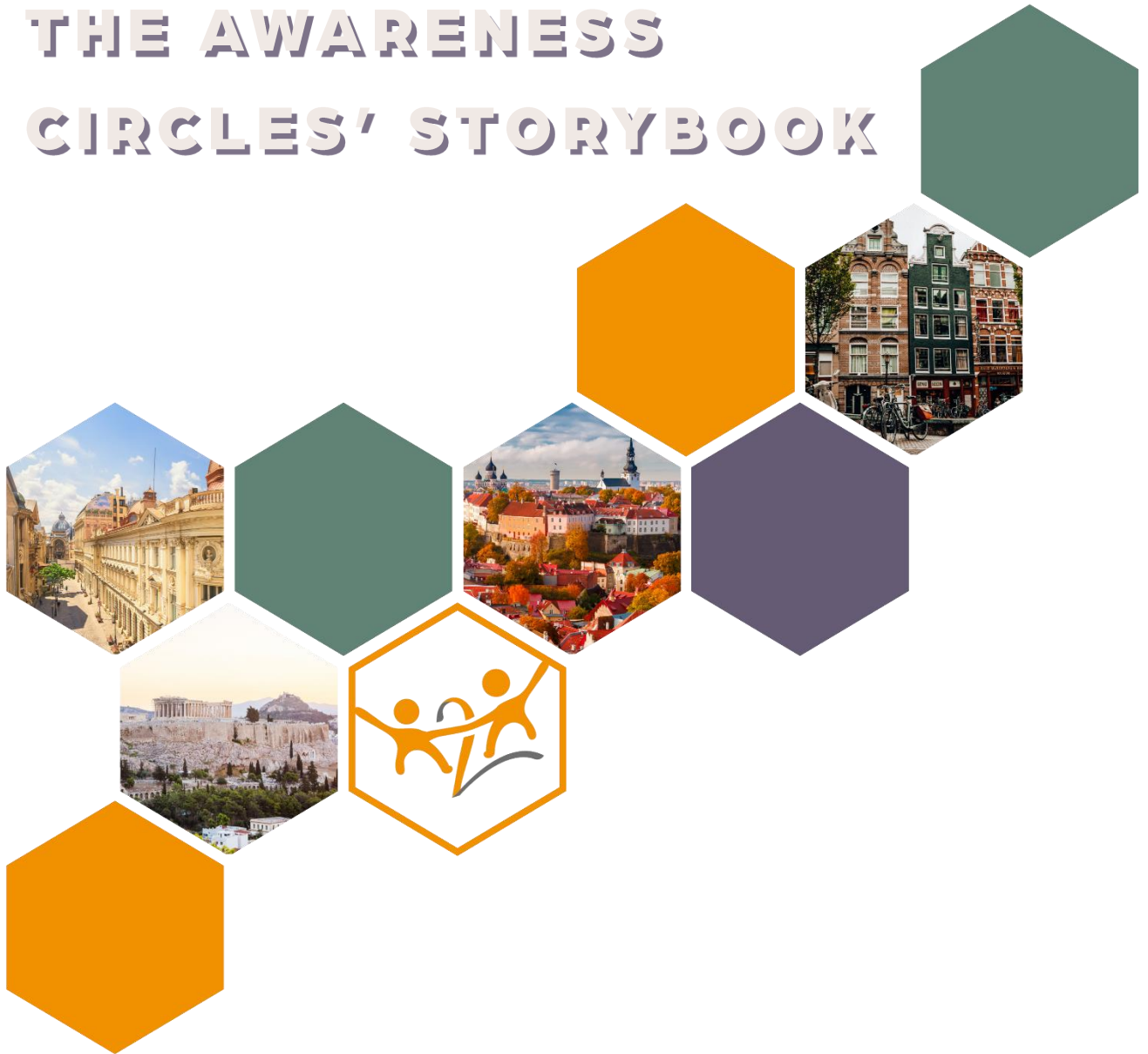


RESTORATIVE APPROACHES IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

THE AWARENESS CIRCLES' STORYBOOK



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UNDER THE FRAMEWORK OF

i-Restore 2.0 Project

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REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
SOCIAL INSURANCE BOARD

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Introduction

"The Awareness Circles' Storybook" illustrates the outcomes from the awareness raising circles on restorative justice with children that took place in different schools of four European countries under the framework of the i-RESTORE 2.0 project.

The [i-RESTORE 2.0 \(2022-2024\)](#) project builds upon the results of the first [i-RESTORE project \(2019-2021\)](#), which aimed at promoting restorative justice for child victims of crime and improving the skills of legal professionals. Leveraging the results of the initial project, i-RESTORE 2.0 goes further by establishing procedures to ensure that high-quality restorative justice is accessible to children involved with the law. The project targets are in Romania, Greece, the Netherlands and Estonia.

In line with the [EU Victims' Rights Strategy \(2020-2025\)](#)¹, the project aims to:

- ⇒ **empower children**, including victims, to express their views about restorative justice through digital and child-led creative approaches;
- ⇒ **increase awareness** of families, practitioners, policy makers and the media on restorative justice for children in criminal proceedings and educational settings;
- ⇒ **increase the number of practitioners** who can provide child-friendly restorative justice services.

Over 24 months, the project has developed and implemented a capacity building scheme for professionals, mutual learning events through cross-border twinning arrangements, has empowered children in assessing restorative justice processes, and actively engaged in discussions with key stakeholders who need to be aware of the role they can play for successful and accessible restorative justice processes with children.

This project, co-funded by the Justice Programme of the European Commission, is a collaboration by a strong team of seven high level expert organisations: Terre des hommes Romania, Terre des hommes – Regional Hub in Hungary, Terre des hommes Hellas, European Forum for Restorative Justice (Belgium), Restorative Justice Nederland (RJN) and HALT (the Netherlands), and the Social Insurance Board (Estonia).

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025), COM(2020)258final. (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0258>)

About the awareness raising circles under i-RESTORE 2.0

At the heart of the i-Restore 2.0 project the aim is empowering children in being agents of change and having their voices heard in criminal or related matters that concern them. Following this objective, the implementing partners of i-Restore 2.0 delivered awareness raising circles in schools and higher education institutions, approaching children, youngsters and their communities about restorative justice and engaged them in reflecting on the benefits and challenges of its implementation in educational and justice settings.

In the years of 2023 to 2024, 49 circles have taken place in Estonia, Greece, the Netherlands and Romania, reaching more than 500 participants, including: primary, secondary and higher education students and their families; teachers and other school staff members; youth justice professionals; restorative justice practitioners; social workers; and youth with lived experience in juvenile detention centres.

