatives. These indicators include infrastructure development, capacity building, and creating tiers of support within the school. The biggest challenges are the time constraints experienced by all school leaders. When dealing with episodes of misbehaviour or conflicts, school leaders deal with the case themselves, and/or with help from the DSO, guidance teachers, psychosocial teams that visit the schools once or twice a week, and at times even including teaching staff and parents. Getting everyone together to "get to the root of the problem", as explained by HoS1, asks for a lot of time as several sessions might be needed. Having other responsibilities to attend to, the different stakeholders, especially the Heads of Schools,

feel that not enough is being done, and at times "children are not being reached" (HoS6). As seen in the literature (Jennings et al, 2008 in Ventura Miller, 2008, p. 178), when a school enrols an RP programme during school hours, it needs to be overseen by a full-time RJ Coordinator. This role is inexistent in our local schools, but it is one which would greatly benefit school leaders and stakeholders. More children could be supported, more root causes of misbehaviour and conflicts could be dealt with, and school leaders could have more time to promulgate restorative principles and values amongst stakeholders until they permeate the school's culture and programmes, as proposed by Derby (2021). Having psychosocial teams present at school once or twice a week is not enough for schools to meet the ever-growing needs of the students, especially in the post-covid years when students' and family needs have increased drastically.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings of the study in relation to the literature. School leaders have a pivotal role in promoting restorative values aligned with the Gospel and supported by Church teachings about Catholic Education. Embracing the RJ philosophy and letting it infiltrate in the local education system, especially and particularly in Church Schools, can help school leaders concretize the philosophy of positive input in schools sustained by the Gospel and Catholic teachings. Training and support for all stakeholders, the introduction of RJ as a whole-school approach, and the strengthening of psychosocial teams and the presence of more services in schools could help minimize the four challenges pointed out by the school leaders themselves.

The final section draws the conclusions of the main findings, outlines the strengths and limitations of this study, and proposes recommendations for further studies.

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CONCLUSION

Summary and Implications of the Key Findings

The study contributes to the body of literature on restorative justice in education by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of restorative approaches in Catholic schools. It supports the idea that restorative practices can be effectively embedded within a school's ethos and culture, particularly in religious or value-based education systems.

The knowledge and concept of RJ is still in its primitive stages here in Malta. Yet this study shows that, although the interviewed heads of schools are not yet aware of the RJ values and principles, and how RJ can be the philosophy behind the positive input they are already inculcating in schools, they are already dealing with misbehaviour issues and conflicts restoratively. Students feel accepted, listened to and helped in all the different ways possible so that the harm inflicted on them, or the harm they have caused to others can be restored. The literature review chapter shows that RJ can help educators concretize something that is core to the identity of Church Schools - integrating mercy and justice as proposed by Pope Francis, echoing the call to promote restoration found in the Scriptures. School leaders' vision to "evangelize the person" holistically while treating students "with respect and love" (HoS8), aligns with the Gospel values and Church teachings. The principles and values promoted through the ethos of different Catholic schools naturally align with restorative principles and values. Hence this study does not suggest a new way of doing things but confirms that RJ is already the bedrock in our Catholic Schools. It is the philosophy behind the positive approaches already adopted in our schools. The study shows that students gain more if RJ is integrated and implemented in our schools in a more purposeful manner as a whole-school strategy. To achieve this, there is the need of more investment in psychosocial trained personnel and RJ training offered to the different stakeholders.

The findings also support the integration of restorative justice principles with educational theories such as the Social Learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Social Development theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The emphasis on empathy, dialogue, and understanding aligns with the idea that behaviour is learned through social interactions and modelling. This suggests a theoretical framework where restorative practices are

not merely behaviour management tools but are integral to the socio-emotional and cognitive development of students. The findings also expand Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory by highlighting the role of school leaders and their restorative vision as part of the microsystem that influences student behaviour. This enhances the understanding of how individual leaders' values and approaches impact student outcomes within the broader environmental systems.

The following are some practical and policy implications that emerge from the key findings:

- Given the global success of Restorative Justice (RJ) in schools and communities, there is a need to raise local awareness of its benefits, not just in the legal system, but also in schools and households for addressing harm.

- A clearer understanding of Restorative Approaches and their integration into schools is crucial, particularly for those in the Secretariat of Catholic Education or the Education Department. Without policymakers realizing its alignment with Catholic values, RJ won't be uniformly promoted to foster sound relationships, holistic development, and gospel values in handling conflicts.

