

# Reducing Inequality & Valuing Identity for Inclusion through Restorative Practice in Cornwall's Schools

## An Impact Evaluation of RJ Working's Restorative Ripple Effect Programme



**RJ Working**  
**Restorative Approaches to Harm**

## **Introduction: RJ Working and its mission in Cornwall**

RJ Working has a charitable mission to reduce inequalities amongst children and young people in Cornwall using Restorative Practice. We have been working with Cornwall's schools since 2017 with partnerships at varying stages of development in 2026. RJ Working is a member of the UK Restorative Justice Council and meets its Training Provider standards, which are verified annually.

Restorative Practice is an accessible, adaptable model, suited to strengthening relationships between individuals (staff~student and student~student) and developing school communities. Emphasising relationships changes dynamics and creates a culture of empathy; shaping how schools understand inequity. Alongside these applications, in the UK, RJ Working is pioneering use of the Restorative model to value identity and tackle cultural identity harms such as racism.

Further, we support innovative uses of Restorative Practice to tackle the harms of the Climate ~Nature crisis. The Restorative model has unrealised potential to offer i) Cornwall's children and young people and ii) Cornwall's schools and colleges, in terms of shared and collaborative language, principles and practices for working together.

## **Tackling entrenched inequality**

Cornwall, the peripheral Southwest, is often misunderstood as wealthy due to its image of beautiful beaches, but as one study of its poverty was titled, 'You Can't Eat the View'. Entrenched, intergenerational worklessness means that some children grow up without knowing of a single family member in employment. EU recognition of Cornwall's poverty led to significant investment from the European Social Fund (ESF). The impact of losing this is now being felt.

Cornwall has 11 neighbourhood areas in the highest 10% of multiple deprivation (IMD) nationally, which are recognised as entrenched over 10 years. RJ Working's purpose of tackling inequality (defined in four overarching strategic aims) means that our efforts largely concentrate on schools that serve these profoundly disadvantaged communities.

In these target schools, the number of 'Pupil Premium' students vary, all above 25% (the highest is 42%), and school PP policies vary in their local detail but all state goals of reducing the attainment gap. Cornwall is ranked 147th of 149 Local Authorities according to the South West Social Mobility Commission, quoted by Cornwall Community Foundation.

## **Rural Deprivation**

There is significant evidence that Cornwall's geography creates additional barriers to social mobility. The region is defined by coastal and rural areas with around 20 former market towns whose struggle to maintain commercial activity is compounded post-covid. Coastal built-up areas in England tend to have lower levels of higher education qualification and lower employment rates than non-coastal built-up areas (ONS, 2024). Employment patterns are often insecure and seasonal (part-time and low-paid). This combines with tourist prices to entrench financial poverty and household stressors causing parental depletion, strained relationships, anxiety and depression..

In Cornwall specifically, independent research about rural deprivation highlights 'pretty poverty': hardship that is masked by a prosperous tourist image and can be under-identified by standard measures. The Pretty Poverty Report: Cornwall Ruralities Matters (Ovenden-Hope, Brown & colleagues, 2025) points to how remoteness, transport dependency, high living costs (heating, transport and food) and housing pressures can combine to intensify disadvantage in rural and coastal areas. These place-based factors limit opportunities and access to employment.

# The Restorative Ripple Effect – what it is and how it works:

RJ Working offers a range of group work programmes for schools, supporting the development of social and emotional skills needed to engage and learn well at school.

Our flagship Ripple Effect Programme supports peer relationships and understanding. Schools are invited to nominate a diverse group of 10 students in years 8 or 9 who face challenges related to disadvantage and exclusion. We particularly encourage involvement of Pupil Premium students, Care-experienced students and those who experience prejudice and discrimination.

It is delivered by two trained and supervised facilitators over 3 days and is suitable for students dealing with challenges connected to resilience, confidence, attendance, behaviour, or experiencing harms to identity.

Through experiential learning: circles discussions, creative group activities, games and shared responses to short films, students learn about the 3 Rs of Restorative Practice – Respect, Relationships and Responsibility - and allyship..

In their feedback students have shared that they felt able to engage with the programme through the variety of delivery methods and the interactive groups experience being very different from usual classroom sessions.

