

Building a restorative community

Stijn Verhagen and Alfons Ravelli argue that the Netherlands has a lot to learn from restorative practices in schools in Hull.

In the Netherlands, an individual's problem is not usually considered to be the community's problem. If you are a nuisance, you are sent out of the class. If a child is awkward in its dealings with others, it is sent for training in social skills. And if youths hang around the street and people feel intimidated, the youths are removed. Police officers move them on. Civic leaders introduce bans on assembly. In other countries, too, people are usually dispersed to prevent escalation.

But what happens when you put people together? That is what the municipality of Hull has been doing in recent years. This former fishing town on the east coast of England has around 230,000 inhabitants. Until the 1970s, Hull was the third-biggest fishing region of Britain. People were employed in the fishing industry, shipbuilding or harbour works, but now these activities have all but disappeared. Unemployment is twice as high as in the rest of England, and Hull is ranking poorly in other areas. Levels of criminality, school dropout and poverty are high, making the city ninth on the list of the most deprived districts of England (of a total of 354 districts).

Since 2006, various organisations in Hull have been working with a common perspective on the matter of citizenship. Primary schools, higher education, local police, youth care and welfare organisations share the view that the root cause of tensions should not be sought only among individuals, but *also in the community* in which these individuals live. If a child fights with another child in the playground, the teaching staff brings together not

only the two children concerned, but also the ones who were looking on. In the discussion that follows, everyone is given the opportunity to talk about their impression of what happened and how it affected everyone personally. Everyone is free to say whatever is necessary to repair the relationship, and agreements are arrived at. This discussion is called 'the circle'. Where possible, the relationships are repaired immediately in the playground by means of a circle. Tensions between individuals are therefore tensions within a community. Disruption in the community leads to obligations on the part of those concerned, whether they are involved directly or indirectly.

The organisations in Hull are developing a tradition of restorative practices. The municipality facilitates the organisations, the Hull Centre for Restorative Practices trains the professionals, and the University of Hull carries out research into the subject. The premise of restorative practices is that people themselves – in the classroom, in the street, within the home, or in the legal circuit – are capable of coming up with solutions when faced with difficulties. People themselves should be allowed to draw on their own resources, before professionals make decisions affecting their lives.

In the Netherlands, this initiative is known under the name of *Eigen Kracht* (literally 'own power'). Recently, parliament adopted a motion calling on the government to encourage municipalities to bring *Eigen Kracht* conferences to the attention of the Ministry for Youth and Families. Known as 'Family Group Conferences' in English, these

conferences give people the opportunity to plan, together with family, friends, and acquaintances, whatever solutions or support they require. The subsequent assistance – usually youth care – is based on the plans made.

Whereas Hull has a cohesive network of organisations, those in the Netherlands are very fragmented. The Netherlands has Family Group Conferences, learning circles in schools and restorative justice meetings. However, institutes and municipalities only engage these citizens at the specific locations and specific times as they consider necessary. This results in a fragmented and uncoordinated approach to the practices. There are no municipalities or districts in the Netherlands where they are organised cohesively. But this is the case in Hull, and the results are promising. The relevant primary schools, higher education institutes, and youth care agencies have carried out evaluations, although the police and welfare authorities have yet to do so.

The teaching staff at Collingwood Primary School start their working day with 'circle time'. The individual classes also do this, and where tension or problems arise in the course of the day, those involved are immediately called together. During the discussions, space is allowed for the feelings and thoughts of the other person, and for the mutual relations. In the group we visited, a ball was used as the 'talking piece'. Only the person holding the ball may speak. If you do not wish to say anything, you pass the ball on. After a few rounds and a game, the question was asked as to how each child was feeling. Two children helped the teacher to place the names of the children on a kind of emotional thermometer. Most of the children felt glad and happy. Two children felt sad, and the teacher asked if they wished to say anything about it as well as how the other children could help them to find solutions. Through the daily circle time, the children learn the principles of the family group conference and can apply them whenever there is tension in the group.