- RJ coordinators would be beneficial to facilitate schools' transition to a whole-school restorative approach.

- National policies, especially in Church schools, could advocate RJ training for all stakeholders, including policymakers, psychosocial teams, educators, and prospective teachers. This training should focus on restorative practices, conflict resolution, and positive discipline.

- Educational policymakers at national and school level may consider revising behaviour policies to incorporate restorative principles, prioritizing dialogue, reflection, and accountability over punishment. Policies should promote parental involvement, aligning home and school discipline through workshops or resources.

- Catholic schools need more psychosocial support from the Secretariat for Catholic Education to develop personalized support for students with behavioural issues. Post-COVID traumas, social media dangers, and family breakdowns require increased counselling, peer mediation, and mentorship for students and families.

Strengths of the Study

- Given the increasing focus on social-emotional learning, conflict resolution, and positive behaviour interventions in schools globally, this study is particularly timely in a post-pandemic world, where many schools are grappling with increased behavioural issues and the need for more supportive and empathetic approaches.

- As restorative practices gain traction in schools worldwide, this study contributes to a growing body of literature as it examines whether these practices can be noted in Maltese Church schools. It fills a gap by focusing on Catholic Church schools, a setting where the values of empathy, compassion, and holistic formation are central to the ethos of education. The findings offer unique insights into how RJ principles align with religious and ethical values, contributing to both educational and religious studies literature.

- The use of semi-structured interviews with school leaders provided rich, detailed insights into their experiences and approaches to behaviour management and conflict resolution. The depth of qualitative data allows for a nuanced understanding of how RP are being implemented in school settings, offering valuable context that quantitative data might not capture.

- The application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis ensured systematic identification of key themes, adding structure and credibility to the study's findings.

- Actionable recommendations for school leaders and policymakers offer a realistic roadmap for implementing whole-school restorative approaches.

- Insights into how school leaders shape a restorative ethos contribute valuable knowledge for future leadership training.

Limitations of the study

- The study is based on interviews with only eight heads of Church schools. While the insights are valuable, the sample size is small and limited to a specific context. Hence, results cannot be generalized to local State or Independent schools.

- The study focuses on school leaders' views, leaving out perspectives from students, teachers, and parents, and so it cannot give a comprehensive understanding of the efficacy and application of RPs.

- The study is context-specific, focusing on Church schools with a Catholic ethos, limiting the relevance of the findings to other local educational settings.

- The data relies on self-reported experiences and perspectives from the heads of schools, which may introduce bias. Participants might have presented their actions and approaches in a more favourable light, potentially overstating the effectiveness of RP or underreporting challenges and failures.

- The study doesn't deeply analyse specific restorative strategies (e.g., circles, mediation), which could enhance practical implementation guidance.

Recommendations for Further Study

- Investigate RP effectiveness in diverse settings (state, secular, and schools with different cultural contexts).

- Include perspectives from teachers, students, parents, and support staff through mixed-method approaches.

- Explore how different leadership styles impact RP adoption and success.

- Investigate how the implementation of RP influences teacher well-being and retention could provide valuable insights particularly at a time when the education sector is facing a scarcity of teaching staff.

- Review behaviour policies in local schools, comparing restorative versus traditional disciplinary approaches.

- Analyse the costs of RP implementation (e.g. training, staffing, resources) compared to traditional methods.

- Examine how parental involvement affects RP success, exploring engagement strategies for consistent behaviour management.

A Final Reflection

Starting from an initial quest to study ways how to lead according to God's heart, this research process helped the researcher to uncover the richness hidden in the process of restoration, and how this can help children and adolescents in school settings to be in touch with their vulnerable selves and restore any harm caused to them. Educators called to offer holistic education (and so to humbly take the role of the Restorative Potter), become essential catalysts in picking up the broken pieces of their students' stories and lead them to restoration (see image in Appendix 3). Reflecting on this educational journey, the researcher notes the discovery of a new call within the original call.

This study process served the researcher to see justice from a different point of view. In discovering the drawbacks hidden behind punitive approaches in educational settings, appreciating positive behaviour strategies and understanding that discipline is not something "we do to students" but something "we develop within them" (Vaandering, 2010), the role of educators and school leaders is seen in a different light. A more holistic experience is offered when students not only learn right from wrong but learn to appreciate their hidden capacity to deal with conflicts and broken relationships restoratively. Schools working restoratively promise a safer and more conducive

environment, empowering students to acquire the essential learning skills and to be better citizens.