With this Awareness Circles' Storybook we would like to share our learnings and put at the forefront the experiences of those who participated. We hope that their testimonies will inspire others in continuing to build a culture of connectivity and restoration that sustains positive relationships and where every child is supported in their full development and in assuming a constructive role in society.

In a nutshell...

What is restorative justice?

Restorative justice is an approach of addressing harm or the risk of harm through engaging all those affected in coming to a common understanding and agreement on how the harm or wrongdoing can be repaired and justice achieved². Its **practices** (such as mediation, circles, conferencing) have been offered and delivered to address harm in different conflict areas, such as justice, education, peacebuilding, families, organisations, and communities.

How does restorative justice empower children?

Many children and adolescents experiment with behaviours which sometimes result in crossing lines and regulations. Children may also be exposed to harm caused by other children or adults. Whether they become perpetrators of harm or are victimised by others, communities have a responsibility in supporting their growth and protecting them from violence, ensuring accessibility to **child-sensitive processes** that are adapted to their needs and capabilities and respect their rights.

Restorative justice is an approach to justice in which the child's **right to be heard is actively implemented**. Restorative justice, and its dialogue-based methods take children seriously, creating a safe space for them to be heard, to take responsibility and to be involved in matters that concern them³. Restorative justice processes are developed taking into consideration the specific needs and capabilities of the parties involved. They offer a flexible process, but always in a non-stigmatising and empowering way. Its basic principles are **voluntariness, confidentiality** and **neutrality** of the facilitators.

Restorative justice approaches with children are **applicable in various settings** where conflicts may occur, including family, schools, sports clubs or other communities, and the criminal justice system. Restorative justice is particularly valuable to protect vulnerable children and to empower children in identifying and managing emotions to prevent (and/or respond to) conflict and violence. To fully implement the dynamics of a restorative child-friendly justice, it

² European Forum for Restorative Justice. (2021). Manual on restorative justice values and standards of practice, Leuven, p.11 (https://www.euforumri.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/EFRJ_Manual_on_Restorative_Justice_Values_and_Standards_for_Practice.pdf)

³ European Forum for Restorative Justice (2020). Thematic Brief on Restorative Justice and Child Justice. Leuven, Belgium. (<https://www.euforumri.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/Thematic%20Brief%20on%20Restorative%20on%20Child%20Justice.pdf>)

is crucial also to work on the promotion of a restorative culture (with language, attitudes, etc.) in educational and family settings, where children and their caregivers can adopt on a daily basis soft-skills in dealing with conflicts. Restorative justice should be the preferred way to deal with peer violence or conflicts between children, as well as a basis to replace punitive disciplinary procedures in learning environments.

What are the benefits of restorative approaches in schools?

In recent decades, restorative practices have been implemented in schools worldwide, promoting the development and dissemination of values of **non-violence**, **cooperation**, **tolerance** and **respect** among pupils and staff, and also in the wider community⁴. Research suggests that restorative practices can contribute to making schools safer, more inclusive and more effective learning environments to work and study⁵.

Restorative schools are supported by developments in the wider field of restorative justice, sharing the common understanding that we are all profoundly connected and that communities share responsibility in building, maintaining and repairing humans relationships.

Restorative practices in schools provide **a framework to co-create** a positive climate for students to learn and develop, and for staff members to feel supported in their working environment. When an incident occurs or a conflict arises, restorative practices ask for all those involved to take responsibility and work together in finding ways to move forward and put things right. In this way, everyone has a voice and is heard, sharing a felt sense of justice and fairness amongst staff, pupils and families.

Why is awareness raising in schools important?

As evidenced by the research carried out under the framework of i-RESTORE, merely developing restorative justice practices would have no impact on children if this did not go along with ensuring that these models were **effectively accessible** to them. Awareness and attitudes on restorative justice values and practices amongst referral bodies and the wider

⁴ Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children (2013). Promoting Restorative Justice for Children. New York: United Nations.

(<https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/file/2180/download?token=JR94W53U>)

⁵ European Forum for Restorative Justice (2022). Thematic Brief on Restorative Schools. Leuven, Belgium.

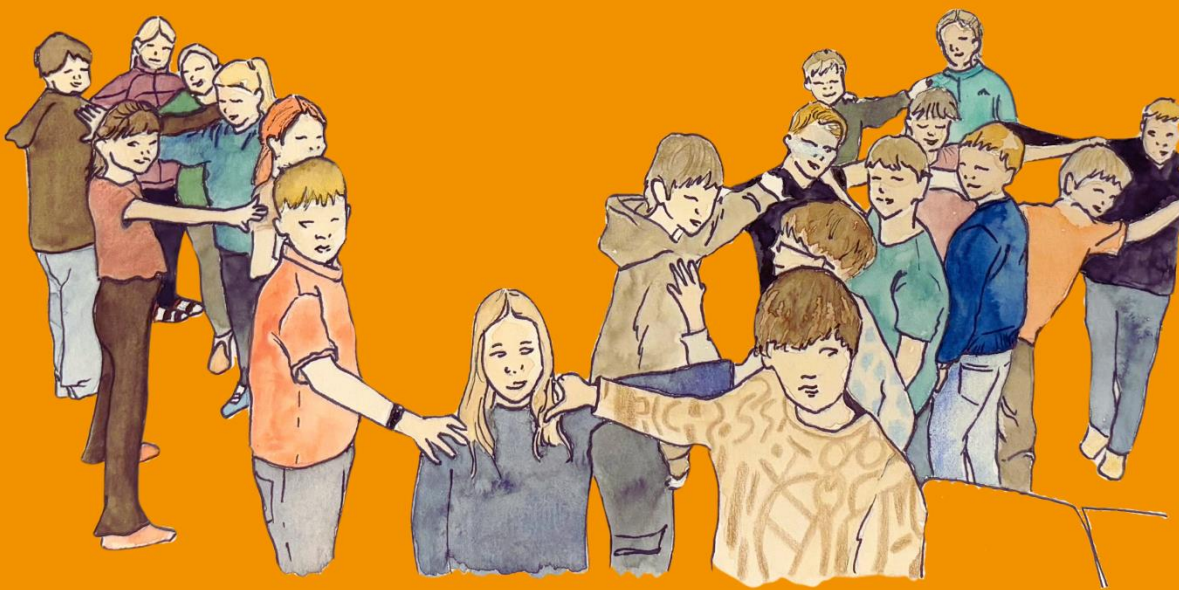
(https://www.euforumri.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Restorative_Schools_Brief_print.pdf)

community, are found to be determining factors in promoting or hindering accessibility⁶. Lack of awareness often results in lack of trust both from professionals (in educational, care and justice sectors) and the public, while greater awareness is likely to lead to more positive attitudes towards restorative justice.

