

To whom it concerns

I apologise for the late submission of my response. I was encouraged to contact you recently by someone who heard a little about my work.

The Transformation Programme includes several key areas that could be addressed through the development of a restorative and relational approach in schools. I will comment individually on those that are most relevant. I would also suggest that you access this research (<https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12525>) as it will endorse my professional experience of why children struggle in schools here.

Significant differences in levels of educational achievement between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

- Most of the children entering the care and justice systems are from communities that experience multiple deprivation and many, if not most of these children are out of mainstream education.
- The current welfare system is pushing families into significant poverty and further adversity, and they're dependant on kinship support and foodbanks. Children cannot learn when they are hungry and living day-to-day. In school, when these children struggle to manage their anxieties, frustrations or seem disconnected, they are punished. It is of no surprise that these children will eventually disconnect from school through repeated suspension or non-attendance. The relational and restorative schools that I work with will look beyond the behaviour, seek to understand the antecedents to it and respond in a way that is compassionate and human-emotional, not procedural.
- 'Maslow before Bloom' - children must have their basic life needs met before they can learn. Something must be done to help these children and families and this could be achieved by better cross-departmental approach to the welfare of pupils. Health and Social Care and Education working collaboratively to ensure that those children *experiencing* these circumstances are elevated as children whose needs are paramount.
- Social Work in schools is something that has been considered essential here for many years and there are currently three social workers in three schools in NI. I understand that there is a panel exploring how more SWs could be located in schools here, the benefit being that they can stem the flow of safeguarding referrals to statutory services and engage with families and pupils that are struggling. There is currently a pilot in London, with a large number of schools engaging social workers so the outcome of this research could inform how such service could be embedded in NI schools.
- In terms of cost-effectiveness, if social workers can use early intervention to support pupils and their families then money is not pumped into crisis intervention and often punitive approaches (family court proceedings) that can further marginalise pupils and families.

g. Increasing proportion of pupils with special education needs which require additional support and targeted interventions.

- The study referred to above (see link) highlights that pupils who have special educational needs are often the most punished children in a school. When there is an inadequate amount of specialist teaching and support staff there is a tendency to use 'quick fix' mechanisms to address systemic issues. My sister has been a teacher in a SEN facility for over 20 years and she uses restorative approaches with children and parents, with much

better outcomes. Each child's needs are individual and challenging behaviours must be met with an individually tailored approach. To do this requires a critical appraisal of discipline and behaviour policies and procedures, and the forward-thinking, child-centric, relational schools that I have worked with create policies that encourage meaningful compliance, not punitive, authoritarian concepts. I have trained staff from a number of EOTAS projects and the response from pupils has been overwhelmingly positive. Sometimes it is the adults who struggle.

h. The mental health and wellbeing of pupils is an area of increasing concern for schools who are finding themselves under significant pressure with the variety and complexity of issues presented by pupils.

- I applaud school staff who go over and beyond for their pupils who are experiencing mental health crises. For many pupils, school is a sanctuary and the one place where they feel safe for 6 hours a day. However, teachers want to teach and there needs to be a conversation about every school having a wraparound hub for pupils in need of MH support. I am working with two schools currently employing a MH nurse and a social worker, to work alongside other support staff in their schools. CAMHS is at breaking point and professionally qualified staff such as these can 'hold' these pupils until they eventually get the Tier 2/3 intervention they might need.
- Many behavioural issues in schools can be the cause of, or result of, poor mental health. An example is bullying behaviours, which can have a profound impact on those who have been harmed. The Anti-bullying legislation guidance refers to restorative practices as a way of addressing bullying behaviour however, having facilitated restorative meetings for 18 years, I am deeply concerned that lack of reference and access to RP training runs the risk of re-victimising those who have been harmed and impacting little on bullying behaviour. Those school staff that I've trained can evidence a significant improvement in mental health, with pupils feeling safe again in school and those who have caused harm not 're-offending'.
- The wellbeing and happiness of children in school is directly correlated with how they experience the adults who work there. Children follow the teacher before they follow the curriculum and very often a canteen supervisor might be a child's trusted adult. The culture of any school is set by the leadership and archaic rules and deficits-focused approaches no longer serve the needs of those who learn and work there. We all need a more compassionate, inclusive, strengths-based environment to thrive and a focus on organisational culture is necessary, particularly in those schools that are struggling. The book 'When the adults change everything changes' by Paul Dix should be mandatory reading for all school staff.
- **Pressures for the local education system to become more flexible in responding positively in preparing young people to meet the needs of a modern and rapidly changing economy. One key challenge is to ensure that young people not only have the appropriate level of technical skills to live in a digital world, but also have the personal skills and attributes to prosper in a modern economy.**

As a mother, a social worker and someone who has been working in schools for 10 years I feel strongly that 'education' commands an holistic approach to each and every child that walks through the front door. 'Educating the mind without educating the heart is no

education at all' (Aristotle). The scramble to the top of the academic league tables is not laudable given that many pupils in these schools suffer mental health issues with the pressure of academic achievement. CAMHS teams report that 1/3 of their caseloads are children struggling with academic pressure from parents and schools. Relational and restorative practices allow children to understand how they need to be in the world, and that as humans we are all interconnected. Our success depends on the strength and resilience in our relationship with one another. Restorative Practice helps develop communication skills, good interpersonal relationships, accountability towards one another and making amends when we've caused harm. I work with organisations that are struggling with staff recruitment and retention and at the core of this struggle is how people *feel* in their work. Schools should be honouring and valuing children - 'meeting them where they're at' - so that they leave formal education ready to meet whatever challenges they face in whatever work they choose to do. This is citizenship.