Collingwood registers any problematic behaviour on the part of the children. The introduction of Restorative Practices in 2006 appears to be showing favourable results. At the start of that year, a child was ejected from the classroom because of disruptive behaviour an average of 60 times per week. By December of the same year, this incidence had dropped to an average of six times per week. At the end of the school year, the frequency had dropped further to an average of once per week. The number of racist incidents also declined, while attendance by children and teachers at the school rose (HCRP, 2008).

Many of the children attending this primary school go on to Endeavour High School, a secondary school comparable with the Dutch VMBO (preparatory secondary vocational education). The director of Endeavour High School was initially sceptical about the restorative practices, but through contact with Collingwood and the manifest results, he has become enthusiastic. At his school, too, working with circles is delivering positive results (HCRP, 2008). Teachers and pupils feel more comfortable at school. In the space of a year, absenteeism at Endeavour declined by 62.5 per cent, and the number of incidents was considerably reduced.

Violent incidents declined by no less than 59 per cent, and verbal incidents by 46 per cent. Racist incidents and theft occurred less frequently, which again demonstrates more positive attitudes among teachers and students. 'We are doing things *with* the children, rather than *to* them or *for* them',

observed the director. The school no longer conducts the old policy of zero tolerance. In its place, the school places responsibility for good behaviour directly with the pupils.

Young people who nevertheless come into contact with the social services also undergo restorative practices in Hull. Escalations among the youths, cases of scratching employees' cars and vandalism in the neighbourhoods are discussed collectively as far as possible, and concrete restorative plans are subsequently made (and enacted). The circles are similar to the restorative justice meetings in the Netherlands. At these meetings, the victim and the perpetrator of a crime come together with their families and friends. They discuss the consequences of what happened (assault, for example) and create a plan of restoration. The meetings are in addition to any penalties imposed by the criminal justice system, and not a substitute for these.

Research into restorative justice meetings shows positive results.

Victims appear to be less afraid that the perpetrator will attack them again. Moreover, their feelings of security are increased, as many perpetrators show remorse; 86 per cent of perpetrators do so, as against 19 per cent of perpetrators in the criminal justice chain (Sherman and

Strang, 2007). What is also striking is the low rate of recidivism among the perpetrators. Those who have attended restorative justice meetings re-offend 38 per cent less often than perpetrators in the criminal justice system (Sherman et al., 2000). It is important to note here that

perpetrators who participate in restorative justice meetings have to be prepared to take responsibility for their deeds. Without this acceptance of responsibility, the meeting does not take place. Therefore, these types of perpetrators are not entirely comparable with those in the criminal justice category.

Recently, the Dutch Council for Social Development advised on supporting families and their social environment. According to the Council, the family, neighbourhood, schools and social organisations could increase their participation as partners of the parents in bringing up the children. Hull appears to be the textbook example of this approach, but clearly there are also dangers. 'Building communities' and 'transforming school cultures' bring the risk that too much is expected of those involved in terms of loyalty and community spirit. In one of the programmes in Hull, we noticed that employees who question the set method are not able to function smoothly in the organisation. 'You are either with us or against us', appears to be the credo there.

Nevertheless, the civic movement in Hull is an open and inspiring approach, which is accepting of criticism and prepared to take responsibility for the course embarked upon. In our view, the Netherlands would benefit from giving consideration to the idea of adopting the methods operated. ■

Stijn Verhagen is Professor of Participation and Society at Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. **Alfons Ravelli** is research fellow at the Participation and Society Research Group.

References

- Sherman, L.W., Strang, H. and Woods, D.J. (2000), *Recidivism Patterns in the Canberra Reintegrative Shaming Experiments (RISE)*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Sherman, L.W. and Strang, H. (2007), *Restorative Justice: the Evidence*, London: The Smith Institute.
- HCRP (2008), *Building a City. The Riverside Project*, Hull: Hull Centre for Restorative Practices.