Children are the future of our communities and schools are ideal environments to promote values of respect and connectivity and to provide with tools for the positive management of relationships and conflict. Embedding restorative approaches to conflict resolution in schools increases awareness of restorative justice and may contribute, in the long-run, towards an attitudinal shift from punitive to restorative ways of dealing with conflict and understanding harm. That is why in the i-RESTORE 2.0 project aiming at accessible quality restorative justice processes for children in contact with the law in Europe we also include awareness raising in schools.

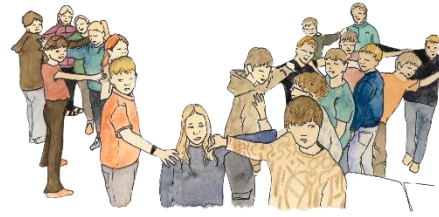
In what follows, we explain what has been done in the four countries. Each partner identified in their own context the best schools to involve and the methods offered.

⁶ Laxminarayan, M. (2014). Accessibility and initiation of restorative justice. Leuven: EFRJ. (https://www.euforumri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/accessibility_and_initiation_of_rj_website_0.pdf)



THE AWARENESS RAISING CIRCLES IN ESTONIA

ESTONIA



What took place?

During the i-Restore 2.0 project, the Estonian partners from the Social Insurance Board (SIB) worked together with a primary school in Tallinn, where the awareness circles were conducted, involving a total of 45 students from the whole school. Awareness circles were conducted in three groups, targeting two classes from the 3rd grade, of 20 students per class (9–10 years old), and 5 students from the 8th grade (14–15 years old).

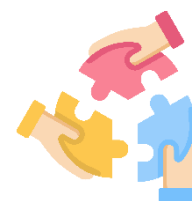
A total of 12 meetings took place amongst the students from the 3rd grade, 4 meetings taking place in the academic year of 2022–2023 and 8 meetings in the academic year of 2023–2024. The 5 students from the 8th grade met a total of 15 times, 5 times during the academic year of 2022–2023 and 10 times during the year 2023–2024. The group of 8th graders included students frequently engaged in conflicts and controversial behaviour in school, including bullying.

All the materials used in conducting the circles were compiled by the facilitators (social pedagogues from the school) themselves. The facilitators are also volunteer restorative justice facilitators at SIB and they are planning to continue working with the youngsters based on restorative practices also beyond the project end. The facilitators will also continue educating colleagues from other schools regarding the possibilities of restorative approaches and thus have become trusted experts.

The awareness circles with children in the city of Tallinn aimed at increasing their knowledge on the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the prevention of bullying through a restorative lens. Each group of students participated in several meetings, each focusing on a specific topic within the main framework. Each session lasted for 45 minutes, at times pairing two sessions together. The programme for each round followed a structured pattern that was similar in every session, including an introduction to the topic of the session and a recall of past topics, discussion on the new topic, a playful approach to the topic, a sociometric exercise and a summary of what was learnt. The following is an example of the programme from one of the sessions:

- ✚ Introduction. The topic of the session is presented (theme: conflict and bullying) – 7 min
- ✚ Students are divided into 4 groups. Each group gets an A3 paper and a marker, on which they write key words that they think mean conflict and, on the other side, that mean bullying – 7 min
- ✚ Discussion. Each group talks about what words they wrote down and where and how they encounter conflict or bullying. Each group has time to speak for 5–20 minutes.
- ✚ Stretching exercise. Each child is asked to find the student they know best in the class and put their hand on his/her shoulder. Then students are asked to find the classmate they know the least, and also putting their hand on their shoulder and ask him or her something about them that they would like to know. Afterwards, students are asked to tell the group who they knew the most, who they knew the least and what they found out about them. – 10 min.
- ✚ Students talk about mutual conflicts and disagreements at home (e.g. parents want me to go to bed at 9 pm, but I can't sleep). The opportunity is taken to find solutions to these stories. The parties are listened, thoughts and feelings are shared, it is explored who was affected and possible solutions to the situation. – 25 min.
- ✚ Slides on bullying and conflict are presented. Facilitators speak and give examples. – 3 min
- ✚ Picture examples. 9 pictures representing feelings are shared. These depict joy, excitement, sadness, surprise, disgust, anger, uncertainty, shame and fear. A discussion is fostered through the question *"how do we recognise another person's feelings?"* – 13 min
- ✚ Summary of the day. Sociometric exercise. Children are asked to stand in a long line. The facilitator says statements related to the topic explored during the session. Whoever thinks that the statement is true is asked to step to the right, and who thinks that the statement is false, is asked to step to the left. – 5 min
- ✚ At the end of the session, students are asked to give an assessment of the session. 0– I did not feel well, the topic was boring; 10– it was a great lesson, I gained new knowledge. Squat, if you feel 0, stand on tiptoe and raise your hands up, if 10. All other numbers are between these two positions.– 1min

What learnings emerged from the circles?



Delivering several sessions with the same group of students allowed for a deeper understanding of conflict resolution, fostering truthful discussion and reflection amongst students and teachers.

As a result of the third grade circles, the awareness on the differences between bullying and conflict among children who participated in the awareness raising circles has increased. They understand why conflicts have to be resolved peacefully and have acquired basic skills. The effects of bullying on the bullied, the bully and the bystanders are understood. The vocabulary for naming feelings has grown.

Some challenges were also perceived amongst the third grader group when putting into practice the concept of mediation amongst themselves. Being in the role of a mediator, the children tended to offer solutions and give assessments. It was difficult for the children to remain neutral, as they wanted to choose sides and assess who is guilty and who is not, and to offer solutions.

Some concepts adults use on a daily basis may have different meanings for children. For example, it was difficult for children to agree on a definition for the concept of «respect». This reinforces the need for using child-friendly vocabulary and adapting language to the needs of children, including to their age and capabilities.

Eighth graders got into the project because of bullying incidents. After the second meeting in the 2022/23 academic year, changes in young people's behaviour were noticeable. Bullying ended, independent interests emerged, they were not afraid to express their thoughts and feelings to the group, each other's differences were accepted. The biggest change was the end of bullying and violent behaviour. The behaviour of all five students this school year has been rated very good by the teachers

What were participants' impressions?



