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CONTENT

THE IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE OF THE SPECIAL POLICE UNITS IN DEALING WITH MODERN SECURITY THREATS AND RISKS	11
JONCHE IVANOVSKI	
THE NATO EXPANSION IN EUROPE –ALLIANCE OF LIBERAL STATES	19
ALEKSANDAR IVANOV	
KIRE BABANOSKI	
VLADIMIR M. CVETKOVIĆ	
BUILDING RESILIENCE – THE NATO AND EUROPEAN UNION APPROACH TO BUILDING RESILIENCE	27
TATJANA GERGINOVA	
THE VISEGRAD GROUP’S REGIONAL COOPERATION AS RESPONSE TO COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT	41
SASHO DAMJANOVSKI	
PROTECTION OF CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE –A CHALLENGE FOR THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA.....	51
MARINA MALIS SAZDOVSKA	
RISK PERCEPTION AND RISK MANAGEMENT – CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND DILEMMAS.....	57
ALEKSANDAR PAVLESKI	
HYBRID THREATS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND THEIR NEGATIVE INFLUENCE.....	67
PULUMB ABDULAN	
DAVOR ARSIKJ	
SECURITY CULTURE: PRESENT AND FUTURE STRATEGIES, POLICIES AND CHARACTERISTICS.....	75
MARINA MITREVSKA	
SVETLANA STANAREVIĆ	
EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF PERSONNEL FOR THE NEEDS OF THE SECURITY SERVICES.....	85
MARJAN NIKOLOVSKI	
FROSINA TASHEVSKA-REMSKI	
EUROPEAN UNION TERMINOLOGY AND ITS INTEGRATION IN THE ENGLISH FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT CLASSROOM	95
VESNA TRAJKOVSKA	
SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CROATIAN TOURISM – NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR STAKEHOLDERS.....	105
JASMINA GRŽINIĆ	
ZDRAVKO ŠERGO	

CYBER-SECURITY AS AN ISSUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY AGENDA	117
BASRI KASTRATI	
ALEKSANDAR PAVLESKI	
NIKOLČO SPASOV	
EU INTEGRATION AND THE EROSION OF SOVEREIGNTY: CANDIDATE- MEMBER STATES' PERSPECTIVE.....	127
MARJAN VELKOVSKI	
CRIMINALISTIC AND PROCEDURAL ASPECTS OF EVIDENCE AND SUBSTANTIATING IN CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS	137
BORIS MURGOSKI	
ANGELA JANKOSKA	
VLADIMIR MURGOSKI	
CRIMINALISTICS INVESTIGATION OF ORGANIZED CRIME WITH ILLEGAL DRUG PRODUCTION AND TRADE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA	147
SVETLANA NIKOLOSKA	
MIODRAG LABOVIĆ	
PROTECTING THE ANIMAL WELFARE THROUGH THE CRIMINAL ACT “TORTURING ANIMALS” - MACEDONIAN LEGISLATION AND JURISPRUDENCE	159
KATERINA KRSTEVSKA SAVOVSKA	
THE CRIMINAL OFFENSE OF MURDER: HISTORICAL, CRIMINAL AND CRIMINOLOGY ASPECTS.....	171
JASMINA IGRACKI	
SADMIR KAROVIC	
TEODORA LJ. ZIVADINOVIC	
ABUSE OF PERSONAL DATA AS A COMPUTER CRIME IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA	187
MARIJA GJOSHEVA-KRSTESKI	
SVETLANA NIKOLOSKA	
ASSERTIVENESS AS A COMMUNICATION STYLE IN THE WORK OF POLICE	197
DRAGANA BATIC	
BOGDANCO GOGOV	
PREDICTIVE POLICING	207
BOGDANCHO GOGOV	
THE ROLE OF THE POLICE OF MONTENEGRO IN COMBATING FAN HOOLIGANISM.....	217
BOJAN JANKOVIĆ	
VLADIMIR M. CVETKOVIC	
ALEKSANDAR IVANOV	