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APPENDIX 1

_____

Information Letter and

Consent Form

INFORMATION LETTER & CONSENT FORM TO HEADS OF SCHOOL

Request for permission to conduct research
[DATE]

Dear Head of School,

My name is Sr Rosanne Azzopardi and I am a student at the University of Malta, reading for a Master degree in Catholic School Leadership. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled: ***BEAUTY FROM ASHES: The Contribution of the Restorative Leader in a school community****. This study seeks ways how to strike the right balance between discipline and empathy, particularly in educational settings. I intend to study the concept of restoration, the history of Restorative practices, highlight qualities of restorative leaders, and unravel God's restorative approaches within the Judeo-Christian tradition. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Rev. Dr Jimmy Bonnici.

Throughout the study I will be conducting a 45-min/1hour in-depth interview with 6-8 Church school leaders to get an overview of the methods being used locally to deal with students' conflicts and behaviour issues. The interviewees will not be identified, and the study will not make comparisons between the schools, primary/secondary sectors, or Maltese/Gozitan schools. It will only capture an overview of what is being done in different schools and settings. There are no foreseen risks to the participants participating in this study.

I am hereby seeking your consent to participate in my study. The semi-structured interview will ask you as a school leader to identify how you deal with conflict on daily basis in your school, which policies are in place, which strategies are used by the different school stakeholders and how you deal with the perpetrator, the victim and the other effected children in a given conflict. During the interview I will present a case study and kindly ask you how you would deal with the mentioned conflict/ bullying / challenging behaviour.

After the actual interview I will make use of a thematic analysis approach to elicit common themes related to conflict management and restorative discourse. Through these, I will analyse in what ways the leaders and your school community are making

use of restorative discourse or restorative approaches. I will also analyse the steps you as a school might wish to take to implement RP (restorative approaches) as whole-school restorative approach. Once the study is over, these results will be shared with you and as a school you can make use of them as a beneficial tool to implement better, or introduce, Restorative Approaches.

Participation is entirely voluntary, and you will be free to withdraw at any point without any repercussions. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you will be erased if this is technically possible (for example, before it is published). Data collected will be treated confidentially. Interviews will be audio-recorded and once the interview is done, the voice of the recordings will be changed to ensure an additional layer of protection. All data will be transcribed and kept safely and securely on an encrypted hard drive. Data will be password protected and kept under lock and key. When the interviews are transcribed, each interviewee will be given a pseudonym. The original and the pseudonymised data will be stored separately. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this transcribed data unless access is required specifically from examiners for verification purposes. All data will be destroyed after the presentation of the dissertation for examination. As a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

Throughout my research I will abide to the procedures and guidelines suggested by Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) within the University of Malta

Should you require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor. Both our contact details are provided below.

Thank you for your time and kind consideration of this request.

Participant's consent

☐ I hereby declare to have read the information about the nature of the study, my involvement and data management.

☐ I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my questions have been satisfactorily answered.

☐ I understand that should I have any further queries, I can contact Sr Rosanne Azzopardi (researcher's email address and mobile number) or her supervisor Rev. Dr Jimmy Bonnici (supervisor's email address)

☐ I agree to participate in this research study.

_____   _____

Participant's name (in block)   Researcher's name

_____   _____

Participant' signature   Researcher's signature

_____

Date

APPENDIX 2

_____

Interview Questions

Interview Questions with Heads of School

Part A

General Questions:

1. For how long have you worked in a school setting, which roles have you undertaken and for how long?

2. How would you define a conflict or a behavioural issue?

3. How do you manage to strike a balance between discipline and empathy? Is this possible?

4. When dealing with a conflict or a behavioural issue, which values and beliefs do you abide to?

5. Being a church school leader, leading a school where gospel values are embraced and promoted, does this impact the way you deal with behaviour issues and conflicts?

6. Which are the most frequent conflicts and behaviour issues? Over the course of years, have you seen an increase, a decrease, or any changes in behaviour issues? Give possible reasons for this.

7. Is behaviour management a theme that worries the different school stakeholders (SLT, teachers and LSEs, students, parents, auxiliary staff)?

8. Do you have a school behaviour policy? Which stakeholders are included in the process to promote behaviour in the school? As a rule, do stakeholders reinforce positive behaviours or punish negative ones?

9. How do you promote a positive school culture and prevent behaviour issues from arising in the first place?

10. What training and support do you provide to teachers and staff to help them effectively address behaviour issues and promote positive student behaviour?

11. How do you work with parents and other stakeholders to address behaviour issues and promote positive student behaviour?