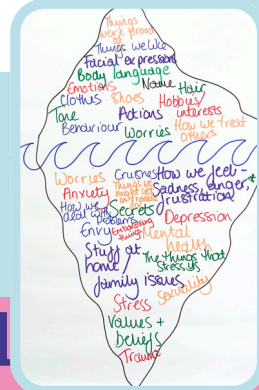
The programme supports young people to:

1. Better understand themselves
2. Build stronger connections with peers across difference
3. Understand prejudice & discrimination and build the confidence to tackle it
4. Develop language, principles & skills to respond to conflict and harm

Selection for the programme is intentionally non stigmatising, offered as teamwork and leadership development, aimed at young people not usually chosen for these opportunities. This means young people are bringing their lived experience to discussions about themes of injustice, although the focus is not on their experiences.

Participation creates opportunities for young people to reset their relationship with their peer group and wider community, with the potential to transform relationship dynamics.

Students are invited to re-imagine themselves as leaders, and to work with school staff to identify next steps and actions to ripple out their learning in their school communities.

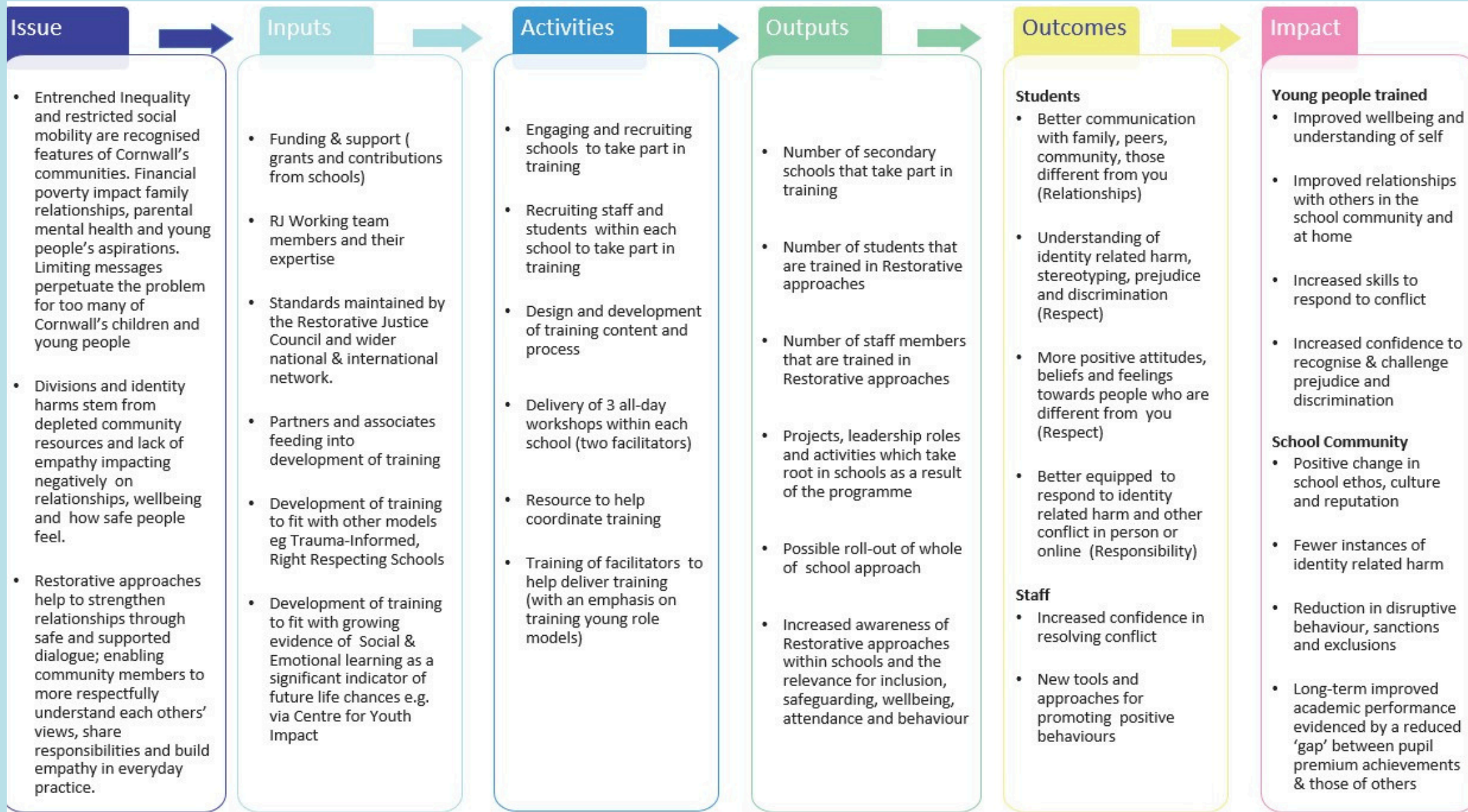


## Numbers Engaged

Between 2019 – 2026 RJ Working has delivered 31 Ripple Effect programmes in 15 of Cornwall's secondary schools, engaging in depth a total of 427 young people.