BEYOND PROPAGANDA AND FAKE NEWS: ELEMENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS AND INFORMATION WARFARE	233
ALEKSANDAR PESHEV	
STRUCTURAL SOCIAL FACTORS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH HOMELESSNESS	243
VESNA STEFANOVSKA CRIMINAL POLICY PROTECTION WITHIN SMART CITIES' AREAS	
MIOMIRA KOSTIĆ	
251	
CONTRIBUTION TO THE TYPOLOGY OF VICTIMS OF POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CRIMES	257
CANE T. MOJANOSKI	
GOCE ARIZANKOSKI	
THE ROLE OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE	271
NATAŠA PEOVSKA	
QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE BANKING SECTOR FOR THE PROTECTION OF CITIZENS REGARDING THE SAFE USE OF PAYMENT CARDS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF PRILEP	281
KETI NIKOLOSKA	
SNEZHANA MOJSOSKA	
DANCE NIKOLOVSKA VRATEOVSKA	
MANAGING NEW SECURITY RISKS THROUGH PRIVATE SECURITY	293
SAŠE GERASIMOSKI	
KEY QUALITY CRITERIA FOR PRIVATE SECURITY IN THE PROTECTION AND RESILIENCE OF CRITICAL ENTITIES	301
SANJA KERMETCHIEVA	
THE IMPORTANCE OF MP'S PROFILE IN MAKING SECURITY DECISIONS	311
NATASA PELIVANOVA	
MIRJANA RISTOVSKA	
THE EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES AS AN ASSUMPTION OF THE STABILITY OF THE REPRESENTATIVE BODY. THE PERFORMANCE OF THE MACEDONIAN ASSEMBLY IN THE PAST MORE THAN THREE DECADES OF POLITICAL PLURALISM.....	323
NIKOLA AMBARKOV	
COMPETENCES OF THE COMMISSION FOR DEFENSE AND SECURITY OF THE PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AS A FACTOR OF THE SECURITY OF THE COUNTRY	335
DAVOR ARSIKJ	
PULUMB ABDULAN	

THE ROLE OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

In the last twenty years, there has been an increasing awareness of peer violence in schools as a negative phenomenon that can cause numerous short-term or long-term consequences for children. If research results continuously show us that peer violence in schools persists (Јованова, 2008) and, in some schools, it even increases, the need is necessarily imposed to find an appropriate solution for managing the violence. To identify an efficient solution for dealing with this phenomenon is not an easy task. Historically, different approaches have been used, ranging from rehabilitative approaches to punishment-based approaches. The former approach is based on compassion, the latter on responsibility. Traditionally, school systems often employ punitive methods to address and respond to pupils' misbehaviour. Most often these methods include measures for excluding pupils from school (suspension or exclusion) leading to the removal and isolation of pupils with inappropriate behaviour (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022), to bring order to schools. In search for another, different and more efficient model that would be based on taking responsibility and compassion, restorative justice becomes increasingly promoted in schools (Peovska, 2021) as one of the ways to deal with peer violence.

In an international context and in the wake of the adopted Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers (2018) 8 related to restorative justice in criminal matters, the development of restorative approaches outside legal systems, such as schools, is increasingly encouraged (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022). To this end, a large number of countries in the world have tried to address the school violence through restorative practices which, instead of punishing the perpetrator, focus on reconciling the broken relationship, removing the harmful consequences, and parties actively participating in solving the problem. Restorative practices are oriented not only towards alternative methods of inappropriate and violent behaviour management, but also towards promoting prosocial behaviours through the development of socio-emotional skills (empathy, awareness, and responsibility), in order to build safe school communities that promote well-being (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022). This would mean that restorative practices and measures are alternatives to punitive measures, offering positive ways for conflict resolution between children and a good basis for promoting and developing personal and relational skills, such as empathy and assertiveness.

Processes based on the restorative discipline model include both formal and informal processes. Along the restorative practices' continuum, the formal processes that are most often implemented include restorative conferences or family conferences, while informal processes include affective statements about people's feelings, as well as affective questions that invite people to tell how their behaviour has affected others. In the frame of the Informal processes include improvised restorative conferences, groups or circles that do not demand the preparation required for formal conferences. As restorative

practices became more formal, they involved more people, required more time and planning, and became more structured and comprehensive (Wachtel & McCold, 2001). There are often dilemmas as to which are more effective, whether formal or informal, but both types are considered to have their advantages and disadvantages. Thus, it is considered that informal restorative processes tend to be, to a certain extent, more effective than formal ones, which can have a dramatic impact on the participants, unlike informal practices, which have a complementary impact as they form part of the daily life of children in schools (Wachtel & McCold, 2001). However, school staff will need to assess, depending on the circumstances and conditions, which procedure along the restorative practices continuum is most appropriate to apply.