"I know what bullying is and what conflict is. I know that conflict is allowed and it will happen. Bullying is prohibited"

(Student, 3rd grade)

"I should resolve conflicts in such a way that not only I win, but the other one wins as well."

(Student, 3rd grade)

"It was a nice class, completely different, we could talk a lot".

(Student, 3rd grade)

"As a teacher, I am happy that the students of the class can take part in a project that will increase their awareness of restorative justice."

(Teacher from the 3rd grade)

"The best experience was when the social pedagogues visited the students' work. The students take this project seriously and think and discuss actively."

(Teacher from the 3rd grade)

"I am very pleased to be able to participate in these rounds. I feel more confident and better. Most of all, I feel that I know how to resolve conflicts. My problem-solving skills have improved, for example when dealing with conflicts.

I now ask questions to help others understand better. I feel like my eyes have been opened. I have a wider horizon."

(Student, 8th grade)

"At first, I thought that we would only talk about how we bullied, because that's how it started. I didn't think that the topics would spread so much and we would learn so many new things. I had no expectations, thinking it was just for teasing. I like these matches, I feel like I get so much from here."

(Student, 8th grade)

The story of Jüri and Kaarel

Jüri felt that Kaarel (both also participants of 3rd graders group) had been bullying him for a long time. The last time had happened a few days ago in music class, when Kaarel came to Jüri, lifted his bag onto another bench, grabbed Jüri by the neck and strangled him. With the consent of the youngsters, we addressed the conflict on the spot. The conflict was addressed through mediation between the boys and also the circle after the initial mediation aimed at giving voice to all the affected parties in the school. We asked Jüri to describe what he thought had happened. Jüri told his story, and Kaarel kept on wanting to interrupt, saying that things were not as Jüri described. We explained that the agreement was that we would listen to his story, that Kaarel did not have to agree with it and that neither did those who saw it, but that they would have to listen. We are different, and that's why our stories are different, even though we were in the same situation. Listening was difficult for Kaarel and he needed the support of an adult. Jüri also expressed his feelings and thoughts, that he did not want to come to school because he felt afraid, that he thought that he should stay at home, and that he had told his mother about it. Jüri thought that his friend had been protecting him from Kaarel and felt grateful. Then, Kaarel described his version of what happened. While listening to Jüri's story, he wanted to intervene and said that he did not do that, but at the end of Jüri's story, Kaarel agreed that he did too much and behaved badly. Kaarel also described his thoughts and feelings and expressed the impact on others who witnessed the incident. Kaarel offered a solution that also suited Jüri. They also agreed on what would happen if Kaarel and Jüri would not stick to the agreement. Kaarel shared that he doesn't want to be malicious or angry, that he wants to be kind, and that sometimes he doesn't know how to behave when he gets angry.



THE AWARENESS RAISING CIRCLES IN GREECE

GREECE

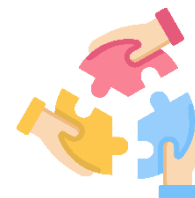


What took place?

During the months of March 2023 until April 2024, the Greek partners from the i-Restore 2.0 project, from the organisation Terre des hommes Hellas, delivered 5 awareness raising circles with students, school staff and parents, in the cities of Chaidari, Chalkida, Elefsina, and Paleo Faliro. The awareness raising circles reached a total of 126 participants, including 110 students from the 3rd grade of middle school, and 1st and 2nd grade of high school, with ages between 14 and 17 years old, 1 parent president from the parent's association of students and 14 school staff members, including teachers and management.

The awareness raising circles in Greece aimed at introducing the concept of restorative justice and restorative approaches with children and youth in the high school environment, by actively engaging students, parents and school staff in reflecting and discussing on the topic. Each circle included an introduction to the work of Terre des hommes Hellas, to the i-Restore 2.0 project, and to the theoretical background of restorative justice and restorative approaches with children and youth. The circles included interactive activities that promoted active participation amongst students and school staff involved, including an ice-breaker activity in small groups to find common interests/hobbies amongst participants, a case study video followed by a joint discussion and a role play activity of a restorative circle with a follow-up reflection round on the roles.

Participants were particularly enthusiastic about the discussions after the case studies and the role play activities. During role plays, participants had the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of those involved in conflict and explore which needs and feelings they think would arise during a possible restorative encounter. These activities challenged student's views on the concept of justice, how conflicts arise and its impact on themselves and those around them, and the different implications of adopting punitive measures or restorative practices in addressing the aftermath of harm.



What learnings emerged from the circles?

The awareness raising circles were overall deemed a success amongst the participants, with youngsters being particularly engaged in the discussions and eager in expressing their views and questions. For most students, the concept of restorative justice and its application in schools and in the juvenile justice system was something new, as they had mostly experienced or heard of more traditional punitive methods of addressing conflict and rule breaking.

In one of the high schools in particular, there had been several incidents of delinquency within the school, which was the reason that the principal decided for its staff members and students to participate in the awareness raising circles. In this session, few children had come into contact with the term restorative justice, and most had a hard time grasping the meaning, as they seemed to support the more traditional – punitive methods of justice. Some disheartening views were expressed by some youngsters, including that they have the right to take the law into their own hands, if necessary, on the one hand discrediting laws and state mechanisms, and on the other normalising violence and ignoring the effects it can have on themselves. Initially, some participants from this circle expressed that they would prefer not to participate in a mediation session unless it meant avoiding court. But there were also some children who said that such an approach seemed useful to them, especially from the victim's point of view. Despite the possible initial hesitation of the students at the beginning, the majority in the class participated actively and a lot of discussion took place on the different opinions the youngsters had among each other. At the end of the session, the students were asked to listen to a fairytale, and then answer some "simple" comprehension questions, choosing the right or wrong answer. The questions were tricky and, while the youngsters were sure of their answers, they ended up getting most of them wrong. This caused them a lot of laughter and prompted a discussion about what we really hear and understand, and to what extent we can listen and pay attention to someone.

In another circle, some students were members of their school's mediation team and showed great interest in learning more about restorative approaches. Participants had different perceptions of what is just and wrong, the corresponding sanction for each incident, and whether they preferred traditional methods of addressing conflict and rule-breaking (e.g. detention) or restorative justice approaches. A case study video was used to promote

constructive discussion on restorative justice practices in the juvenile justice system. Reflections revolved around the potential feelings, needs and motivations of victims and offenders to participate in a restorative encounter. Overall, most of them would want to participate in a restorative justice process if they themselves were involved in a crime or conflict. However, from the offender's perspective, they thought it would be a difficult condition to listen to what one has caused to another person.

