

Restorative Practices in Queensland's Youth Detention Centres

Summary of a presentation to the AARJ AGM, Wednesday December 1st 2021

At this year's (2021) AARJ AGM, we continued our now long tradition of inviting a colleague to speak about frontline reform work. A project to foster **restorative practices** across Queensland's then two - and now three - **Youth Detention Centres** (YDCs) was initiated in 2017 by Kelli Anderson and Natalie Treasure, a Program Manager and Policy Officer in the **Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs**, the Department responsible for the Centres.

Robert Topping is one three current YDC **Restorative Practice Coordinators (RPCs)**, and is coordinator at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre (BYDC). He continues the work of his predecessor Jacqueline Divers. His counterpart RP Coordinators are Sarah Cahill in Townsville's Cleveland YDC, and Majella Ritchie in the newly completed, small-scale West Moreton YDC, which is located adjacent to BYDC.

Robert began his presentation describing an earlier career path that has, in retrospect, provided solid preparation for the current project. He worked at Albert Park Flexible Learning Centre (APFLC), a co-educational learning community catering for young people between the ages of 14 and 25. Brisbane City Council created APFLC in 1990 as an educational initiative for homeless young people. It was initially located at Brisbane's Albert Park Amphitheatre, then relocated in 2004, and registered in 2006 as a school through the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Schools Networks (EREA). APFLC is part of the Youth Plus Network, now supported by the Youth+ Foundation, and informed by the notion of '**Operation by Principles**'. Rob also mentioned work with The Southern Outlook, state-funded Adventure-based learning and groupwork programs for young people engaged in the Youth Justice system. Outlook applies adventure frameworks and experiential learning theories to deliver adventure intervention programs to facilitate change and enhance existing YJ interventions.

After these professional experiences, the core language and techniques of restorative practices in Youth Detention seemed very familiar. Rob explained that YDC staff readily understand the theory and practice of restorative *justice* – using group conferences to respond to youth crime. However, some staff have struggled with the broader, deeper, and less immediately obvious concept of restorative *practices*. As in any organisation, some staff resist change, or fear it. Others initially judge as “soft” an approach that relies on something other than inducement and enforcement. However, most staff simply need to observe any new form of working actually being demonstrated by trusted colleagues who are working with them on the floor. Most staff also then need to be coached and supported by those trusted colleagues, and to experience consistency in staff practice.

Factors that increase the challenge of adopting restorative practices include the at-times competing demands between *professional* and *operational* staff. As in any workplace culture, there is also incomplete alignment between official workforce policies and procedures / cultural change. These sorts of issues are more challenging in large and long-established facilities such as BYDC and CYDC, which have over 150 and 100 beds respectively. It has proven easier to set and maintain a consistent culture in the smaller and more-recently-established West Moreton YDC, which has only 32 beds. The three RPCs work as a team, and celebrate wins and progress at each detention centre.

In each YDC, cultural change requires finding champions among the operational workforce, upskilling all staff, and minimising confusion by standardising practices and terminology. This work has been made easier by a **recent massive staff recruitment drive**.

Restorative Practice Coordinators have been working with large induction groups of new employees, who each receive two days of foundational restorative practice training. The training includes principles and techniques for working in an authoritative - firm *and* fair – manner, and intentionally building relationships. There is a six-week break between the first and second days of RP training, during which time the new staff, who are generally keen to work restoratively, grapple with *best* practice and *actual* practice. The RP coordinators work through coaching, mentoring, advice, and relationship-building so as gradually and intentionally to align staff expectations with the necessary support / coaching:

High expectations + low support ↗	High expectations AND high support
Low expectations + Low support	Low expectations + high support ↘

There is a sense that the larger centres are now close to a **tipping point** at which **relationship management, using restorative practices, becomes *the way we do things here***. There is no question that young people have responded positively to feeling heard and being able to solve their own issues. Centre staff are currently working in partnership with Queensland Police Service, implementing Communication and Resolution Techniques (CART) in response to challenging behaviours and incidents. CART strongly emphasises restorative practices. Verbal de-escalation tactics and practical applications of co-regulation create greater cohesion between RP and operational practice. The two Brisbane-based RO Coordinators are in regular contact with Sarah in Townsville, and also now with the counterpart Communities of Restorative Practice that have been established – with the official backing of senior management and the Victorian state government – in the two large **Victorian YDCS** at Parkville and Malsbury.

Discussion towards the end of the presentation at our December 1st AARJ AGM considered:

- The power of staff **satisfaction surveys** to help answer: *Why are we doing this?*
- Mechanisms for ongoing **upskilling of staff**;
- The likelihood of the system of **12-hour shifts** being reviewed;
- The power of senior staff to **model cultural change** through being involved not only in practice circles *with colleagues*, but also in circles *with young people*.

Perhaps most powerfully of all: some young people are now being nominated as *RP champions*. Rob concluded his presentation with an inspiring example of one of the more mature young people in West Moreton, who has been supported to mentor and support younger residents to be the best possible version of themselves:

*When young people can look up to someone who believes in them,
it becomes easier to believe in themselves.*