1. INTRODUCING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

In recent years, within international context, many schools have introduced and tested initiatives and projects aimed at promoting restorative approaches (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022) for developing socio-emotional skills, but also as a way of addressing peer violence. The positive results from applying restorative programmes and practices have been confirmed in many conducted evaluations, which have shown that restorative programmes in school environments: reduce the incidents involving inappropriate behaviour; reduce the practice of excluding the children with inappropriate behaviour from schools (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Davison et al., 2021; González et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Lodi et al., 2022; Simson, 2012) cited in (Ighavongbe-Patrick, 2022); improve the school culture; promote empathy, communication and responsibility; increase the children's socio-emotional skills; and better resolve the conflicts that arise in school (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Davison et al., 2021; González et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Lodi et al., 2022; Ortega et al., 2016; Sandwick et al., 2019; Simson, 2012) cited in (Ighavongbe-Patrick, 2022)). A systematic review of studies on restorative programmes and interventions in schools has revealed that eight studies have found a reduction in experiences involving aggression, violence and bullying in schools that had adopted restorative approaches and practices, compared to schools which used traditional disciplinary systems or zero-tolerance policies (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022). A study into 19 schools in Great Britain has found that restorative practices have improved the school environment and have promoted young people's learning and development. Three schools in Pennsylvania have experienced reductions in misbehaviour and disciplinary measures after implementing restorative practices. Skills gained from restorative programmes, such as conflict resolution and critical thinking, have served pupils in their later lives (Ashley & Burke, 2009). An evaluation of restorative practices in 18 schools in Scotland has shown that these types of practices allow pupils to feel safe, respected and have positive relationships with others (Ashley & Burke, 2009).

In general, it can be concluded that restorative measures and practices (formal or informal), incorporated in a preventive programme in all schools, contribute to:

- developing a positive model of behaviour among pupils and encouraging positive narratives among them;
- learning the rules of behaviour and the consequences that may arise;
- openly communicating and discussing the problems they are faced with and addressing them;
- increasing pupils' awareness of the adversity violence brings;

- teaching pupils to forgive (How to Successfully Implement Restorative Practices At School, 2021);
 - respect among pupils;
 - increasing tolerance and respect for diversity;
 - repair;
 - reconciliation between pupils;
 - reintegration;
 - assistance, protection and counselling;
 - building trust among pupils and between school staff and pupils;
 - creating a positive climate in the class;
 - “breaking the silence” when pupils appear as witnesses of school violence
- (www.effectiveantibullyingprogramsinschools.com, n.d.).

Taken together, all formal and informal restorative practices and their systemic use can have a cumulative impact, especially in creating what is called a restorative milieu – an environment that consistently encourages awareness, empathy, and responsibility as a more effective way of social discipline than immediate reliance on punishment and sanctions (Wachtel, 2013).

2. TYPES OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

According to literature review, there are different types of restorative practices, from simple practices that require little training to implement, to intensive practices that require specific expertise because of the sensitive or complex nature of pupils’ disciplinary events. The most commonly used types of restorative practices in schools include: peer mediation, restorative conferences, circles, class councils, peer juries and school boards on responsibility.

2.1 Peer mediation

During the time spent in school, and resulting from a variety of factors, pupils sometimes or oftentimes find themselves involved in various conflicts or manifesting violence. To encourage their active attitude to solving problems at school, pupils are trained for a process of negotiation, in order to successfully resolve disagreements and problems arising between peers without violence. They do this through peer mediation.

Peer mediation is mediation in which children/pupils take the role of a mediator (Isić, 2010, p. 131). In such procedures, a “no blame” approach is used, which engages all parties in the process of seeking solutions to conflicts by accepting the damage caused and identifying ways to repair damaged relationships (Cowie, 2006). The goal of mediation is for each of the parties in disagreement, after mediation, to come out with a positive experience and a solution that is fair for both parties (Flaherty, 2001, p. 45).

But why is mediation the preferred technique for solving problems between pupils in schools? There are many advantages for recruiting peer support to help conflicted parties reach a mutually acceptable solution (Besag, 1992, p. 123). Since young people are believed to be very productive as mediators in conflict resolution, and very successful in understanding the conflict and bringing the different views of the parties closer, it is insisted that this type of mediation be used in solving problems and conflicts between pupils in schools.