For teachers and other school staff, the application of restorative approaches to address conflict and incidents in schools seemed positively appreciated. A member of one of the high schools management team reported having several incidents of violence amongst students that led to tensions within the community, and acknowledged the benefits of applying restorative approaches with young people instead of more punitive ones. During the first circle, the teachers and the representative from the parents and guardians' association were very engaged, mentioned deficiencies of the judicial procedures in Greece regarding children, and were positive to the recommendations from the organisers. Some questions and concerns were presented, and interventions were made regarding the fair trial, the success rate of restorative justice, its application in Greece, the voluntary nature of the meetings, whether the perpetrator involved in such a proceeding sincerely repents, and if the prosecution ceases.

What were participants' impressions?



Case studies and role play activities allowed for extended discussion amongst participants and prompted reflections on how to better address conflict in schools and within the community. Most students had never heard of restorative justice or its principles and they had not thought of the possibility for a victim and an offender to engage in a dialogue. Reflecting on the possibility for such restorative encounters amongst children prompted different reactions. Some students argued that it may be more difficult to apply restorative justice when children are involved because they are immature, and it may even be more difficult when the perpetrator is an adult. Others, however, argued that it could be easier for children to participate because it is easier for them to change their views, avoid being stigmatised and being able to get a job later.

There were also reflections on the aim of a restorative meeting for participants. While some students argued that if the perpetrator does not regret it, there is no point, others said that it may make sense to meet each other in any case. Students do believe that encounters should take place in a friendly and safe space, in the presence of a well-trained facilitator. When discussing about the presence of supporting parties in a restorative meeting, there was some concern about including parents/guardians. Some students argued that parents/guardians should not be present, as they tend to speak for their children and may limit their expression. Other students considered, however, that when the victim is a minor, he or she may need a parent/guardian present to feel protected.

During the discussion of case studies, children reported feelings of fear and shame on the part of the victim, but also the possibility of a desire for revenge if not enough time has passed between the incident and the restorative justice meeting. The offender is believed to feel guilt, shame and fear of going to jail. Overall, facilitators reported that it was easier for children to empathise with the victim and think from the victim's perspective than to identify with someone who has done something wrong. In this sense, students worried that without proper preparation, meeting the wrongdoer may be intimidating for the victim or even cause further trauma. They tend to believe that a restorative encounter is more difficult for the victim than for the offender. Often, it was difficult for them to see the juvenile offender as both perpetrator and victim, rather than just someone who did something wrong. Some students argued that the perpetrator may not be faithful in their apology during restorative justice and "get away

with it" without serious consequences, although they also referred that it seemed a difficult condition to listen to what one has caused to another person.

Through these circles it came clear that there are several preconceptions amongst children about what is fair or just. Often, at the beginning of the circles, some children referred that a restorative meeting would not change anything and only a harsher sentence or punishment could be beneficial. The difficulty identified lies in the fact that the prevailing views in the country and society are those of punishment, individuality, and the removal of the offender from the community. This opinion, however, was challenged during the awareness raising circles, and it changed the perspective of most of the engaged participants.

"Restorative Justice is a way the offender and the victim being put into each other's position and share how they experienced the incident. It is a kind of intervention that is needed, so explanations and answers will be given"

(Student, 14 years old)

"Restoring justice in different ways, outside the court, by helping both the offender and the victim"

(Student, 16 years old)

"I think it's right that you can speak to the person who hurt you"

(Student, 15 years old)



THE AWARENESS
RAISING CIRCLES IN
THE NETHERLANDS

THE NETHERLANDS



What took place?

In the Netherlands, 8 awareness raising circles were facilitated by the staff members of the organisation Restorative Justice Nederland (RJN) during the months of February 2023 to June 2024, targeting diverse educational institutions. These circles reached more than 100 participants, including high school students, university students (field of law, social work and integrated safety and security studies), school staff, social workers, juvenile probation workers, youths with lived experience in juvenile detention centres, restorative justice practitioners, teachers and trainers from the peaceable schools methodology⁷ (the CED group), and members from the i-Restore 2.0 project's Child Advisory Board (CAB)⁸.

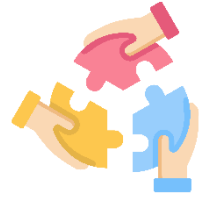
The awareness circles in schools that were organised in the Netherlands were part of the strategy to involve young people and students in the work of RJN and introduce them to restorative justice and restorative practices, but also to involve professionals and teachers of high schools and universities of applied sciences who can further the implementation of restorative justice in their respective workplaces. It was decided not to place the focus on primary schools due to the age and maturity of the children. It was considered that involving younger children would require a different programme than that for high school students and young adults, and many primary schools in the Netherlands already work with the peaceable school method which is based on restorative justice principles and practices, such as peer mediation. However, teachers and coaches of the peaceable schools methodology, the CED-

⁷ The Peaceable School is a whole-school approach for primary schools, aiming to cultivate a democratic community where children's voices are heard, and where children and teachers learn to resolve conflict constructively. Students are involved in and learn to adopt responsibility for the good of their community's social environment. The Peaceable School is a Dutch programme developed by the CED-group, a non-profit foundation in the Netherlands. See more: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/282065/The%20peaceable%20school%20a%20description.pdf>

⁸ The Child Advisory Boards (CABs) have been created through the project in each target country to integrate children's views in the implementation of activities. They bring together children and young people who are interested in the justice system or might have been involved with it. We train them on the concepts of restorative justice, consult them on project activities and materials, and empower them to become child advocates.

group, were invited to a circle, aiming to raise awareness on how their work is also part of the restorative justice movement and utilises restorative approaches.

The content, timeframe and methodology of the circles were adapted to the different audiences and their previous knowledge level on the subject. Programmes shared, however, a similar structure. They all started with an introduction by the facilitators and an opening circle with a talking stick, during which participants could introduce themselves and share their pre-existing knowledge about restorative justice or primary associations when they heard the term. Following that, facilitators explained some of the basics of restorative justice, principles, values, different forms and specific aspects of restorative justice for youth and restorative approaches in schools. Videos were shown and case studies were explored to facilitate understanding and make the practice more tangible. Every circle also had time to reflect on questions or statements relating to restorative justice in their (school) settings, the accessibility thereof, as well as benefits and challenges. The goal of this part was to stimulate further collaboration on and implementation of restorative practices in these schools and identify crucial tools or challenges that facilitate or undermine these efforts in educational environments. Each session ended with a closing circle using a talking stick, asking the audience what they had learnt and would like to take "home or back to their work/school".