This built on our original programme of work with 80 students across 8 of those same schools 3 independently evaluated by IPSOS Mori in 2018

# The Ripple Effect Theory of Change





# Evidence of Impact with 427 young people, in groups of 10, in 15 schools

## 3. Understanding prejudice & discrimination and developing the confidence to tackle it

Participants stated that the training not only improved their understanding of prejudice and discrimination, but also helped them develop the tools and confidence to tackle it when it occurs.

When asked how Restorative Practice could be useful to look after other people, one young person said *"If somebody is discriminating somebody and being horrible I have learned that actually it's a lot better to step in and try help sort it out instead of just watching it happen"*

Another noted that Restorative Practice can *"stop bullying, helping people out by sorting it with a conversation"*.

Some also recognised the stretch that this learning requires; *"Learning about discrimination was the most challenging part because it's hard and hurtful to learn what people go through"*

94%  
have a better understanding of prejudice

93%  
have more confidence to tackle prejudice

### Why is this important?

Prejudice and discrimination cause multiple harms for everybody involved. When people experience prejudice (pre-judgement with little knowledge) and are harmed in an aspect of their identity, it negatively impacts self-esteem, self-respect and belonging /inclusion. The person making the negative assumptions, is demonstrating a limited worldview and limited social skills. Restorative practice works with both parties. Developing skills in communication, cooperation and empathy supports young people to recognise and stand up against these types of harm, and so benefits everyone involved.

## 4. Developing language, principles & skills to respond to conflict and harm

Students feedback showed that they felt confident and able to apply their learning to real life situations;

*"When there has been conflict I can now use restorative practice to help people to resolve their disagreements no matter how big or small".*

*"When a group of people have had conflict and fallen out with each other, you have to give guidance and support"*

*"If two people got into a fight or an argument or one of these people did something to harm the other.... they could also use it to resolve, see the impact from someone else's perspective".*

*"It helps me gain a neutral outlook, and to see both sides. It also focuses on the future and how to resolve, restore or improve the relationship. It would help me in a situation where friends have fallen out and both think the other is wrong".*

90%  
feel more confident in supporting difficult conversations

89%  
are better at working out problems with other people

'Skills Practice' is an important part of the programme, participants are invited to take different roles to practice Restorative conversations. Many young people saw this as important, saying it helped them practice empathy. One said "I enjoyed making up the scenario with Penelope and Peter, it was fun and we got to act it out and play the role of the listener to help improve our listening skills". Others recognised that it was both "fun and challenging"

### Why is this important?

Practicing 'the restorative thing to do' supports the development of emotional regulation. When young people learn to understand their own and each others' feelings and needs in relation to difficult situations and relationship dynamics, they can make informed choices about how to communicate. Restorative Practice supports young people to read situations and recognise where support can be given to repair harm,<sup>6</sup> rather than picking a side.

# The Restorative Ripple Effect in the wider School Community

Restorative practice is not an 'add-on' intervention: it is an enabling approach that helps schools deliver their Pupil Premium agendas, and equip young people who are facing disadvantage with transferable language and principles for dealing with challenging situations.

Restorative tools and principles when practised consistently can achieve:

- strengthened, more flexible relationships
- a shared understanding of responses to conflict and harm.
- the development of a school culture which supports positive and caring behaviour
- individual and collective well-being and higher attendance
- stability and motivation for narrowing the attainment gap
- bringing to life the values and principles of school policies and mission statements
- enables inclusion and we intend, measurably reduces exclusions
- supports Safeguarding by developing a culture of care and communication, enabling young people to recognise and talk about harm, and equipping staff to respond effectively.

Whole school Restorative approaches involve leadership, culture, Pastoral Support teams, parents and the wider community.

RJ Working has supported four schools to achieve the Quality Mark of the UK Restorative Justice Council and wants to further develop use of this incentive. Please see [this short film](#).