Various studies have determined that peer mediation is a good strategy for occasionally improving the school climate (Skiba, et al., 2011). Pupils involved in peer

mediation often express greater willingness to help their peers, avoid fights, and solve problems, and are less likely to believe that certain individuals deserve to be “beaten up”. However, involvement in such processes also has an impact on the mediators themselves. Some analyses have shown that the learning of the mediation process has influenced the pupils in that they had acquired a set of skills they could use in solving potential future conflicts (Ashley & Burke, 2009), they had built their self-confidence, and they had even improved their school performance (Skiba, et al., 2011).

Overall, advantages of peer mediation are numerous and can be summarised as follows:

- children/pupils become active in solving the problems, they are encouraged to independently come to an agreement on issues in their surrounding, thus increasing their determination to implement the agreement;
- they learn positive ways of solving conflict situations;
- they are more willing to take responsibility;
- mediation participants’ opinions and values are respected;
- they create a positive atmosphere and help build relationships between mediation participants;
- a culture of listening, dialogue and creative conflict resolution is built, which is why those involved in a conflict, having drawn lessons from their experiences with identifying quality solutions, change their attitude towards the conflict, allowing the process to help them learn how to deal with conflicts in the future, and without the assistance of a third party;
- the tension between children and parents, and likewise between pupils and teachers, deflates, and the relationship itself improves;
- parents and teachers are no longer preoccupied with solving everyday problems, especially those arising between children/pupils (Isić, 2010, p. 131).

Which conflicts are suitable for peer mediation?

While some peer mediation programmes allow mediation only in informal settings, such as on the playground, other programmes allow peer mediators to come into the classroom and provide assistance and resolve disagreements between pupils (Skiba, et al., 2011).

Each school must decide on the type of conflicts that can be mediated by pupils. Some authors believe this should apply to cases related to physical violence. For cases that are perceived as posing danger to the school community (drugs, thefts) or cases involving issues beyond the ability and capacity of pupils (disputes involving parents), the general view is that they should not be subjected to mediation. Typically, a mediator resolves cases involving arguments, petty quarrels, conflicts arising from the spread of rumours, conflicts involving small amounts of money or items of little value (The Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007).

2.2 Restorative conferences

One of the challenges of restorative justice in school programmes is defining what counts as conference. A conference generally implies a formally structured conversation between persons affected by a conflict in the community (Wachtel, 2013). School conferences are specific, unlike mediation, in that not only the two parties involved in the conflict participate, but also parents, school representatives and a facilitator who mediates and facilitates the communication between the participants. In this way, it is

possible to build a space in which the parties will be heard and assumptions about responsibility, actions and constructive responses will be built (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022).

Some schools use the concept of short or informal conferences, while others of long or formal conferences. Some schools take an approach of formal leading, while some adopt a more open model that is informal, with no official leadership of the process. Primary schools in Oxford used them informally, so none of the conference proceedings were seen as official conferences. Primary schools in Medway used informal conferences (which were also not considered conferences) and formal conferences (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2004, p. 27), depending on the case examined at the conference. However, the type of the conference to be used depends on the schools as well as on the incidents that need to be resolved through a conference.

“Who can be a facilitator at the conference”? There are different practices regarding who can be a facilitator. The conference can be conducted by a person who is not employed by the school but is specifically trained to conduct restorative conferences. Such practices can be found in England and in New Zealand, where persons employed with certain child protection services act as facilitators. They are the youth offender teams established in 1998 in England by the enactment of the Crime and Disorder Act (Crime and Disorder Act, 1998), which are competent to mediate when restorative measures are applied. In New Zealand, this person is the Youth Justice Coordinator who manages the school conferences (Jovanova & Stojkowska, 2010). In addition to outsiders, the role of a facilitator can also be occupied by school employees who have been specifically trained for that purpose. This is in line with McElreai’s recommendation that every school should have a dedicated conflict resolution centre (McElreai, 1997) cited in (Jovanova & Stojkowska, 2010).

For which incidents is a conference organised? When it comes to incidents that can be looked into at a conference, it is commonly considered that these should involve more serious incidents of injury, i.e. they should be conducted in response to serious conflicts (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022). A conflict can result from repeated acts of harm over which there is no disagreement, or it can be related to many unresolved disagreements between individuals and/or groups in the school.