What learnings emerged from the circles?

The awareness raising circles in the Netherlands tackled a heterogeneous group of participants, requiring different methodologies and offering them an adapted experience according to their background and needs. The content focused on restorative justice, its values and standards of practice, and the implementation of restorative approaches with young people, both in school settings and within the juvenile justice system.

The organisers enjoyed facilitating the circles and seeing the eagerness of the students, teachers and other professionals to learn about restorative justice. It was reported that most of the participants had never heard of restorative justice, knew very little about it, or recognised some of the values and practices in their own work but had never linked it to restorative justice. They do see now that part of their work in schools or universities is rather restorative and many participants expressed ambitions to take their restorative justice practices further. For many it was an eyeopener and a starting point to get to know more about the topic.

Teachers from the peaceable schools methodology were surprised to see how much their work on citizenship, addressing conflicts in the schools through peer mediation fits with the broader concept of restorative justice. They got inspired by some of the materials used and likely they will use some of it in their own programmes and curricula for peaceable schools and neighbourhoods.

Circles were also welcomed by the teachers from a specialised high school for children with behavioural problems, who often have a criminal background, are in youth care and/or undergoing juvenile probation. This session was initiated upon the request of the school, expressing their interest in working with restorative justice methodologies in their school environment and beyond, after two of their ambulatory supervisors had started a mediation training. The discussions focused on the potential implementation of restorative practices, such as peer mediation and youth courts in schools, which was a relatively new and eye-opening methodology for most of them that sparked a lot of interest. Teachers reflected on their own work and what more could be done or improved in the future. They expressed interest in contacting the organisation that facilitates youth courts in the Netherlands, which also operates in a restorative justice way, to set this practice in their school since they deal

with many disciplinary incidents that need to be handled in a more resilient, empowering, and sustainable way. While they expressed hesitation for how suited their youths were for the methodology, they agreed that perhaps a similar, more-tailored version, could be suited for the cognitive and maturity levels of their specialised students.

The awareness raising circles also sparked interest amongst higher education students. After their participation in the circles, students reported an increased understanding on the concept of restorative justice and its practical implementation with children and young people. A key objective in these circles was to convey that restorative justice, in particular for children and young people, is a children's rights issue, that it includes trauma informed work and that they can implement aspects in their studies and future jobs. Some students were eager to have further information and even shared that they would want to write their thesis on the topic.

Learnings from the awareness raising circles expanded beyond the implementation of restorative justice approaches in educational settings. One of the circles engaged in a dialogue youths with lived experience in juvenile detentions centres and professionals from the juvenile justice system to reflect on the ways that inequality (of opportunities) expresses itself in the city of Amsterdam, its potential impact on young people's trajectory in the juvenile justice system, and the role that restorative justice approaches can have in addressing these issues. For this session, facilitators from Restorative Justice Nederland organised a focus group on the results from a research project that they had participated in. An easy-to-understand and child-friendly visual representation of those results was issued, so that participants could discuss collectively and come up with solutions to the presented issues. Restorative justice was discussed in depth both on the trial and imprisonment level, and on the probationary and judicial level, to get a grasp on this phenomenon with youth participation, to facilitate more trust between law enforcement and certain populations (e.g. circles), and to implement it as a tool before escalation (e.g. community courts, police mediation, Halt). Facilitators wanted the experienced youth experts to understand the power of their voices and to empower them in being agents of change. Participants understood the value and their right to restorative justice and the potential benefits they could expect when coming up with their suggestions to tackle the discussed issues.

Youngsters from the Dutch Child Advisory Board of the i-Restore 2.0 project were also invited to participate in a circle with members from one of the main restorative justice providers in the Netherlands. As part of the project, the youngsters had already spent many sessions learning and disseminating about restorative justice, so no prior presentation was required for this circle. The focus of this session was for the youth to give feedback and suggestions on the approach of the organisation that offers restorative justice. Through the session, the youths were tasked to consider what strategies were most successful with their peers who have unfortunately been having a harder time finding the restorative justice services over the last couple of years (since the start of Covid there are fewer mediation requests and fewer referrals despite no drop in suitable cases). Through these sessions, young people learnt on the importance of the services provided by the organisation, about restorative mediation for their peer group, the importance of their unique insight and the value of their voice and feedback (empowerment). The youngsters were stimulated to give their honest and critical opinion. Afterwards, the organisers followed up with them on how much their feedback was appreciated by the communication division of the organisation and how their vision was included as a central point of the organisation's youth outreach strategy approach.

What were participants' impressions?



"There should be an active effort to encourage people to partake in restorative justice but they should be there 100% of their own accord. That way, they can participate with the needed mindset because they're open. Encouragement and informing is important, too, because the likely answer at first is probably no. I would have said no if I wasn't informed properly"
(Higher education student)

"In the department of the forensic clinic where I intern, one person underwent a mediation procedure with his girlfriend and it made a beautifully positive impact on the rest of his time in detention and his rehabilitation."
(Higher education student)

"More people my age should know about this, I'm glad to be able to bring it more to their attention so they can find the help they need."
(i-RESTORE 2.0 Child Advisory Board member)

"I recognise all of this but never understood how closely my work was related to this restorative justice movement."
(Trainer from the peaceable schools methodology)

"My first thought is of course, can it be done with our 'specific target group' of young people? They are little troublemakers and we always assume because of their disposition or cognitive capacities that they are unsuited for this type of peer-to-peer work and assuming responsibility but take the example from YesWeCan Clinics (recovery treatment centers for youths that have been in the care system for so long they are considered "beyond treatment" with impressive success rates) with a restorative approach: it can be done there. What happens when we give young people responsibility? Do we perhaps not underestimate our little 'troublemakers'?"
(Teacher at high school with tailor-made approach with vulnerable youth)

"Our students struggle with overcoming their stumblings and challenges of the past in the form of trauma. A lot of what we try to do is try to facilitate and

nurture resilience in them, and your restorative justice work seems to be very useful for this purpose."

(Teacher at high school with tailor-made approach with vulnerable youth)

"I presented a case to demonstrate the conference model used in Northern Ireland. The students' questions were intelligent and they seemed genuinely interested in restorative justice".

(Restorative justice advocate and speaker during the circles with higher education students)

At the end of the sessions, participants engaged in a closing circle where they were asked on their satisfaction with the activities, what they learned, and whether they could share a word or a few reflections on what they discovered during the session and would like to take back to their classroom, work environment, or even the personal life at home. Feedback words we heard the most included:

"interesting", "insightful", "promising", "new", "revolutionary", "we need this", "I want to know more", "peer mediation", "(we need more) youth courts" and "powerful"



THE AWARENESS RAISING CIRCLES IN ROMANIA

ROMANIA



What took place?

