

I have worked in education for the past nineteen years as an Education Welfare Officer, and more recently as a Senior Education Welfare Officer with children and young people experiencing difficulties in school. Responses to breaches of school rules has always been contentious between school staff, pupils and their parents. Whilst there needs to be rules within school settings, the breach/wrongdoing is almost always viewed in isolation without any consideration of what prompted the wrongdoing, or indeed what has been happening for the pupil outside of school that may have contributed to their behaviour. The traditional discipline strategies in school consist of identifying the wrongdoer and punishing them for any misdemeanours, often suspending pupils who don't want to be in school which is counterproductive. As the pupil has not had to face up to the harm caused the behaviour is often repeated.

Within the Education Welfare Service we often hear both sides of the incident from school staff and the pupil/parent. By utilising restorative approaches school staff are enabled to view the incident within context as questions such as 'what happened?' and 'what were you thinking at the time?' promote discussions that create the full jigsaw not just one piece. Further questions such as 'what do you think now?', 'who has been harmed, in what way?' and 'what do you think you need to do to make things right' encourages the pupil to consider the impact of the incident and promotes remorse resulting in less likelihood of the behaviour being repeated.

In a school community it is important that all pupils feel a sense of belonging, this is achieved using restorative approaches. Rather than isolating the pupil in a withdrawal in school, or issuing a suspension/expulsion the pupil is able to remain part of the school community. The behaviour is viewed as wrong not the child/young person. Additionally there are also benefits for the victim as they are able to tell the wrongdoer how they feel, the impact the incident had on them, obtain some understanding of why it happened and reassurances that it won't happen again.

Our present scheme within the Education Authority in relation to pupils being expelled does not allow the pupil or victim's voice to be heard. Very often consultation meetings occur to consider expulsion without a full understanding of what happened, why and any chance offered to the pupil to acknowledge wrongdoing and take steps to address the harm caused. If restorative conferences were available to all suspended pupils and those facing expulsion then the number of pupils out of school with no educational support feeling unwanted and labelled by organisations there to support and educate them would decrease significantly. Not only that, how wonderful would it be to teach the young people of Northern Ireland a different approach to conflict resolution.