The most common incidents that occur inside or outside of schools include such behaviours as: bullying, beatings, property damage or theft. These, rather serious and repeated incidents in schools deserve to be examined at a conference, especially because they offer an opportunity for active involvement of parents in solving and overcoming the problems of their children, regardless of whether they are in the role of people who experience violence or persons who manifest violence.

2.3. Circles

Circles originate from the tradition of certain communities in the past, when people gathered in a circle to hear each other out, exchange opinions, solve problems or reconcile. In the simplest terms, circles, or peace circles, bring people together to talk about problems and resolve conflicts. The aim of the circle is, by providing opportunities for safe and open communication, to resolve the conflict, to strengthen the bonds between the participants and to establish respect and understanding between the participants.

Today, circles are used in different contexts and, more recently, in schools. In principle, when talking about conflict resolution between pupils or about certain problems

they face, it is believed that having the pupils sit in a circle allows for better connection and communication between pupils when talking about particular problems.

Staging circles in classrooms to resolve certain conflicts should essentially be based on specific principles, such as: drafting an agenda made by the pupils, giving and receiving compliments, developing good communication skills, learning, understanding, and respecting differences, examining the reasons why people do what they do, role-playing and brainstorming to solve problems and focus on finding non-punitive solutions (Clifford).

Most of the time, circles are headed by a trained staff member, typically a facilitator (a teacher can also appear as a facilitator) (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022), often called the “circle keeper”, who encourages the participants to share information, views, and personal feelings. The facilitator may use a particular item that grants the person holding it at a given moment the opportunity to speak without being interrupted. Others in the circle should remain quiet and listen to what is being shared. It is the opportunity given to participants to speak and be heard by others that is essential to resolving conflicts and overcoming problems (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Circles do not always mean that there should be a conflict between pupils in order to be implemented. Circles can often be used more informally, as a forum for discussing issues such as the presence of drugs, alcohol, or violence in and out of school (Ashley & Burke, 2009). However, the extent to which and the method in which these circles will be conducted (in an informal way) largely depends on the skills and abilities of the facilitator, whose role should be performed by teachers on a daily basis.

2.4 Class council

Within the context of restorative practices in schools, the class council can also be mentioned as a mechanism for establishing a good school climate. If children should be encouraged to make decisions and gain self-respect through self-discipline, then accountability must follow their actions. Class council allows a peer group to draw their own boundaries for behaviour and, based on that, make decisions about behaviour that is adverse to others. In this way, the class council becomes particularly important as pupils set the criteria for good and bad behaviour, so that a problem created by the children is returned to the peer group. The more influential the peer group is, the more effective the decision will be.

The teacher plays a neutral role and has the duty to pass the decision of the peer group. Of course, when class council is reaching a decision, it is deemed reasonable to remove the pupil exhibiting inappropriate behaviour from ongoing discussions, so as to give the opportunity to more shy children to express their views without fear of intimidation, in order to be heard. It is also important to identify all the witnesses in the case, since third-party observation of the case is very important. Determining what had actually happened may be way different from what the pupil presents. For example, two pupils were involved in a fight, and one appears to be the victim. However, having heard the witness’s statement, it was established that the child who seemed to have been the perpetrator was often provoked or was constantly abused, which ultimately triggered him to fight back.

When it comes to class councils, there is one hazard that needs to be considered when children are involved. They can be very cruel when given the power to judge their peers. This can lead to a demand that the pupil exhibiting violent behaviour be punished too severely. However, it is necessary for the class council to consider how they would feel

if the punishment was imposed on them and then make the decision. In such processes, teachers only need to moderate the case and ensure a fair procedure. Once the decision is made, the solution is returned to the class council, and its members are held accountable for the solution they had worked out.

For some pupils, being part of the solution is very positive, so the class council can prepare a list of “what is not allowed” (such as hitting, calling names, stealing, beating up in toilets, sticking toilet paper in the sink and leaving the tap on, constantly disrupting the work of the class) and, at the same time, make proposals as to which measures are regarded as most appropriate in case one manifests an inappropriate behaviour (such as: no recess for a week, no swimming lessons, seeing the class teacher, summoning the parents to school, no TV for a week, keeping clear from the school cafeteria etc.) (Halbert, 2002, p. 141). These may not be the solutions adults would choose, but that’s not the point. When their voice is heard, they also show greater cooperation in other matters, since they are given the freedom to make their own decisions regarding their behaviour. Naturally, positive behaviour should be rewarded in order for those perpetrating violence to have an incentive to change (Halbert, 2002, p. 141). It is exactly with this approach that the active role of pupils is identified and emphasised. All solutions in which pupils are involved provide solid grounds for them to become more effective in terms of their behaviour both in and out of school.