During the months of February 2023 until April 2024, 9 awareness raising circles were held in two high schools in the city of Bucharest by the team of Terre des hommes Romania under the mandate of the i-Restore 2.0 project. From the 9 awareness raising circles, 4 were held with high school teachers and school staff, 3 with high school students, 1 with parents and guardians, and a joint one with students and teachers. These circles reached around 90 high school teachers from diverse fields of education, 95 high school students, and more than 15 parents and guardians of students from the high schools involved.

The awareness raising circles taking place in Romania aimed primarily at introducing the concept of restorative justice and involving participants in exploring the benefits of implementing restorative approaches to dealing with conflict and violence in the school environment. The circles created the space for participants to engage in open dialogue to reflect on the challenges of traditional methods of conflict resolution and the opportunities that restorative interventions could bring to the schools in the future.

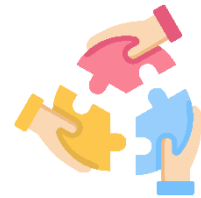
In recent years, the application of restorative practices spread widely worldwide, proving its effectiveness in diverse contexts, including in the justice system and in educational settings. Drawing from the reported benefits and positive outcomes from their application, several countries have included recommendations on the use of restorative approaches in their education policy documents. In Romania too, experimental projects have been successfully carried out in which these practices have been piloted, including in the educational environment. However, the current model of intervention in situations of conflict and violence in schools in Romania remains predominantly punitive. This context has led to the need for collective reflections on more positive models of intervention that take into consideration the views and needs of all members from the school community, especially those of children and youngsters.

Through interactive discussions, participants understood that building and sustaining meaningful relationships is a cooperative effort and that their views are vital in finding opportunities to improve current intervention mechanisms and the overall school climate. Facilitators explored with students, teachers and families, the emotional and cognitive context of situations considered to be harmful and its impact, helping understand problems regarding violence in schools that students face regularly, and possible approaches to mitigate the effect of these problems. In these discussions, students spoke honestly about situations they encounter in schools and how they often “not feel listened to”. Students were also encouraged to express ideas on the benefits of using restorative practices and to reflect on concepts such as 'blame' versus 'responsibility' and 'sanction' versus 'reparation'.

Needs in the system were also explored with teachers. There is a shared belief amongst teachers that violence in schools has become more widespread in recent years (in terms of the diversity of types of conflict and in terms of visibility) and this has created a need to diversify methods to address these situations. During the circles with teachers, presentations, informative videos and the analysis of case studies inspired by real situations were used to explain to teachers what restorative practices entail and the importance of applying them in schools, and to promote open dialogue on their needs and views, and those of students, in sustaining a constructive school environment. Some teachers resonated with the principles and models of the restorative approaches presented, mentioning that they too have an approach in their activities that considers students' needs and allows them to express their own views. There were also teachers who believed that inappropriate behaviour in the school environment needs to be dealt with more firmly and punished swiftly, in line with current school regulations. While all participants showed openness and interest in examples of the application of restorative practices in schools, it became clear that applying any new intervention methods requires a period of learning, application, constant exchange of ideas, and appropriate evaluation.

Parents and guardians of high school students also enjoyed being invited to explore their role in the process of creating more respectful and safe schools, and towards building a more constructive society. Learnings from the application of restorative practices to conflict resolution in schools can also be translated to the home environment, promoting a transformational effect in the quality of interpersonal relationships that travels beyond classrooms into community at large.

What learnings emerged from the circles?



Students

Students had the opportunity to learn from the work carried out by Terre des hommes in Romania, especially through the i-Restore 2.0 project, on the field of restorative justice and restorative practices with children and young people. Youngsters were open and engaged in dialogue, gave examples from their personal lives, of how their mistakes were dealt with by adults (parents or teachers), and reflected on the differences proposed by restorative approaches. The circles were deemed relevant to the needs of students and this was visible in their willingness to debate the issues they face, to express their opinions (even when sometimes it was challenging for them to listen to each other) and in the meaningful ideas expressed as 'lessons learned'. Among the ideas considered by students as relevant were:

- ✚ the need to communicate more and patiently with each other;
- ✚ the need to analyse a situation carefully before drawing conclusions;
- ✚ the possibility of solving problems calmly and without shouting, and that this helps to improve relationships;
- ✚ the importance of listening to all people involved in a conflict as communication is vital for understanding problems;
- ✚ the importance of a third person to mediate a conflict;
- ✚ that forgiveness is a good thing and that listening, understanding and empathy are the keys to solving problems and mistakes;
- ✚ the importance of a different way of fixing mistakes and that mistakes can be learned from.

At the end, the students evaluated their experience with keywords such as "interesting", "useful", "educational debate", "new things", "patience", "respect", "understanding", "personal development". The conclusion brought by some students was that for a pleasant educational environment it is necessary to change some behaviours and that this change must start from each one of them. As one student said: "change starts with us".

Teachers

Three of the awareness raising circles were carried out with teachers and school staff from different specialisations (geography, foreign languages, socio-human sciences, religion, sociology, biology, mathematics, documentation). The relevance of restorative approaches was understood by the teachers both from the perspective of the intervention framework as well as from the perspective of the values they promote and create: "motivation", "repair", "learning", "listening", "possibilities", "empathy", "needs met", "ownership", "adaptation", "awareness", "values" and "new perspective". They were especially interested in learning more about how restorative practices could be translated into their schools, as many of them had never heard about this framework before and could not yet grasp its applicability. They understood from the examples presented and the case study discussions the differences between the classical approach, as laid down in the school regulations, and the restorative approaches presented by Terre des hommes. Discussions focused on the current school protocols for addressing conflict and some teachers realised that the level of information and understanding on the application of these regulations was different amongst themselves, which often lead to different ways of applying them. Examples were also given of how to link interventions and measures provided for in school regulations with restorative practices, so as to build a positive, participatory and constructive framework for the intervention and decision-making.

Teachers stated that the circles changed their perspective, including giving them the opportunity to focus their attention on things they knew but neglected. They said that the activities provided them with a useful framework for reflection and self-reflection, an opportunity to think not only individually but also with others, opening "doors, windows to other perspectives". Some other keywords used to describe their experience were: "usefulness", "self-reflection", "ownership", "emotional impact" and "change of perspective". At the end, the teachers said that the circles were very instructive and useful, with elements of novelty and creativity that had a revealing impact. They also appreciated the positive energy built up during the discussions. Overall, they felt that awareness raising activities on restorative practices should be carried out for all staff in schools, as the application of these practices would require specially trained staff. There is receptivity for future activities in this area, as they are considered necessary and useful in the context of the in-service training process. Participants expressed an interest in being included in wider training activities on restorative approaches in schools to better understand how they work and to become trainers for others in this area.