12. How do you monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of your methods for dealing with student behaviour issues, and what changes do you make when necessary?

Part B

Case Study :

Alisa and Fatima have been friends since childhood but have recently had a falling out. Alisa spread rumours about Fatima on her social media, and has also been avoiding her in school. Fatima denied the content of Alisa's rumours and feels hurt that Alisa doesn't believe her. The situation has become so tense that other students have started taking sides, and several have been caught up in the conflict.
Their parents have been friends since childhood. Fatima's mother was infuriated when she realised that Alisa's rumours were causing Fatima symptoms of school anxiety. She has contacted the school to express concern about her daughter and demanded punitive action to stop Alisa from spreading more rumours. Alisa's mother also contacted the school. She is insisting that Alisa never spread any rumours about Fatima – in class or on social media. The situation has become so tense that both parents have requested that their daughters be placed in different classes.

Questions:

1. How would you deal with this conflict? Who would you involve in the process? Would you involve Alisa and Fatima in resolving conflicts and addressing behaviour issues? Separately or together, and what role do they play in the process?
2. Which values would you abide to?
3. Would there be any consequences? To whom?
4. What might be the difficulties and the main drawbacks in the process?
5. Do you think this strategy would address the root causes of the student behaviour issues or would it be treating the symptoms?

Part C – only if time permits.

Conflict Management Strategies List & Questions:

The following is a list of different conflict management strategies. Kindly mark the ones which you use at school.

- ☐ Peer mediation - It involves trained students who use active listening, empathy, and problem-solving to assist their peers in resolving problems.
- ☐ Counselling and support - Giving students who may be having emotional or behavioural issues counselling and support services can be a good method to deal with disputes and stop them from getting worse.
- ☐ Positive Behaviour Support - A proactive approach that focuses on teaching and rewarding positive behaviours rather than only punishing negative ones.
- ☐ Collaborative problem-solving - Working with students to uncover the underlying problems that are causing conflicts and coming up with possible solutions together.
- ☐ Restorative justice – A procedure that brings together students, teachers, and other stakeholders to talk about incidences of hurt or wrongdoing and to discover methods to mend bridges and rebuild trust.
- ☐ School-Wide punishment Policies - Creating fair and equitable punishment policies that are transparent and consistent. These help to avoid problems before they start.
- ☐ Conflict Resolution Training - Giving teachers and students conflict resolution training, you may help them acquire the abilities and tactics necessary to handle conflicts when they occur.
- ☐ Parent-teacher conferences – Offering the chance to discuss any issues they may be having with a student's behaviour and collaborate on finding solutions.
- ☐ Student-Led Solutions - Including students in the development and implementation of conflict resolution strategies can give them a sense of ownership over the process and give them the confidence to effect change.
- ☐ In-School Suspension - Offering a structured setting where kids can consider their actions and focus on cultivating good habits and conflict-resolution techniques.

1. From the ones marked, which strategy (or two) do you find most effective? Give reasons why.

2. From the ones marked, which strategy do you find most challenging to implement? Why?

3. If you had the time and you were given the professional personnel to facilitate the process, which new strategies would you consider implementing within your school? (You can refer to ones in the list that were not marked or other strategies).

4. (ONLY IF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IS ALREADY BEING PRACTICED) Which of the following restorative practices happen at school?

☐ Restorative circles - A restorative circle is a process that brings together students, teachers, and staff in a circle to discuss and resolve conflicts or issues in a safe and respectful environment.

☐ Restorative conferences - Restorative conferences are meetings between students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to discuss incidents of harm or wrongdoing and find ways to repair relationships and restore trust.

☐ Peer mediation - Peer mediation involves trained students who help their peers resolve conflicts through active listening, empathy, and problem-solving.

☐ Restorative language - Restorative language is a way of speaking that emphasizes empathy, understanding, and problem-solving rather than punishment and blame.

☐ Positive behaviour support - Positive behaviour support is a proactive approach to behaviour management that involves teaching and reinforcing positive behaviours rather than simply punishing negative behaviours.

☐ Restorative justice circles - Restorative justice circles are a more structured form of restorative circles that are used to address serious incidents of harm or violence.

☐ Community service - Community service is a way for students to make amends for their behaviour by engaging in acts of service that benefit their school or community.

☐ Restorative re-entry - Restorative re-entry is a process that helps students who have been suspended or expelled reintegrate back into the school community by addressing the underlying issues that led to their behaviour.

☐ Restorative mentoring - Restorative mentoring is a program that matches students with adult mentors who provide guidance, support, and positive role modelling.

