NARRATION TO PROMOTE RESTORATIVE ATTITUDES IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

According to recent studies (Lodi et al., 2021), using a restorative approach in educational contexts is useful to efficiently solve problematic situations at school as well as to promote prosocial behaviours among young people. However, developing restorative attitudes is a slow and complex process that requires to develop the ability to adopt a probabilistic and multicausal representation (Nicolini, 2023) of the reality. In fact, according to the balanced model of restorative justice (Chapman, 2012), the damage that is the result of a crime involves not only the person victim, but also the responsible of the situation as well as the overall community in which the situation has been developed. Consistently with this assumption, the present study has the aim to develop a complex and a restorative attitude into adolescents. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the involvement in a narrative activity in which they assume in turn the prospective of a person victim, of a person author of a crime and/or of the community, can be useful to improve their restorative attitudes. Participants were 44 adolescents (24 girls and 20 boys) attending high school (M_{age} = 17.58; SD = .53). They took part to an event at the University lasting one morning. First, they were told a story about a car accident. Then they completed a questionnaire (T0) about anagraphic information and their restorative attitudes (Taylor & Bailey, 2022), a multicomponent tool with subscales about empathic understanding, harm and needs, restoration processes, accountability, community engagement. Soon after they were divided into groups to discuss about the episode based on the point of view of people victims or responsible of the car accident, familiars, friends, media. Each participant takes part to two different groups, adopting two different roles. At the end, they completed again the same questionnaire (T1) used at the beginning of the activity, collecting data about the empathic understanding, harm and needs, restoration processes, accountability, and community engagement. Descriptive and t-test analyses were performed. Statistical analyses showed that participants indicate an improvement of their restorative attitudes in term of empathic understanding, $t(43)$ = -3.81; p = .000, harm and needs, $t(43)$ = -4.09; p = .000, restoration processes, $t(43)$ = -4.01; p = .000, accountability, $t(43)$ = 2.31; p = .026, but not community engagement, $t(43)$ = -1.66; p = .103. In conclusion, the results suggested that is possible to promote a restorative attitude among adolescents, despite more actions are needed to promote also a community engagement approach. Strengths, limits and future directions of the study will be discussed.

Keywords: Restorative attitudes, adolescence, justice, narration, restorative justice.

1. Introduction

Schools play an important role in the development of children and adolescents. They are not only places of instruction, but also places of education. Indeed, students develop their emotional and social skills at school and can have the opportunity to learn how to manage conflicts. In this sense, the restorative justice approach can provide valuable support. Restorative justice is a new paradigm that runs alongside traditional justice and involves the whole community in managing a crime, focusing on the harm caused by the crime (Zehr, 2015). It is based on the awareness that the consequences of a crime affect not only the victim, but also those responsible for the situation, as well as the wider community in which the situation occurred, following the balanced model of restorative justice (Chapman, 2012). All people directly and indirectly involved in a crime suffer as a result of it, and their needs must be recognised and addressed (Patrizi & De Gregorio, 2009; Patrizi 2024).

Recent studies have shown that this approach is effective when adopted in an educational context (Nicolini et al., 2024; Guardabassi & Nicolini, 2023). Schools that use a restorative approach in cases of conflict have also achieved positive results in terms of reducing deviant behaviours, fostering positive

relationships, and promoting pro-social behaviours, social and emotional skills, and student well-being (Church et al., 2021; Lodi et al., 2021)

Thus, promoting a restorative attitude can be a very important educational practice that can have a positive impact on students' lives. Based on this evidence, the aim of this study was to encourage restorative attitudes in adolescents. According to the study's hypothesis, participating in a narrative activity (Bruner 1956, 1986, 1990, 1996, 2002) in which they take on the perspective of a victim, an offender and/or the community can be useful in improving their restorative attitudes. Narrative thinking is useful to reconstruct and represent what is possible within a given framework, avoiding the intention of demonstrating what is true and what is false. It is a social way of thinking because narrative is a way of exchanging ideas and opinions, it is a vehicle of relationship.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A group of high school students took part in a one-morning event at the university. First, they were presented with a story about a car accident. Then, they completed a questionnaire (T0) providing demographic information and their attitudes towards restorative justice. They were then divided into groups to discuss the episode from the perspective of different stakeholders, such as victims, those responsible for the accident, friends and family members, and the media. Each participant took part in two different groups. Finally, they completed the same initial questionnaire again (T1).