Families

Parents and guardians of students who participated in the circles were open to the information presented and wanted to understand the concepts and how restorative practices can be applied in the school environment. Participants expressed that the information shared was "very useful and the approach was carried out in a professional way". They resonated with restorative principles, agreed that it is necessary and urgent to diversify intervention methods in the school environment (both for conflict prevention and for conflict resolution), and that the restorative practices they were informed about are a positive and constructive solution that "should be implemented in all schools". The relevance of restorative practices was also perceived by parents in terms of their usefulness "for children's personal development" and in terms of changing adults' attitudes towards children's education for the future. Parents understood that the application of restorative practices requires a joint effort, and that change is needed at individual, family, school, decision-making and community levels, and they are keen to be part of this change. They said that such activities would be very useful in the management of classes and should be organised in all schools. From this perspective, it is necessary that any future activity to promote and/or apply restorative practices should involve parents and parents' associations.

What were participants' impressions?



"We learned the importance of listening to all people involved in a conflict and that this shows a sign of respect."

(High school student)

"Understanding, empathy and listening are key to solving problems and mistakes."

(Student, 10th grade high school)

"I think it would be useful to have lessons about restorative justice in high school, especially in personal development/leadership classes. I think that the headmaster should be trained in this, it would be good to make courses for headmasters."

(Student, 10th grade high school)

"I would apply these restorative practices in the family. When it comes to a mistake, for example a mistake of my younger sister, I would like to move away from the concept of punishment to learning from the mistake and self-reflection."

(Student, 10th grade high school)

"Restorative practices should be the first thing we turn to in managing conflict situations (...). Today's discussion planted a seed in me and changed my perspective by showing me the positive effects and also the limitations of restorative practices."

(High school teacher)

"I felt connected, inspired to support more, with new, actionable ideas."

(High school teacher)

"I think it's important for people to be aware of their own humanity from the very beginning. And the restorative approach can make important steps towards rediscovering our humanity."

(High school teacher)

"Romania needs as many of these programmes as possible. By changing mentalities, we change the world!"

(Parent/legal guardian)

"It opened my eyes to the behaviour of this generation of children. Involvement should be from all sides: school, parents, children."

(Parent/legal guardian)

"I think this meeting helped me learn how to deal with conflict".

(High school student)

"We could all do more to make each person aware of their role in the social group they belong to".

(High school teacher)

Final reflections

The awareness raising circles on restorative justice and its implementation in schools settings were widely welcomed in each country by students, their families, school staff and other professionals who participated. These circles created the space, often for the first time, to jointly reflect on how restorative practice can contribute to creating and sustaining peaceful and effective learning environments. The educational institutions involved valued positively the work carried out with their staff and students, and most of them suggested that similar activities take place again reaching their other students and school staff.

Children and youngsters were very keen to engage in the activities proposed in the circles. Most of them had not participated in any similar justice-related activity before and enjoyed being given a voice to share their views on issues such as conflict, its impact and restorative ways to address and resolve disputes. Young people stated that the circles have provided them with knowledge that is relevant for real life, including self-management skills, the courage to take responsibility, the courage to make decisions and improved their problem-solving skills.

Students, teachers and families expressed their eagerness to participate in future activities to deepen their knowledge in the practical implementation of restorative practices in schools and beyond. Oftentimes, they were curious to hear more about other related areas, such as children's rights in relation to the criminal justice system and the implementation of restorative practices in other settings. In this line, some participants would want more sessions where they also can invite practitioners, such as mediators or public prosecutors dealing with youth cases, and work more with testimonies or children and youngsters with lived experience who can share their stories. In general, particularly when trying to reach children with a more difficult background, having young people who understand their environment and speak their language coming to deliver the message, and what restorative justice meant for them, would be far more successful than having academics/teachers give guest-lectures on the topic.

Furthermore, working with case studies was particularly well-received, both in these sessions and in other project activities, and should become a standard tool for improving restorative justice awareness raising, both with adult and young target audiences. Participants specially enjoyed the participatory activities and requested that future awareness raising circles include role plays or simulations of how mediation and other restorative practices can be

carried out in schools. It was also suggested that future circles make further use of the awareness raising materials developed under the framework of the i-Restore 2.0 project by the Child Advisory Boards (e.g. videos presented by young people), as these materials foster interest both among young people and adults.

A lesson learnt through the development of the awareness raising circles on restorative practices with children and young people in schools, is that effective implementation would require involvement at an individual, family, school, decision-making and community levels. One of the experienced challenges when designing awareness raising strategies was identifying and accessing relevant stakeholders from the child's community of care, such as family members, and bringing together multiple target groups in a joint circle. In Romania, one circle was dedicated specifically to parents, guardians and family members of high school students. In Greece, one circle brought together students, school staff and a parent who was also the president of the parents and guardian's association. Despite the positive reactions to these experiences, the inclusion of multiple target groups in the circles was challenging. From this perspective, it is necessary that any future activity to promote and/or implement restorative approaches with children involves relevant stakeholders from the child's community of care, including their families.

Furthermore, a question arises on how to move forward from awareness raising on the benefits and limitations of restorative practices towards its effective implementation in school settings. Awareness raising is central when empowering children, young people and their communities in adopting more restorative approaches of conflict resolution. However, a transformational change in school culture would require a tailor-made process and a long-term commitment, where further resources are destined for its effective implementation at all levels of the school. These can include: the development of a tailor-made strategy for the implementation of restorative approaches within the school, that can be co-created with the involvement of teachers, students and their families; a training strategy for school staff (including teachers, principal, administrative and other relevant school personnel); peer mediation training with students with several practice moments; regular reflection moments on the progress of the implementation amongst the management team, and also with students, and with less frequency, with their families; further awareness raising amongst other relevant community groups (e.g. with members from extra-curricular activities, sports clubs); implementation of assessment tools for monitoring and evaluation of the results.

Overall, outcomes from the awareness raising circles continue to show that children and their local communities are eager to be active players in co-creating more respectful and inclusive

school environments. Awareness raising on the values of restorative justice, its implementation and impact on those who participate, contributes to empowering community members in deciding whether restorative practice is something they can benefit from or would want to pursue.



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