Peer jury

Peer jury, sometimes called teen jury, youth court, or peer court is a programme in which pupils volunteer to hear cases of minor delinquency or school offences.

A peer jury programme can be set up as a project in police departments, in community services, and in schools, too. In the peer jury, pupils that have been trained as peer jurors meet with the pupil sent in for a disciplinary offence committed on school premises. An adult coordinator also sits in the peer jury to supervise the work of the peer jurors. In an ongoing process, peer jurors offer guidance and support to the pupil and try to reach an agreement with the pupil, outlining the actions the pupil must take in order to compensate/repair the harm caused by his/her behaviour. To better determine the reasons underlining the misbehaviour of the pupil, based on which the decision will be made, the jurors can liaise with the local services and obtain the required information (Ashley & Burke, 2009).

By allowing the pupils to assume the leading roles at every level of the process, including programme development, planning, and implementation, the intention of this practice is to place the young people in the central role of peer jurors in establishing the existence of a pupil misconduct, deciding on the measure to be imposed, and assigning responsibility for its implementation. In such a way, by giving the pupils an opportunity to appear as jurors, it is likely to develop a sense of responsibility both for the way pupils behave and for what goes on around them. It is worth noting, however, that, being insufficiently developed and not yet applied in many of the European countries, the implementation methods and the effects of this restorative practice have yet to be analysed.

Challenges in implementing restorative practices in schools

First, restorative programmes/practices are considered more time-consuming than traditional disciplinary actions of punishment and exclusion. And while the initial time investment can be substantial, restorative practices can save time by preventing future problems at an early stage.

A second challenge regarding the implementation of restorative practices may be the need for an amount of funds, depending on the practices. Certain restorative practices may not create financial implications if they are informal and incorporated into school lessons. But in other cases, when it comes to formal practices, funding may be necessary for in-school training, teacher overtime, promotion materials etc.

A third challenge that schools may face in relation to restorative practices consists in the numerous problems or difficulties with their implementation, the small number of requests for mediation, the pupils' lack of motivation to become mediators etc. (The Independent Society for Education and Human Rights (SIEDO)), which can sometimes be difficult for some schools to overcome.

Research shows that the success of restorative programmes is highly dependent on comprehensive bureaucratic structures as well as on the individual support of restorative practices by the school staff (McCluskey et al., 2008; Reimer, 2019) cited in (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). Restorative justice is a new concept for many educators who may not have received adequate training and guidance on how to successfully implement the practices (Fronius et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2021) cited in (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). It is often the case that the principal would ask for full inclusion of restorative practices in school classes, but the teachers would decide whether and to what extent they can personally accept and implement them, which can lead to major discrepancies in the substantial implementation of the programme (Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Finding solutions for resolving the problem with peer violence in schools is indeed a difficult task. Analysing the results from research and studies, it can be noted that schools need to overcome the traditional punitive system for establishing discipline and to strive for a different, comprehensive model for problem solving in schools while creating a positive school climate. This would mean that restorative practices should not be only about replacing the discipline that excludes, or at least it should not be their primary goal. If the reasons for adopting restorative practices are merely perceived as an attempt to only replace the traditional punitive measures, rather than as a comprehensive transformation of the school values and policies, a potentially incomplete implementation of restorative justice may occur that fails to fulfil its full potential (Stewart & Ezell, 2022).

It must be noted that restorative programmes and practices face certain challenges in the process of their implementation. This, however, does not mean that the challenges should serve as an excuse to not practice the restorative programmes and practices in schools. The positive results demonstrated in many studies and the positive evaluations of restorative-justice-based programmes are much greater than the effects of traditional measures and activities that are more often taken. The process of introducing restorative justice programmes into school policies, as well as deploying such programmes for solving problems in schools is a long process, but the effects obtained from this approach to problem solving are long-lasting. Therefore, no matter how difficult the process of their implementation is, integrating restorative justice practices in school programmes is of utmost importance.

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