2.2. Measures

The following information was collected using a questionnaire at T0 and T1.

2.2.1. Demographic information. Some general information about the participants was requested, such as gender and year of birth. The latter variable was used to calculate participants' ages.

2.2.2. Restorative attitudes. The Restorative Justice Attitudes Scale (RJAS) by Taylor and Bailey (2022) was adopted to measure restorative attitudes. This 20-item multi-component tool comprises five subscales related to empathic understanding ($\alpha_{t0} = .896$; $\alpha_{t1} = .927$), harm and needs ($\alpha_{t0} = .827$; $\alpha_{t1} = .863$), restoration processes ($\alpha_{t0} = .772$; $\alpha_{t1} = .840$), accountability ($\alpha_{t0} = .872$; $\alpha_{t1} = .919$), community engagement ($\alpha_{t0} = .803$; $\alpha_{t1} = .879$).

2.3. Statistical analyses

A descriptive analysis and a T-test were performed.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive information

The participants were 44 adolescents (24 girls and 20 boys) who were attending high school ($M_{age} = 17.58$; $SD = .53$).

Table 1. Means and standard deviations.

	Pre (T0)		Post (T1)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Empathic understanding	3.54	.84	3.88	.97
Harm and needs	3.36	.88	3.77	.91
Restoration processes	3.42	.79	3.85	.83
Accountability	4.71	.44	4.42	.11
Community engagement	3.39	.74	3.62	.96

3.2. T-test analysis

The results showed that participants improved their restorative attitudes in terms of empathic understanding, $t(43) = -3.81$; $p = .000$, harm and needs, $t(43) = -4.09$; $p = .000$, restoration processes, $t(43) = -4.01$; $p = .000$, accountability, $t(43) = 2.31$; $p = .026$. However, there was no improvement in community engagement, $t(43) = -1.66$; $p = .103$.

4. Discussion

This study was conducted with the aim to develop restorative attitudes in adolescents, i.e., develop a multi-component and multi-probabilistic vision of the reality and an awareness about the complexity of events (Nicolini, 2023).

The activities conducted in this study with adolescents lead to significant changes in their restorative attitudes in term of empathic understanding, harm and needs and restoration processes. It can be said that to have embodied different roles was an efficient tool to allow the participants to take the point of view of persons directly involved in a conflict. Consistently with Galinsky and Moskowitz (2000), taking on the role and perspective of the other person, putting oneself in their shoes, seeing the world from their point of view, can reduce distance and prejudice because the other person is seen as less threatening and less different from oneself than one might think. This kind of cognitive and emotional intervention can activate the idea that we share the same destiny as human beings, that we are all interdependent. Thus, it can lead to an other-centred perspective, imagining how the other person experiences a given situation. Both are effective in increasing empathic feelings, although the self-centred perspective involves a higher level of commitment. Cognitive empathy often acts as a precursor to emotional empathy.

The results present also some unexpected outcomes. There has been a significant reduction in accountability, i.e., the author of the accident has not taken responsibility. However, this value is one of the highest on the restorative scale, and these changes can represent a reduction in the attribution of blame to the author of a crime. In addition, there is an absence of an improvement in term of community involvement. This can be due to the fact that the community is not directly involved in the situation, neither as an author nor as a target, which makes it more difficult to understand its role and involvement. Because a community is not a real person, but rather an abstract concept, it is probably more difficult to take the perspective of a community.

5. Conclusions

According to the initial hypothesis, to develop restorative attitudes into adolescents is possible, involving them in a narrative activity in which they are asked to assume in turn the prospective of a person victim, of a person author of a crime and/or of the community. However, as it was stated, developing full restorative attitudes is a slow and complex process that requires the ability to adopt a probabilistic and multicausal representation of the reality. In fact, the results of the current study show that while restorative attitudes improved in terms of empathic understanding, harm and needs, restoration processes, and accountability, no improvement resulted in the dimension of the community engagement.

As a point of strength, the research addressed a new topic by using workshop activities that directly involved adolescents, making them the main actors in their own development process as well as in the research. However, it also presents some limits: the sample size is small; there is no a control group; and no personal experiences of car accidents or similar negative events were explored.

Future studies should overcome these limitations and pursue this line of research, detecting new strategies to develop restorative attitudes among adolescents. This can foster a climate of greater democracy and tolerance, promoting the well-being of future generations in our society.

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