☐ Restorative classrooms - Restorative classrooms are characterized by a supportive, inclusive, and collaborative learning environment that emphasizes positive relationships and mutual respect.

6. Restorative justice approaches involve bringing people together (students, teachers, etc). When these approaches are practiced, who is the person that guides the sessions? Is it always the school leader?

7. Would you be interested in learning more about Restorative Approaches, and giving training to your staff members?

APPENDIX 3

_____

Image of the Biblical Potter

restoring the broken pieces
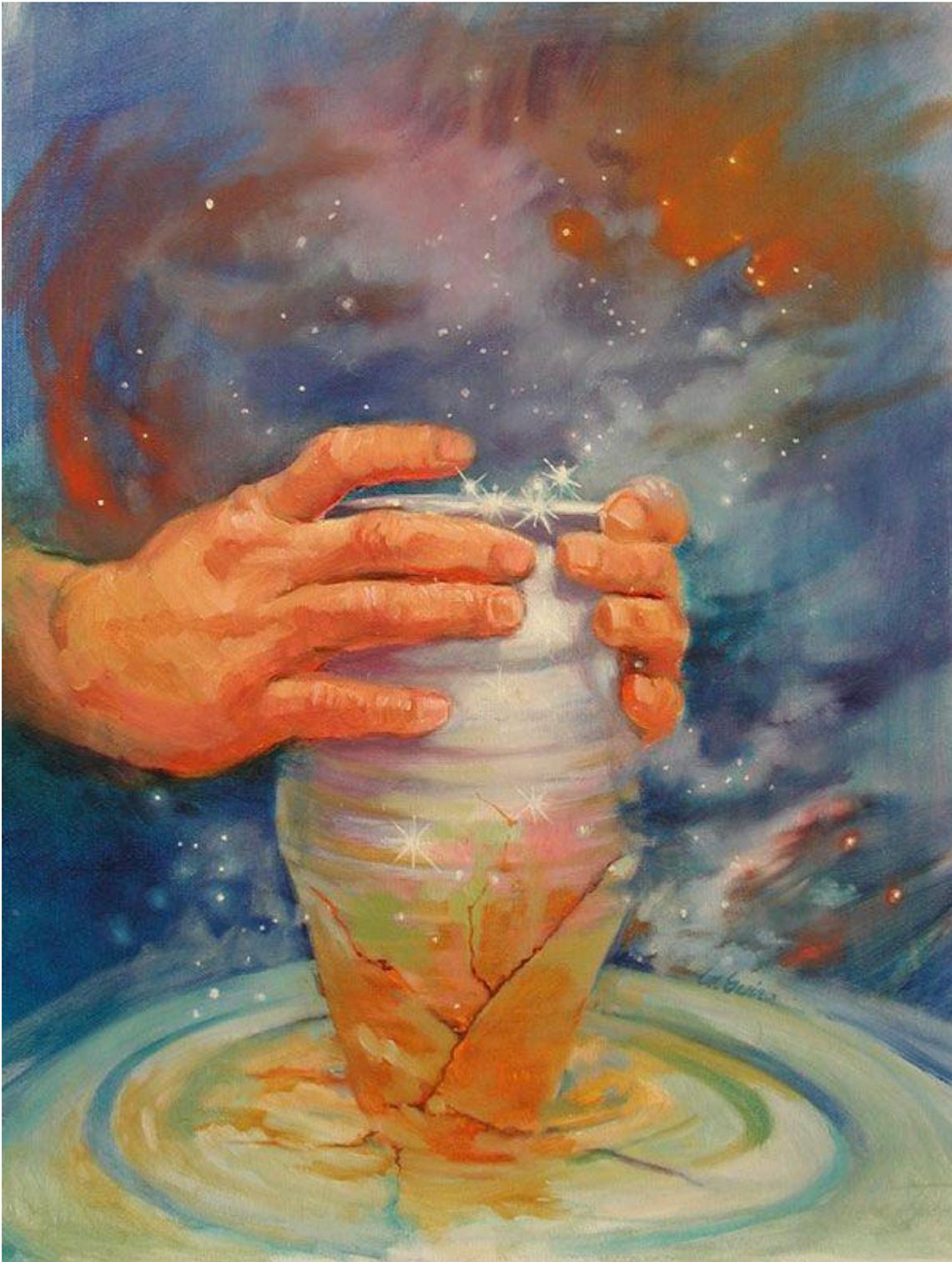
Restored In the Potter's Hands

(Jeremiah 18: 1-12)