- **Place-based capacity building:** The RJ Working team can help schools embed shared language, routines and coaching so that Restorative approaches become normal practice across classrooms, corridors and leadership, supporting sustained culture change rather than short term projects.
- **Strengthening relationships across systems:** Consistent with the evidence base we support schools to work Restoratively with families and relevant partners, reducing fragmentation and improving early help /problem-solving.
- **Reducing reliance on exclusion as a response:** By building staff confidence and consistent responses to harm, schools are better placed to prevent avoidable removals from learning. This is an important equity lever given the unequal impact of exclusion on disadvantaged pupils.
- **Developing essential skills through everyday practice:** Restorative routines create repeated opportunities for pupils to practice listening, communicating, taking responsibility, managing conflict and repairing relationships; skills strongly linked to wellbeing, engagement and long-term outcomes.

Overall, whole-school Restorative Practice targets the underlying conditions that generate inequity - beliefs, relationships and power - while also supporting measurable priorities such as inclusion, wellbeing and essential skills. In a rural and coastal county where disadvantage can be hidden and access to services is uneven, this relational, participatory approach offers a practical way for schools to deliver fairer day-to-day experiences for children and young people, especially those most likely to be marginalised.

# Case Studies

## Case Study: Restorative Ambassadors at Humphry Davy School (37.4% of students eligible for Pupil Premium)

The Ripple Effect programme at Humphry Davy was delivered with a group of young people who wouldn't usually put themselves forward for leadership roles.

Despite the stress of upcoming mocks (which we now know to avoid), through the programme the young people moved from shy and nervous to speaking up during circle questions. They confidently and decisively worked out how to handle different conflict scenarios and opened up with their feelings and opinions.

The school supported these students to take on active leadership roles, and invited them to become Restorative Ambassadors. RJ Working team members ran weekly training sessions for the Ambassadors over 6 weeks, and the students led on developing what this role would entail. Since their training, they have helped run Restorative workshops for younger year groups, given talks in assemblies and created a safe space for younger students to resolve conflict Restoratively.

The students have let us know the importance of this experience for them; they are highly motivated to step up in school and contribute further to a Restorative culture of care. All have reported becoming more confident, through working outside their comfort zones. Friendships and relationships have flourished alongside an impressive level of trust in each other. They are proud of the open and respectful environment they have created as a team.



## Case Study: Restorative Girls Group at Bodmin College: (27.8% of students eligible for Pupil Premium)

The Bodmin College Ripple Effect was a 3 Day programme engaging 12 Y9 students who would not typically have been chosen for leadership opportunities. The group did well to navigate the complexity of dynamics within their group around gender, race, and disability. They engaged with activities which focused on prejudice and discrimination, expressing passion and anger about inequality and unfairness.

The girls in the group expressed frustrations about some of their experiences; friendship struggles, relationship issues, and discipline procedures in school. They recognised ways they could provide support and advice to younger girls in the school, and so ripple out their learning. They have set up a lunchtime Girls Group; a Restorative space where discussions are held in circles. This is in its early stages and has strengthened their sense of responsibility with the potential to reposition them as role models in the school.



# Learning and Conclusions

- **YEAR GROUPS:** The Ripple Effect Programme has most impact when delivered with Y9s. Investing authority in a group of Y9s who don't usually get picked for leadership opportunities can realign those students relationships with their school, and give them the confidence to step up and look out younger year groups.
- **TIMING:** Delivery of the Ripple Effect Programme has most impact in the autumn or spring term. This maximises time for students to put their learning into action. The Ripple Effect has been most successful when it has been delivered year on year in a school - becoming embedded as a regular and expected opportunity for student development.
- **SCHOOL STAFF INVOLVEMENT:** Staff involvement is key. Consistent involvement of a nominated staff member can change that staff member's relationships with the students who struggle the most, and can help the students to understand the perspectives of school staff. Relationship with participating staff members must be invested in both before and after the programme. School staff participation in our adult training on Restorative Practice supports them to understand the theory and think strategically about how best to put it into practice within their school community.
- **CONTINUITY:** Cascading learning works best when there is a clear pathway for the students to take their learning into the wider school community, for example, when the students are supported to become Restorative Ambassadors or Peer Mentors, or when they can take on a specific project within their school as a team of young leaders.

We intend this Impact Evaluation to become the basis of a wider Report incorporating other Restorative Practice programmes for KS2, KS3 and FE students. This will further expand our overarching theme of reducing inequality & valuing identity for inclusion through Restorative Practice in Cornwall's schools.